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Realness and Hoodness:

Authenticity in Hip Hop as Discussed by Adolescent Fans

by

Ginger L. Jacobson

A thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval: March 31, 2009

Keywords: rap, music, media, signified, performance

Dedication

       This thesis is dedicated to Grandpa who encouraged me to pursue higher education. I know he was proud of my academic accomplishments and will continue to watch over me as I pursue a doctorate to be the next Dr. Jacobson of the family.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Graham for collaborating closely with me on this project. Her detailed comments were meticulously written and offered constructive, optimistic criticism. I would like to thank Dr. Friedman for coaching my interview technique and giving me confidence with this skill. I would like to thank Dr. Tyson for his attention to detail and continuous support. Thank you to my entire committee for taking me onto their workload and believing in my ideas. A special thank you to my sister who helped me get this ball rolling. As always, I would like to thank Papa for his endless support and advice that consistently guide me through life.

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Authenticity in Hip Hop as Discussed by Adolescent Fans

Ginger L. Jacobson

ABSTRACT

Various forms of media penetrate our lives daily. Hip hop music has gained universal appeal and widespread success that permeates barriers of race, class, gender, age, and nationality. It is important for social service workers, parents, educators and other adults who interact with youth to understand the roles hip hop music and culture can play in the identities of those who are listening. In this study I conducted 12 open-ended interviews with adolescent hip hop fans about their music. The research presented in this thesis suggests that adolescent hip hop fans are making interpretations from the media and applying them to their understanding of themselves and the world.

The findings of this study show that these adolescent hip hop fans most saliently describe their interactions and understandings of hip hop music in terms of authenticity. This thesis builds upon Armstrong's (2004) forms of authenticity, incorporating what participants discussed about themes of realness and hoodness. These interviews also indicate that fans relate music's lyrics to their own lives and what they understand of other people's lives. Youth may understand hip hop images and messages as types of lived realities. Although further research is necessary, these findings suggest there may be a need for adolescents to refine media literacy skills to be critical of media images and messages.

Chapter One

Introduction

Music is an ancient form of entertainment and expression. As the traditional institutions of family, church, and school become less influential in the social development of children, media and entertainment industries continue to penetrate American lives and transmit culture (Kitwana 2005). In an increasingly mediated world, music is nearly omnipresent in the lives of children (Bosacki, Francis-Murray, Pollon, and Elliott 2006). Music plays on the iPods, CD players, computers, televisions, DVD players, video and electronic games of children and adults alike. "The content of this media may provide models for identity development and may influence the way children and adolescents think and feel about themselves and the world" (Bosacki et al. 2006:369). Therefore, it is important for social science to study how music connects to listeners' social and personal understandings.

Some music genres, such as heavy metal, punk rock, and hip hop, are the centerpiece of an entire culture or lifestyle through which listeners have shared beliefs, values, fashion, language, and experiences. These music listeners are likely to identify with the music they listen to because of their connection to these aspects surrounding the music. My interest lies in hip hop music, which is embedded within hip hop culture. Little research has studied how adolescents[1] apply hip hop to their experiences. Discovering this realm of youth identity may be found in answering the question: "How do teen hip hop fans describe their understanding of hip hop music?"

Hip hop's worldwide appeal and diffusion through social barriers of race and class emphasizes its important influence. Cornel West (1993:127-128)stresses the Afro-Americanization of White male youth by noting the prominence of male athletes and the cultural weight of male pop artists: "[the] Afro-Americanization process results in white youth—male and female—imitating and emulating black male styles of walking, talking, dressing and gesticulating in relations to others" . This phenomenon is one result of hip hop culture's universal presence and growing appeal. With such a strong presence in our society and its presence increasingly permeating all types of cultures, it is important for social service workers, parents, and educators to understand the roles hip hop music and culture can play in the identities of those who are listening, especially impressionable

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[1] Adolescence and youth are two terms closely related and are often interchanged. Both refer to the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. The differences are quite subtle and include the physical versus the psychosocial behaviors (Danesi 2000; Bucholtz 2002). For the purposes of this paper, the terms youth, teens and adolescents are interchanged, referring to those who undergo the psychosocial development between the ages of 13-19 years.

youth. Policy makers can build upon the media literacy skills that adolescents already possess in interpreting hip hop music for further media literacy mandates.

While the literature on hip hop is wide and varied, little qualitative research has been conducted on the hip hop fans themselves. Much of the scholarship builds upon notions of race, authenticity, Black identity, and gender issues through content analysis and other methodologies. In my review of the literature, I have found no studies interviewing American adolescent hip hop fans about hip hop music in general. Studies that do exist focus on other intervening variables. For example one research study was framed around political awareness and rap music. Other studies might discuss rap music and listeners in another country. I begin this paper by first distinguishing between the terms rap and hip hop. I then review literature on adolescent hip hop fans and their understanding of hip hop music, which encompasses youth culture, popular music, identity, capital and authenticity, media literacy, and hip hop culture. Lastly I present the findings from 12 interviews with adolescent hip hop fans, concluding with implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

Distinctions Between Hip Hop and Rap

I must begin by addressing the use of the terms hip hop music and rap music. Both originate from hip hop culture which comes from a set of cultural practices that began with graffiti, break dancing, MCing, and DJ-ing (Myer and Kleck 2007; George 1998; Rose 1994, Xie, Osumare, and Ibrahim 2007). It has also been defined in terms of African and Black traditions of art, dance, poetry, fashion, and experience (Love 2008, Rose 1994). Hip hop culture began in South Bronx in the 1970s. The three original DJs, Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, and Grandmaster Flash, created the disc jockey style of mixing and scratching records to get a desired beat (George 1998). While the DJs spun, scratched, cut, or mixed recorded music, the MC, or the master of ceremonies or mic controller, was on the microphone to energize the crowd. These MCs are now commonly referred to as rappers. This music is now commonly referred to as rap or hip hop.

Rap music evolved as a component of the larger hip hop culture (Love 2008; Pough 2004). Thus rap music is the music of hip hop culture although some refer to this as hip hop music. The terms hip hop music and rap music have different meanings for some. For example, the Billboard charts, an authority of music airplay and sales for over 50 years, have a chart for R&B/hip hop music and a separate chart for rap music. To further confuse the issue, R&B or urban music is sometimes categorized as hip hop/rap, as seen with Billboard and RIAA (the Recording Industry Association of America). Radio stations often claim to be 'the number one source for hip hop and R&B,' reinforcing the relationship between hip hop and R&B with no mention of rap. The interviewees in my study did not assert the distinction between rap and hip hop music which can sometimes arouse strong sentiments from lovers of 'true' hip hop. Following the lead of the participants in this study and of much of the literature on hip hop music and rap, I interchange these two terms freely.

The hip hop music genre is made up of several different subgenres. making it difficult to define hip hop culture within this broad spectrum Persaud (2006). Scholars categorize subgenres such as old-school, party, mack/pimp, jazz/bohemian, reality, gangsta, materialistic/bling, crunk, and political (Borthwick and Moy 2004; Dyson 2007). Within these subcategories, participants all seemed to be familiar with the same

mainstream music (radio Top 40) and artists, or at least discussed these the most. There were very few references to lesser-known, underground, or even old school 'fathers' of hip hop music. In response to my questions of 'Who's your favorite musical artist?' or 'What's your favorite song?' they gave similar answers from the more widely known list of artists who frequent the radio and music television, with some responses overlapping between interviewees. Included in their responses about rap or hip hop music were also artists that might be considered more R&B artists. However since R&B and hip hop are closely related, as noted above, and since my goal was to understand the views of my interviewees, I accepted their categorizations of artists at face value.

Youth Culture and Identity

Adolescence is a unique time period when identity and critical thinking develop. Because this study focuses on adolescent hip hop fans, it is important to understand how one's development during this time period differs from childhood or adulthood and could affect one's musical interpretations. Adolescence is a time when teens are developing formal operational thinking, which includes abstract and complex reasoning abilities, and also metacognition, which is the ability to be reflective upon one's thinking (Gruber and Thau 2003). With the development of these skills, they are better able to decipher what is relevant and how it applies to them. At the same time, adolescents are developing their own self-concepts and may draw upon media influences. "Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the information they are exposed to because they are likely to use it as a basis for decision making without the cognitive ability to consider other decision-making pathways" (Gruber and Thau 2003:442). This is one reason to be concerned about adolescents' media use and media literacy. How well do they think critically about the media with which they interact?

Like all individuals, youth need to feel accepted as a member within a social group. "In the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (Erikson 1968:130). Social identification is when a person feels a connection with some other person or group. During the teenage years, language, dress, musical tastes, and other symbolic systems are integral to identifying with peers because they are concrete markers of identification (Danesi 1994). Although the identity of people of any age is agentive, flexible, and ever-changing, the identity associations of teens are important connections to how they will understand the world as adults (Bucholtz 2002). This transitional identity carries extra weight because it is a bridge to adolescents' adult identity. "Adolescence and early adulthood is a period for reshaping values and ideas, and exploring one's relationship to the world" (Brake 1980:25). Thus it is important to examine how elements of adolescence, such as music, may or may not influence the transitional period of identity exploration.

While youth culture offers a collective identity for young people, this is often not enough to satisfy questions of individual identity. "Young people need an identity which separates them from the expectations and roles imposed upon them by family, school and work" (Brake 1980:166). Erik H. Erikson discussed adolescent identity in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). He notes that adolescents are often preoccupied with how they appear to others compared to how they feel about themselves. This creates a search for a uniform identity that fits into others' perception and the self's perception (Erikson 1968). During this period of searching for identity, which Erikson terms

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'identity confusion,' youth often find solace in groups or cliques that accept them. "To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify with the heroes of cliques and crowds to the point of an apparently complete loss of individuality" (Erikson 1968:132). Adolescents form cliques within subcultures on the basis of ideology, style, values, and lifestyle, in order to comfort each other during the period of identity confusion (Erikson 1968; Brake 1980). Hip hop is a subculture with ideology, style, values, and lifestyle that can offer a source of comfort for identity-seeking teens. How do adolescent fans identify with these aspects of hip hop?

Theories that relate to cultural youth activities have been framed largely in the terminology of interactionism and subcultural resistance. Many youth participate in subculture resistance which is apparent through a set of unifying symbolic artifacts and expressions that are often opposing parent culture or the dominant culture (Laughey 2006). "Accounts of resistance associated almost exclusively with working-class youth subcultures implicate collective groups with shared demographic characteristics in the same structural relationship to the equally monolithic dominant/parent culture" (Laughey 2006:52). This means that adolescents who have similar characteristics are likely to unite in opposition to the dominant or parent culture.

Identity and Interpretations Among Popular Music Listeners

Each music genre within popular music has its own group of fans who often have particular markers of identity connected to the musical preferences they share. This is not to say that one cannot enjoy music from different genres, but as Borthwick and Moy (2004) indicate, music genres are sometimes embedded within an entire culture and lifestyle, making it difficult to be a partial fan. Hip hop is certainly not the only genre to have a lifestyle surrounding its music. Fans of heavy metal music believe their music is "just one element in a 'whole way of life' encompassing dress, social activities, hobbies and collecting, and implied values" (Borthwick and Moy 2004:140). Similarly, punk music implies connections to punk politics, journalism, fashion, poetry, cartoons, fiction, cinema, and etiquette (Borthwick and Moy 2004). Punk rock addresses political, social, and economic issues of the times (Borthwick and Moy 2004), meaning that the fans most likely share these political leanings in their daily lives.

Adolescents can choose to identify with cultures surrounding their musical preference. "Youth subcultures have been often organized around music" (Blair 2004:498) and are even credited for making rock 'n' roll possible. Deena Weinstein (1999) portrays youth and rock 'n' roll as Siamese twins born in the 1950s. Teenagers of this time experienced an increase in economic affluence and freedom from financial responsibilities. With this, they chose to spend their money on music that spoke to adolescent situations. Rock and roll was also sexually expressive, which helped wedge the natural divide between teens and parents. In the eighties, the relationship between youth and rock and roll became less pronounced as the audience grew broader (Weinstein 1999). Still, one cannot argue with the claim that rock and roll began with support almost entirely from youth culture. Along the same vein, Andrew Ross (1994:3) argues for the contractual nature of youth music, claiming that "the level of attention and meaning invested in music by youth is still unmatched by almost any other organized activity in society, including religion." Because adolescents invest so much of themselves in this music, it is appropriate to explore how adolescents interpret popular music.

Within youth subcultures, hip hop is among the most popular genres. According to the 2007 Consumer Profile from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the rap/hip-hop genre accounted for 10.8% of sales and R&B/urban[2] 11.8%. Consumers from 10-19 years old made up 23.8% of all record sales in 2007. In 2001, hip hop music sales accounted for 89.2 million or 11.7% of the total 763 million albums sold (Xie et al. 2007). These substantial numbers represent the legally purchased music and do not account for the sharing of music files or illegal downloading of music. From a general economic impact, it is estimated that hip hop contributes $5 billion to the US economy through clothing, films, and television sales associated with hip hop culture (Xie et al. 2007).

Rap music's outcry against structural oppression speaks to teen resistance, giving youth challenging the dominant or parent culture a voice through hip hop. "Musical taste and the collective sense of identity to which such taste often gives rise may grow out of a shared sense of experience or the aesthetic and political values that members attach to a particular popular music genre" (Bennett 2000:50). Youth may identify with others who appreciate the same music and look for models to shape their behavior and values. As long as rappers are part of adolescent lives, there is potential for these rappers to be seen as their role models (Richardson and Scott 2002; Anderson 1999). By asking fans to talk about hip hop, we can see what it is about the music and culture that appeals to them-- whether it be its rebellious undertones or the rapping role models or something entirely different.

Individual experiences contribute to how someone constructs meaning from music (Krims 2000; Esposito and Love 2008; Negus 1997). Not everyone will interpret a piece of music in the same way because not everyone has the same understandings or experiences. Research on popular music questions the listener's degree of active participation with music. Frankfurt School Critical Theorists such as Theodor W. Adorno (1990) believe that popular music is so 'predigested' that it leaves no room for audience interpretation thus eliminating the construction of personal meaning and significance of popular music. More recent cultural studies of music insist that although the culture industries shape the music we hear and some of our interpretations, popular music consumers take an active role in creating musical meanings (Bennett 2000). Individuals listen to music from their own personal perspective and construct their interpretations from their unique point of view. Stuart Hall (1997)has claimed that texts have one reading that is most commonly shared among people of the same culture, but he also acknowledges the likelihood of oppositional and negotiated readings that allow for a great deal of individual variation.

When examining the dynamics between music producers and consumers on a macro level, we can assume that most music is supported and funded because it promises to make money by targeting general listeners. This popular hip hop, or mainstream, music sells to the market that is certain to buy, sometimes by appealing to the lowest common denominators of sex, violence, and other shocking imagery in order to guarantee high sales (Gladwell 2005). At the same time, how well consumers receive popular music influences the music industry's decisions, as the music industry and its clientele are in

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[2] Includes R&B, Blues, Dance, Disco, Funk, Fusion, Motown, Reggae, and Soul which are sometimes cross-referenced with rap/hip-hop.

constant negotiation (Krims 2000; Negus 1997). In other words, if consumers passively purchased music, then the music industry's decisions would go unchallenged and producers could release anything successfully. In this sense, listeners would be like robots who purchase music to follow a crowd or the music companies' lead without thinking about the music. Asking how hip hop listeners describe their musical preferences will shed light on the extent to which they are active listeners who think about the music instead of robots dutifully purchasing whatever is on the market. There is no way to be certain whether music influences listeners' understandings of the world or conversely listeners choose their music based on their understandings. We can assume that there is at least a reflexive relationship at work in which listeners' worldviews and their taste in music influence each other.

Andy Bennett (2000) has researched how music contributes to a localized sense of identity. According to Bennett (2000:195), "Music not only informs the construction of the self, but also the social world in which the self operates." Among Bennett's general conclusions is the finding that young people use the local and familiar as their central point of reference when discussing what music means to them (Bennett 2000).

> Young people take the cultural resources provided by the popular culture industries and use the prescribed meanings attached to such resources as templates around which to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity. Although the resulting variations in musical significance obviously retain a sense of connectedness—for example, hip hop enthusiasts possess essentially the same sensibilities of commercially communicated style, musical taste and 'street-talk' irrespective of their location on the globe—at the same time they become infused with distinctive knowledges and sensibilities which originate from the particular region in which they are lived out (Bennett 2000:27).

As Bennett highlights, hip hop fans have commonalities that distinguish them from other music genre fans. Social identification with hip hop music and culture is one factor that influences how youth understand themselves and the world. Of course, youth have several templates that do this. Music might influence identity formation, but perhaps no more than the family, church, school, work, extra curricular activities, or peers. The degree of symbolic interaction a hip hop fan may have with other fans, the music, or other components of hip hop culture will affect how integral it is to one's world.

Greg Dimitriadis conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study of hip hop's use to youth at a local community center. He concluded that hip hop served as an unofficial curriculum. The young people he studied drew upon hip hop narratives to create meaning in their world. "Popular media forms made a whole host of constructs available to the young people at the community center where I conducted this research" (Dimitriadis 2005:36). As a trusted authority figure, Dimitriadis was able to conduct informal interactions with the youth at the center. He listened to how they talked about important issues and how they drew upon dominant themes in rap music and movies to describe their lived experiences (Dimitriadis 2005). Two boys constructed a sense of community and Southern values through Southern rap music. The boys also referenced rap music when explaining notions of 'playing' and player-hating in romantic relationships and also notions of trust in friendships. Dimitriadis also observed that hip hop artist Tupac represented a validated sense of self to the youth; "Young people seem to be creating

myths that work to mitigate against intense feelings of vulnerability—as young, black, poor, and gendered subjects in the United States today" (Dimitriadis 2005:117-118). This study highlights the complexity of adolescents, but also demonstrates the utilization of hip hop narratives in understanding oneself and the world. Dimitriadis (2005) also stresses that it is important for policy makers to understand how youth create a sense of place in life before developing policies and institutions relevant to their lives.

Bettina L. Love (2008) also conducted an ethnography of nine young Black students from 13-17 years old at a local community center. Using interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and document analyses of media materials, she found four major themes of how rap music informed these youth on ideas of gender, race, sexuality, and education. Her participants understood the images of rap music to be authentic Black representations, leading the girls to believe that real Black women have a large backside and a promiscuous character. The absence of White women from rap videos led them to believe that Whites make better choices and have better work options, which consequently indicates that they believe Black women are less intelligent and do not value their bodies as much. Love (2008) attributes these understandings to the significance her participants placed on media images, in combination with the girls' lack of positive female role models and critical thinking skills. "The stories of all youth are important to understanding rap's impact and influence in today's growing technological world that is driven by mass media" (Love 2008:182). Her research calls for educators to teach students how to think critically about the media texts they consume.

Capital and Authenticity

Pierre Bourdieu proposes different forms of capital that are acquired through and exist in the social world. Cultural capital, the knowledge and skills acquired through socialization within a particular status group, can be turned into economic capital under certain conditions and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. This cultural knowledge can earn access to various social groups with similar cultural capital. Social capital is essentially membership and acceptance into a group or a durable network of relationships (Bourdieu 2001).

Sarah Thornton offers an image of subcultural capital which is similar to Bourdieu (2001), applying it specifically to the context of youth and music. Subcultural capital is a concept that describes markers of taste, preference, tacit knowledge, and skills that pertain to a subculture but may be irrelevant in the dominant, main culture (Thornton 1995). Bourdieu's cultural capital focuses on how learned, academic knowledge functions as capital in social contexts. Thornton's subcultural capital focuses on how 'hipness' functions as capital in youth's social contexts. "More important than class, 'hipness' is crucial to subcultural capital in the same way as knowledge is at the base of cultural capital" (Huq 2006:51). Hipness is how well you can keep up with the dynamics within the subculture. "To be 'hip' is to be privy to insider knowledges that are threatened by the general distribution and easy access of mass media" (Thornton 1995:6). In hip hop culture it is how well-informed you are of new music, new artists, lingo, fashion, current events, and gossip. Therefore, subcultural capital is more relevant in the context of this paper because it pertains directly to the ways youth acquire and apply notions of 'hipness' to their connection between music and social life.

Just as artists are judged according to their apparent "authenticity," a fan's awareness of various artists' authenticity helps define that fan's level of hipness. In fact, this effort to identify the real is a major preoccupation within hip hop culture and the term 'keepin' it real' has been a mantra since the 1970s when hip hop began (Gaunt 2002; Forman 2002; Richardson 2007). Identification of what is real has ramifications for shaping individuals' conceptions of what makes anyone, including themselves, real. For a hip hop fan, knowing what it takes to be real is a kind of insider knowledge. When fans assess the authenticity of rappers they are asserting their own subcultural capital in the process. By understanding how fans assess the subcultural capital of rappers, we can see a relationship to how fans understand their own social positions within hip hop culture. This thesis discusses how adolescent hip hop fans determine an artist's authenticity by invoking their own subcultural capital.

Fans acquire a lot of the subcultural capital that allows them to make these authenticity assessments from the mass media. Thornton emphasizes this difference between her theory and Bourdieu's theories, "A critical difference between subcultural capital (as I develop it) and cultural capital (as Bourdieu develops it) is that the media are a primary factor governing the circulation of the former" (Thornton 1995:13). The media are key because "the difference between being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure" (Thornton 1995:14). Thus a lot of hipness is learned and acquired from hip hop music, fashion, and news itself. Sometimes it is transmitted through peers to other fans, but it commonly enters peer culture through the media. Hip hop audiences mirror what they learn from the media. Fans look into hip hop culture to search for understandings of hipness that they then reproduce. The reproduction of hipness is part of the feedback loop: hipness is acquired from the fans and displayed in the media, and fans acquire hipness from the media, reproducing it in a similar fashion (Goodman and Dretzin 2001). Bourdieu's cultural and social capital are useful concepts for my purposes, but Thornton's subcultural capital will be referred to most often because it pertains specifically to youth and music.

Media Literacy and Adolescents

Young people "learn about themselves and others through the consumption of popular culture texts such as music, television, and film" (Esposito and Love 2008:32). In a Canadian study of 168 children in grades one through six, the researchers asked children questions about music preferences in open-ended and forced-choice questionnaires. The data indicated that older children offered more complex explanations of why they liked a particular song. Older children also preferred hip hop and rap music more than the younger ones (Bosacki et al. 2006). The researchers suggest that the change in preference could be attributed to the complex themes in hip hop and rap that might be better understood in later childhood, or perhaps the beat and the 'real life' stories in the music (Bosacki et al. 2006). They found that their participants played an active role in constructing their music collection; "Given the purchasing power of children and preadolescents in today's consumer society, parents and educators need to encourage children to become critical consumers of the media, including popular music" (Bosacki et al. 2006:380). This study pointed to the need for media literacy to be taught in schools, given that music played a part in these children's personal and social lives.

"Cultural studies of media audiences aim to understand the power dynamics of mass media systems, the role mass media play in people's everyday lives, and the particular nature of audience experience" (Fisherkeller 1997:468). JoEllen Fisherkeller's work with three middle schoolers revealed that they learned from local cultures (family and peers) differently than from television cultures (Fisherkeller 1997). She examined comments about television from three participants to explore identity construction and cultural learning. She connected interpretations of a particular television persona to the viewers' life circumstances, to their perceptions of self and the social world, and to their sense of the future. Fisherkeller (1997) concluded that her participants acquired guidance from real people and situations within their local cultures, but looked to television culture for imaginative strategies to help them realize their dreams and cope with personal dilemmas. While she recognizes that "[c]ontextual analyses of young people's talk about television are valuable means for exploring how young people build a sense of themselves as members of multiple worlds within which mass-produced cultural symbols are prominent and proliferating" (Fisherkeller 1997:487), she also points to further studies of this nature with various forms of media. Analyses of how teens talk about music and other forms of media (films, video games, books) can lend insight into how they draw upon music to make sense of themselves and their world.

While little has been written on media literacy's implications for understanding music, there are numerous articles on the need for media literacy to counteract the possible negative effects of television viewing (Maness 2004; Krueger 1998; Singer and Singer 1998; Brown 2002; Fisherkeller 1997; Gruber and Thau 2003). Media literacy is the ability to think critically about information contained and conveyed through a variety of non-print media (Maness 2004; Krueger 1998). "It seems apparent that the artificial social reality of television does affect perceptions of young children and that explanation or mediation is necessary to counteract the glamour and stereotypes of television's portrayals" (Singer and Singer 1998:167).

These studies stress a need to research how youth are interpreting media and a need for them to formally learn how to be critical of media, so as not to interpret television—or any other media for that matter—as pure truth (Krueger 1998; Singer and Singer 1998; Brown 2002; Fisherkeller 1997). "In one national study 9 out of 10 American children reported living in homes with 2 or more television sets, 97% had VCRs, 75% had access to cable television, and more than half had a TV in their own room" (Gruber and Thau 2003:441). These statistics from a 1999 survey suggest easy access to television, which includes the then three large music video stations MTV, VH1, and BET. "Between the ages of 8 and 18, American children are exposed on average to almost 8 hours of media each day, more than 40% through television" (Gruber and Thau 2003:438). The concern for adolescents' television viewing includes any viewing of these major music stations that play music videos and music related content specifically catered to their age group. In this sense, music is a media that overlaps with television and raises concern for the images associated with it, as studies on music videos point out (Jones 1997; Emerson 2002). Therefore music is a form of mass media that is traditionally in the audio form, but since the introduction of music television, it is also visual. Concerns about television's effects can also apply to music's visual forms.

Steele and Brown describe a process whereby teens select particular media products, interact with those media in an interpretive and evaluative process, and then apply aspects of the media product to their lives (Maness 2004).

> Jeanne R. Steele and Jane D. Brown agree that adolescents, like adults, use media for a variety of purposes: to enhance their mood, to sort through cultural norms and values, to make statements about their identity, to emulate desired behaviors (e.g., imitating role models), and to fantasize about a possible (alternative) self (Manness 2004:47).

Steele and Brown (1995) describe a process whereby teens select particular media products, interact with those media in an interpretive and evaluative process, and then apply aspects of the media product to their lives (as cited in Maness 2004). Thus the media are appropriated and become part of lived experience, which motivates new selections of media.

Similarly, David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (1994:30) argue that media provides symbolic resources that young audiences use "to define and resist the various social identities that are available to them." While adolescents might use media as diversely as adults, it is important to remember that "young people use media to achieve goals that are intimately connected with their identity and their social interaction" (Maness 2004:47). Particularly in the context of hip hop music, which is widely ridiculed for its hyper-sexualized and violent imagery (Emerson 2002; Collins 2004; Pough 2004; Ogbar 2007; Rose 1994; Ward, Hansbrough, and Walker 2005; Richardson and Scott 2002), we need a better understanding of how literally youth interpret this music and how much critical "music literacy" they display in their interpretations. This is why it is important for adults involved with youth to understand how adolescents apply music and other forms of media to their lived experiences.

Hip Hop Culture and Race

Hip hop culture is inextricably linked to the Black community where it began. Hip hop music is still predominantly produced and presented by Blacks. The superficial assumption is that Black youth will be more likely to perceive similarities between themselves and major actors of hip hop culture. Therefore Black youth may see rappers and producers as role models and listen to hip hop music more than other genres. This assumption has a certain amount of support in the literature. "The culture of hip hop has become the nexus from which youth (particularly lower income Black youngsters) can create their values, define their selfhood… against a social backdrop that has historically devalued their color and contributions" (Richardson and Scott 2002:185). Although a person's identity formation is never based entirely upon one experience, but rather a combination of several influences, this statement may have some credibility.

The street code is seen and reflected in rap music. Charis E. Kubrin (2006:434) discusses the link between rap music and the street code:

> Rap music speaks directly to issues of identity, culture, and violence, themes that permeate recent research on inner-city Black communities. Mostly ethnographic in nature, this [Kubrin's paper] describes how structural disadvantage, social isolation, and despair have created a Black youth culture or 'street code' that influences adolescent behavior, particularly with respect to violence.

It could be that in rap music, Black youth see themselves so accurately reflected in the music that it serves as a strong influence on identity formation. "The street code and rap lyrics do not compel youth to act, but they provide an interpretive resource that can be drawn upon to understand as well as justify social identity and behavior" (Kubrin 2006:442). This notion can be applied to any lyrics because music provides youth with a resource for shaping their identity and behavior.

While hip hop music may be influential in the identity formation of Black youth, it also has implications for other races. A common misconception is that hip hop music and culture create a template for how Black people understand themselves merely because of their racial identification with the artist. While it is true that hip hop may describe various Black identities, "the identities constructed are not wholly and exclusively the property of people designated as Black people" (Hylton and Miller 2004:374). The narratives in rap songs can be applied to and interpreted by anyone listening, even though almost all its artists are Black. "Black people may more readily describe the stories on display; however… they are not exclusive properties or understandings of Black people" (Hylton and Miller 2004:374).

Through the media, hip hop culture has been appropriated by the dominant White culture. This profitable move made it only natural that hip hop is appropriated by races and socioeconomic levels other than the one from which it was born. White youth purchase an overwhelming amount of hip hop music (Kitwana 2005; Diamond, Bermundez, and Schensul 2006; Krims 2000; Xie et al. 2007). This is debated for its implications about authenticity, appropriation, racial integration, and morals (Kitwana 2005). Some scholars argue that the more negative the commentary surrounding rap, the more White audiences are drawn to it (Samuels 2004; Richardson and Scott 2002; Riley 2005). The fact is that youth and adults of all races are exposed to and are purchasing hip hop music.

"Because of rap, the voices, images, style, attitude, and language of young Blacks have become central in American culture, transcending geographic, social, and economic boundaries" (Kitwana 2002:196). The pervasiveness of hip hop in popular culture creates cultural identities in the media that represent Black urban communities. However, with its central position in society, hip hop culture offers a societal norm with which adolescents of all different races and backgrounds can identify.

The focus on rap as a source of identity among its artists and audiences is not discontinuous with recent concerns in popular music studies (Krims 2000). However, if rap music has been censored, continues to be questioned, and continues to stir Americans into moral panic (Bennett 2001; Krims 2000; Collins 2006; Chang 2005), then it has been assumed that hip hop listeners are influenced by either actively creating or passively absorbing meanings from the music. While there is a body of literature examining various aspects of hip hop culture, there is little that attempts to understand hip hop culture from the perspective of the young listener. "Youth are cultural actors whose experiences are best understood from their point of view" (Bucholtz 2002:533).

Research Questions

After reviewing the literature on youth culture, popular music, identity, capital and authenticity, media literacy, and hip hop culture, some questions remain as to how these fields relate to adolescent hip hop fans and their understanding of hip hop music. As

part of popular music, hip hop fans are criticized for not thinking critically about their music.

❖ Are fans active listeners who think critically about their music or are they simply followers who passively purchase whatever music is considered popular at the time?

Youth culture offers a collective identity for young people Adolescents are developing critical thinking skills during this period of transition when feelings of identity are significant. Theories relating to youth activities often discuss subcultural resistance.

❖ Hip hop is a subculture with ideology, style, values, and lifestyle that can offer a source of comfort for identity-seeking teens. How do adolescent fans identify with these aspects of hip hop?

Previous studies (Bennett 2000; Dimitriadis 2005; Love 2008) indicate that hip hop fans use the music to inform the construction of their own identity. Some (Weinstein 1999; Ross 1994; Bennett 2000) claim that teens are drawn to music that speaks to adolescent situations that can offer a sense of collective identity.

❖ How do teen fans identify with hip hop music? Does the music serve offer templates around which fans construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity?

Studies on media literacy and television viewing emphasize a need to research how youth are interpreting media and a need for them to formally learn how to be critical of media (Krueger 1998; Singer and Singer 1998; Brown 2002; Fisherkeller 1997).

❖ How well do teen hip hop fans think critically about the media with which they interact?

These questions seek to reveal how youth interpret hip hop music and how their relationship with hip hop music relates to their understanding of the world and issues of identity. The key research questions that incorporate all the questions above are:

➢ How do adolescent hip hop fans describe their interaction with and understanding of hip hop music?
➢ How critical are hip hop fans about the media with which they interact?

I believe that a study addressing these questions will yield important information pertinent to hip hop fans as well as social service workers, parents, educators, policy makers and others who interact with young hip hop fans.

Chapter Two

Methods

The question of how to study Black culture and hip hop culture has been debated in the literature. Black culture in general has been widely misinterpreted historically and still suffers from misrepresentation in social science. As Kelley notes (2004:120), there has been research on Blacks in the past that was likened to the ethnographer exploring concrete jungles, where "more often than not, they do not let the natives speak." Kelley's concern is that ethnographers are less likely to capture the essence of the Black experience when Blacks are conceptualized as the "exotic other," especially if there is little interaction with those studied. Because of the popular association between Black culture and hip hop culture, this tendency to exoticize can become an obstacle in research like mine. There are many possible ways of overcoming these problems in research, and each research method has strengths and weaknesses.

In investigating youths' interpretations of hip hop, I am in step with the third generation of cultural studies research as defined by Pertti Alasuutari (1999). Audience studies have taken on various forms in cultural studies research. Alasuutari argues that there are three generations of media audience research. Alasuutari sees the third generation, which takes a constructionist view, as the future of audience studies. This method starts with people's daily lives as the object of research. "The objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary 'media culture', both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourses within which it is discussed" (Alasuutari 1999:7). It also studies media's role in everyday life as opposed to an isolated analysis of texts. My research is grounded in this third generation of audience research which recognizes the need to examine how media are used in everyday lives as well as the discourse surrounding media.

Since I am interested in how adolescents understand hip hop, listening to them discuss it will be more effective than observing their behaviors. The goal of this research is not to understand the collaborative construction of meaning, for which focus groups would be most useful (Tiggeman, Gardiner, and Slater 2000). In my view, the strongest method for gaining access to the individual interpretations of youth is the open-ended interview. One-on-one open-ended interview offer a venue for interviewees to address topics that are relevant to them. It also allows participants to construct their own responses rather than choose from a list of given responses. Stephens and Few indicate that "interviews with youth provide the most direct window into adolescents' experiences through rich descriptions that can detail facts that are not easily quantified" (2007:254). Open-ended interviews are designed to gain a wealth of information from the interviewee with the option for the researcher to question further on particular topics that arise.

Kubrin seems to advise the interview as an ideal methodology for my specific purposes: "An essential follow-up to this study would take researchers into inner-city

communities to talk with residents, particularly those who listen to rap music. Face-to-face interviews are necessary to understand how residents respond to, interpret, and are influenced by rap music's content" (Kubrin 2005:454). I aimed to accomplish this very thing in asking low-income Black youth about hip hop music. At the same time, I included other races and socioeconomic classes to more accurately represent rap music's varied audience.

A Canadian study examining the popular musical preferences of 168 children concluded that "Future researchers should explore how children make meaning or construct their personal interpretations from popular music" (Bosacki et al. 2006:381). Lipsitz (1994) and Kitwana (2005) both stress the need to understand what young people are communicating through their dance, dress, speech and visual imagery. Thus, for my interest in hip hop's role in the lives of youth, there is not only a need to listen to youth themselves, but a lack of their voices commenting on musical influences in the literature. In studying hip hop culture and asking youth about the music, I seek to reveal the ways youth talk about rap music.

Interviewing youth about hip hop can present methodological challenges. The methodological challenges I faced in this project concern: 1) my position as an easily recognized outsider and potentially also as an authority figure; 2) the ways in which adolescence (and in some cases, non-White status of the interviewee) can encourage youth to adopt particular poses as research respondents, tailoring their comments to fit the currently circulating "vocabularies of motives" (ways of accounting for their own actions and thoughts) for liking hip hop. These challenges are addressed below in the following sections that detail the sampling technique, performance in interviews, my own presentation of self, the interviews, and examining talk.

Sampling Technique

The adolescents from this sample varied in their race and class backgrounds. My 16 year old family friend was the first member of my snowball sample, and she referred me to other hip hop fans she knows from her high school. As part of the snowball sampling process, they were all initially contacted on my behalf by someone they knew personally, who portrayed me as "a friend." These participants were informed by their friend that I was doing a research project interviewing hip hop fans. When I set up interviews through text messaging their cell phones or talking to them on the phone I informed them that I am a graduate student in sociology interested in what adolescent hip hop fans have to say about music. I told them that I wanted to interview them for about an hour and listen to their ideas about hip hop music. I also offered to buy them food and met them at various restaurants near their homes.

Prior to this project, I had been a 4th grade teacher for three years at a local elementary school. To obtain additional participants for this project, I contacted a fellow teacher from that school and asked her to put me in touch with any former students of hers who were also hip hop fans. She connected me with three interviewees. These students had remained in informal contact with her and had attended the school where I once taught while I was teaching there. At that time, several years ago, they had interacted with me frequently. When they knew me best, they saw me in the teacher role. My first challenge in these interviews was thus to break down some of the authority vs. student status hierarchy in order to enable a less encumbered discussion. I had to be sure

to present myself to them as almost an equal. Before turning on the tape recorder, we had brunch and talked about acquaintances we had in common such as family and friends, and also different things going on in entertainment gossip. All three interviewees who had known me in the teaching capacity were Black and from low income neighborhoods.

A Note on Performance in my Interviews

Erving Goffman discussed how individuals construct themselves in the presence of others according to circumstances and settings of the encounter. He asserts that individuals generally try to control the impression they give off in the presence of others (Goffman 1959). Goffman's point is that in any social circumstance, in addition to whatever else we are accomplishing, we are also performing our "self" for others who are observing us. In every given situation, we commit to a particular performance which can change during the course of the interaction. "The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretenses of being other things" (Goffman 1990:135). Full commitment to a specific role is called embracement. "To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it" (Goffman 1990:102). Goffman's theories of performance apply directly to the participant/researcher or interviewee/interviewer positions. Before committing to a particular performance, the interviewees evaluated me to determine what performance of self they were going to embrace. In conversation I believe that I was able to assure them that they could perform their hip hop insider self because, being an insider myself, I understood their language and cultural references[3]. Clearly they were engaged in impression management, but in sharing my own understanding of hip hop references and love of the music, I made every effort to impress upon them my status as a peer rather than as an authority figure. In other words, I managed my own performances in a way that I thought would make them relaxed and comfortable so that they would speak to me as if speaking to a peer.

As described below, my particular status does not perfectly match that of my interviewees in terms of age, education, or class. When asked their race, none of them identified as biracial like me, White and Asian. I find my qualitative experience to be similar to Elizabeth Chin's in that "Certainly, people's idea of who I was influenced them in their relationships to me, and vice versa. But none of us were wholly reinvented for these encounters" (Chin 2001:23). Instead, I performed a particular self that positioned me as a hip hop insider and less as an authority figure so they would speak to me as a peer or friend. Similarly, interviewees performed a particular self for me. They may have given me answers that they assume I want to hear, answers that they believe will appease me, or answers to annoy me. Regardless, the performances are useful for revealing one of the many ways the interviewees make their relationship to hip hop understandable to others like myself, through their presentation in their language, means of expression, and ideas.

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[3] Goffman's notions of performance are also relevant and discussed in the data analysis, lending insight into how fans determine the authenticity of rappers.

My Presentation of Self

The social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee has long been examined as problematic. "Negotiating the researcher role, issues related to the insider/outsider status of the researcher and matters of rapport have long concerned qualitative researchers" (Best 2003:896). Crossing barriers of race, gender, class, or age may yield skewed data. The participant might cater their answers for the interviewer in terms of what they think the 'right' or 'wrong' answer might be depending on whether they respond based on what they think the interviewer wants to hear or even if they want to purposely distort the results. Therefore, it was necessary for me to present my subcultural capital to position myself as an insider to minimize barriers between myself and the participants. I displayed my own subcultural capital through the questions I asked, the statements I made, and the momentary, spontaneous thoughts I brought up as I would in normal conversation.

Before the interview, the participants all knew I was studying to get my master's degree in sociology and that my thesis was on hip hop music. Knowing this automatically earned me somewhat of an insider status in hip hop culture because they assumed I knew about hip hop. I also selectively employed both proper English and hip hop slang as I would if I were talking to my own friends. Finally, the fact that we were talking about the rather neutral topic of a music genre that appeals to people of all races may have also minimized any significance my race or other barriers could have had in the interviews.

Before conducting this research, I was warned that my race would be very problematic because hip hop is predominantly represented by Blacks. As mentioned earlier, hip hop fans are not homogenous so I could not assume that my participants would or would not be White or Asian like myself. Ethnically, I am half Swedish and half Korean. By other people's perception I can fit neatly into the White category, but I have also been classified as Latina, and most often as Chinese or racially ambiguous. My own ambiguous racial status highlights the sociological premise that race is socially constructed; race is an ongoing interactional achievement and not an essential attribute (Best 2003). My presentation of my own "race" may have mitigated intimidating perceptions of Whiteness or Asian-ness.

> "As a number of prominent Black anthropologists have pointed out, being of the same race as the people you are researching is no guarantee of mutual understanding and can pose obstacles for discovering information. Racial groups are far from homogenous and factors other than race may facilitate or impede effective fieldwork—even in the hyperracially conscious United States" (Chin 21-22:2001).

This is not to say that my race is unproblematic, but rather, that it may be less of a problem than some outsiders to this subculture may presume.

Other factors were my age, which is 7-12 years removed from the ages of my participants', my sex as a female, and my class status as a graduate student. Some respondents knew that I was once a teacher. In situating myself as an insider genuinely interested in what they had to say, I attempted to minimize these differences. The participants who asked my age all guessed that I was closer to their age than I actually was. I cannot be sure how my class or gender may have affected their responses, but it did not seem like there was much distance between myself and the interviewees as we spoke, since they were willing to talk to me extensively about topics that could only be

understood by a fellow hip hop fan. In addition, I certainly joked around with them to put them at ease during the interview. Essentially, I presented myself and played my role as a researching hip hop fan which situated me close enough to the participants to allow them to relax.

Some of them had access to my My Space page before we met, so they may have looked at it, gaining insight into the social networking site aspect of me. On my My Space page I have pictures of myself with friends from various trips, myself with family members, and also pictures taken from online sources of some of my favorite artists. Some of my My Space friends are also some of my favorite hip hop artists. I feature a song and some of my favorite music videos on my profile that change with my mood. On the 'about me' section I have quoted an author,

> "The real question is this: why should hip-hop generationers continue to participate in and support a multibillion dollar industry if it fails to in any way address the critical problems facing our generation? What good is rap music if it does nothing more than give young Blacks the opportunity to 'dance to our own degradation'...and if it enriches only a few at the expense of the many? -Bakari Kitwana, 'The Hip Hop Generation.'"

If participants viewed my page, they may have seen that my personal musical preferences lie within the more critical corners of the broader genre of hip hop.

Regardless of how participants may have perceived my race, class, or status, they quickly understood that I was well versed with their language and that I shared in their subcultural capital. They were comfortable in these interviews mentioning names, concepts, events, and other insider knowledge with the assumption that I knew what they were talking about. I demonstrated my subcultural capital enough to convince them of my insider status so that they did not feel the need to translate their language and could speak more freely than they could have with some other researchers who do not share in their subcultural capital.

The Interviews

Before each interview began, I read the participant the IRB approved informed consent form appropriate for their age (either the child form for those under 18 or the adult form for those over 18). They signed a copy and were given a copy to keep along with my contact information. For those under 18 years old, I spoke with their parent beforehand and collected written consent from them as well. Each interview lasted about one hour, the shortest being forty minutes and the longest being one hour and forty-five minutes. In the interviews, I actively encouraged participants to describe hip hop music and artists. Specifically when they brought up "real" hip hop or rappers, I probed about this definition to gain insight into what they understood the "realness" of the music to be. I had a list of questions (see Appendix) before me that I used to guide me through the interviews, but most often my questions were constructed spontaneously in response to matters the interviewee brought up. For each interview, I presented the Billboard Music Charts Top 10 'Hot Rap Tracks' and 'Hot R&B/Hip Hop Songs' to get an understanding of how they talk about the popular songs for that week. Throughout the course of the interviews, there was minimal weekly variation of the songs and artists so that in using these charts, I collected comments from all the participants regarding a rather uniform and standard set of songs and artists. All twelve interviews were conducted in a quiet

corner of a restaurant near their residence, except three participants (Dave, Darrius, and Sarah) who were 18 or older. They were interviewed in my apartment upon their request.

Examining Talk

The second challenge of interviewees performing for the interview, is a problem for any project that asks respondents why they do something. Asking about motives can be problematic because the motive for why someone does something or likes something is unknowable (Mills 1940). Mills argues that sometimes people construct the 'why' for a behavior only when questioned. However, there is something to be said for the vocabulary people use to describe motives. "This imputation and avowal of motives by actors are social phenomena to be explained. The differing reasons men give for their actions are not themselves without reasons" (Mills 1940:904). Responses reveal which subjects are important to the participants in what is brought up most often. These are subsequently also markers of insider status in the hip hop world, and in conversation, I learned how the participants use their subcultural capital in social situations. Specifically, responses to my questions revealed the ways adolescents talk about music with me in an interview since I cannot be sure what teens will say when I am not there.

In interviewing youth about hip hop music, I can examine the meaning surrounding the words/terms used instead of treating the responses as straight-forward explanations. Discourse involves ways of being, doing, and knowing and contributes to social processes and meaning making (Richardson 2007). Language has the power to create and shape reality (Eder et.al. 1995). Since we can never be completely certain about our true motives for doing things, the ways adolescents *talk* about hip hop reveals how they bridge understanding between hip hop music and themselves. This shows their understanding of culture--revealing what they deem appropriate or inappropriate; important or unimportant. Most significantly, it shows how they understand themselves and the world in relation to hip hop music.

Meet the Participants

Almost all of my interviewees were friendly and talkative, if not in the first ten minutes, definitely by the end of the interview. Only one participant, Jay, was on the quiet side and appeared slightly uncomfortable. He was also the youngest interviewee at 14 years old. In each instance, I had some kind of background information about the interviewee before actually turning on the tape recorder. The source of that information came from a variety of places--either from the person who referred me to them, from their myspace page, or from talking to them at some point before the interview.

Since individuals interpret things based on their individual understandings and preconceived notions of the world, it is important to provide a basic overview of how my interviewees presented themselves to me and what kind of knowledge they are working with as a listener of hip hop. Information about the participants helped define the interviews and what I could expect of them (Goffman 1959). The participant in an interview setting chooses what role to play, what to reveal to the interviewer, and how to define themselves within the context of the interview. As mentioned earlier, I positioned myself within hip hop culture as an insider so that the participants were as comfortable as possible in performing self to me as if I were a peer. Although they were all presenting a

self specific to our conversation and context, there was no reason for me to believe that at any point they were playing a role other than that of their everyday selves.

Darrius

Darrius is a young Black man of 19 who lives in a nice suburb of the mid-size city of about 1,000,000 where all the interviews occurred. He lives with siblings and his mother in a relatively new apartment complex. A recent graduate of high school, where he played for the school football team, he was interviewed during the summer when he was occasionally playing around recording in the booth at a local studio. His friend's father owned or had rights to the recording studio so Darrius would mess around with two of his friends recording rap songs. He claimed that he is not trying to get serious with the music industry or trying to break into the rap game.

He stands just about 6'0" tall with big baggy clothes hanging off his lean body. Most of his dreds were pulled back in a rubber band, those that weren't fell just below shoulder-length. Darrius came across as very knowledgable about hip hop music, artists, and the community in his interview. He mentioned that he bought and has watched documentaries of his favorite rap artists. He also indicated that he surfs the internet, specifically YouTube and learns new information about various rappers there, too. It was as if he had done his homework before my interview, but in reality this subcultural capital he displayed was all just information that he knew already because it was part of his lived experience.

He spoke with authority on different artists. His friend's father was involved in making music, so Darrius had some sort of affiliation to rap artist Plies but was unspecific in our interview about this. Darrius seemed to convey that he is situated in a group of friends that is very interested in and involved with rap music.

Darrius entered my apartment and sat slouched on my couch, comfortable and laid-back as he answered my questions. At times he was more animated than others and sat up, sometimes leaning in and using his hands to explain what he was talking about. At the end of the interview he shared that it was really fun to talk with me. While he had discussed music before, he had never talked about hip hop from this angle. This was something a lot of the participants shared with me—Charlotte, Ronnie, Angelo, Dave, and Pierre.

Mimi

Mimi is a darker-skinned Black girl of 15 years old who has embraced her larger size. The size of her body reflects her presence and draws you to her beautiful face, often radiant and smiling. She is a social butterfly. She sees to it that she is well known among her peers and community. She has grown up in a low-income community with her grandmother with little to no contact with her biological parents. She is active in a local church with her grandmother. She has a strong personality and has no problem expressing that she is very opinionated.

I knew Mimi when she was a student at my school and I was a classroom teacher. When Mimi was in elementary school she did not learn to read at the same pace as most other students but was much farther behind. I believe this is why she feels so confident in discussing hip hop; it is part of her everyday life and it is something she can command easily. In her interview she conveys a sense of agency and knowledge when discussing

hip hop. Mimi indicated that she likes some songs because she can relate to them. Mimi also mentioned that she used to perform hip hop dancing and still plays around with her friends in a dramatic lip sync style.

Ciara

Ciara is Mimi's best friend who she met in her current school and they came together. I interviewed them one after the other. Ciara is a boisterous light-skinned 15 year old Black girl with womanly curves and tight curly, shoulder-length extensions. In my presence she was obvious in trying to be mature and on her best behavior. This was evident when she mouthed words like 'bitch' instead of speaking them. But since I interviewed her and Mimi together, she was more herself when interacting with Mimi and I was able to get a taste of how Ciara behaved with peers or when she was not trying to act mature.

Ciara expressed interest in the female artists and the soulful aspects of music. She seemed to speak of the emotional music with the most passion and even mentioned that she would like to be a good singer one day. Because she is in a relationship now, Ciara was acutely aware of the songs that discussed relationships and she favored songs that she could relate to.

Ty

Ty is a Black 18 year old who stands about 6'0." When I interviewed him he had just graduated high school where he was a cross country runner. He has a long wiry frame naturally built for running miles and miles. That same energy is communicated when talking to him with his compelling personality and smiley baby face.

Ty lives in a very typical nuclear family of his mother, father, and younger sister. They live in a house in a new gated community in an up-and-coming area of the suburbs. He was planning on attending a mid-size University on the other side of the state on a cross country scholarship. Over the summer he was working at his father's restaurant which had opened only 7 months before our interview. Business seemed slow and he attributed it partially to racial factors. He said that white people look at the menu in the window of their restaurant all the time, see Black folks and then keep on walking to the next storefront.

Ty seems to be very conscious of racial dynamics and his place as a Black male. He spoke proper English and did not have as much of a cultural dialect as the other Black interviewees did. When he mentioned that one of his favorite songs was "Boys in the Hood" by Easy E, he said that it is about "Black guys in the hood" as if there was really nothing more to it. He did not go into detail or discuss how he related to it. Our conversation led me to wonder if perhaps he struggles with his place as a Black male fan of hip hop who has not experienced living in the hood firsthand. Also, Easy-E is an old-school artist who I was surprised to hear about from someone of Ty's age. This indicated a wider breadth of hip hop exploration, in terms of history at least, on Ty's part.

Sarah

Sarah is a focused 17 year old White girl with straight long brown hair that rests upon her strong shoulders attached to her solid structure. She's an avid golfer and has her eyes set on top-ranked colleges and universities for next year. Before the interview she

expressed how tonight was a good night to meet because it fell on a rare day where she was not studying for one of her AP classes. Despite this being a more relaxed night, she was still focused on our goals of the interview. We got straight down to it and she answered questions expeditiously and frequently 'um-ed' when searching for her response. It was interesting to interview Sarah because she was the one who turned my sister on to rap music, and she proudly took credit for this achievement. She lives with both of her parents and her sister in a young suburban area, in an upper-middle-class gated community that has its own golf course. She seems to have a close relationship with her mother and sister as she mentioned that they all share music, slightly to her mother's chagrin. Sarah said that she gets a lot of music from her sister or downloads it herself and is constantly trying to turn her mom onto new hip hop.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a 15 year old Black girl who lives with four guys: two older brothers, a younger brother and her father. It is safe to say she is a daddy's girl and loves him very much, even as he struggles to keep a steady job. In talking to her it was apparent that this living situation affected her outlook. She is a beautiful girl who wears her own hair straight to her chin, and has a quiet and unassuming disposition. She dressed simply and comfortably in jeans and a t-shirt. Charlotte answered questions effortlessly and it seems she is surrounded by music--specifically that of her brothers' tastes. She expressed how it sometimes irritated her when her brothers play music that she is not fond of. Charlotte grappled with the criticisms of hip hop during our conversation. She seemed to take on a defensive position, acknowledging that some rap is "just talking about money and sex and women" and labeled some songs that we discussed as "bad" but that not all rap is like this.

Ronnie

Ronnie is a 14 year old Black boy who has an extensive family, many of whom live with or near him in a low-income area. Ronnie arrived well dressed with a long shiny silver cross displayed above his striped polo shirt. His neatly twisted dreds brushed against his shoulders and fell between his shoulders. Ronnie plays football and hopes that he can play for the high school he attends next year. I know him from my elementary school teaching days.

His mother and father have raised him and his 5 siblings with traditional Jamaican cultural values and norms. Ronnie's older sister has two small children, and various significant others of his sisters have had influence on him. In particular, he told me about how his nephew's father was killed a few months earlier in a random shooting at a nightclub. He was sad about the situation, and I could see that the man was a role model for Ronnie. Most of all, I could see how it pained him to see his sister upset over the loss of her baby's father, as they were scheduled to marry soon.

Ronnie is a sweet boy who really loved to talk about something he knows well. More importantly, he loved to be heard. It seemed like he was not used to such attention, and he relished in our discussion, commenting that he enjoyed it at the end.

Angelo

Angelo is an 18 year old young Black man who recently began rapping. A family member owns a local studio where he has begun to develop himself as a rapper. Before meeting with him he was secretive about where he lives, claiming that he stays in various nearby towns. This led me to believe that his parents were not together and that he lived partially with both of them, and/or other family members close by.

He is has portly build, with focused eyes resting on his round face. He wore a large t-shirt that said 'leaving Brooklyn forget about it' in big block letters, which indicated his affiliation to Brooklyn that he later spoke about. Angelo was prepared for our interview. He thought about things he wanted to say and was reflective about his experience rapping and what he thought about other issues in the rap game. He seemed to want the conversation to move quickly and spoke as if he had a lot to say but was rushed to do so. I certainly was not the one to rush him, as I sat relaxed and listened pleasantly. At the end he said that he enjoyed our talk, in which he did nearly all of the talking. When he rapped some lines, he consistently and frequently touched his nose as if quickly and lightly pinching it with a half-opened hand between his thumb and pointer finger. It was like a nervous tick, but it seemed to be a concentration technique. I've seen it with battle[4] rappers specifically but less persistently, so perhaps it is something he picked up from a mentor or someone.

Jay

Jay is a 14 year old darker-skinned Black boy with a sweet face. Still growing, he looked younger than his age to me. He is quiet and shy and seemed slightly uncomfortable talking to me, which I attribute to his age and natural disposition. His interview was different for me since all the interviewees previous to him were forthcoming and engaged in our conversation. His dark eyes seemed to hide what he was thinking-which could have been about football practice that he had afterwards. Jay told me he really would like to play on the high school football team this upcoming year where he would be a freshman. He did not come across as knowledgable or interpretive of music as the other participants, which could have been the source of his discomfort.

Although we did not talk extensively about his family, I learned that Jay's parents are divorced and he lives with his mom. He seems to spend time with both parents quite evenly. His father is remarried and has a toddler with his current wife. His father works full time in the pro shop of his community's golf course. I interviewed Jay in the club house of this golf course.

Dave

Eighteen year old Dave casually entered my presence with a mop of long shaggy hair that fell past the bottom of his ears and slightly over his blue eyes. The 4-inch dark roots told that he was not a natural blond. Otherwise he could pass for a blonde White boy even though he shared that he is Cuban. His speech was very much the laid-back surfer type and he sat comfortably spread out on the floor of my apartment. He wore a collared shirt with loose comfortable jeans that matched his loose comfortable attitude.

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[4] Battle rap is a component of hip hop culture that features two rappers who freestyle rhymes head to head, often in intimate settings with small responsive crowds.

He met me after work, where he does manual labor in a warehouse. He lives with his mom and younger sister. Dave mentioned that his mom had gone through some abusive relationships that made his childhood less-than ideal but things have been calm at the household for at least his high school years.

Guilli

Guilli is a wiry 19 year old light-skinned White and Latino boy with long wavy hair that was pulled back in a puffy frizz ball. He wore a long black t-shirt into which 4 of him could have fit and baggy jeans to complete the hood look. He sat down at the restaurant booth with his hands extended in front of him loosely clasped together, displaying his tattoos. On eight knuckles, he has a small tattoo of a bleeding heart which he explained to me when I asked. He slouched in the booth and spoke softly during our interview which was heavily laced with the phrase 'know what I'm sayin'?' He lived nearby our meeting place in a small unkempt apartment building with a roommate in an underprivileged part of town.

Guilli's mother is Puertorican and his father Italian, but he identifies as Puertorican since he grew up with his mother and his father was not around. He told me that his mother is a pastor and would love for him to be an evangelical gospel musician. He grew up with his mom and does not feel she supports him, but would like to prove himself to her and share his future success with her.

Pierre

Pierre is a 19 year old darker skinned Black male with a young face. He has a thin frame and wore an oversized t-shirt that, like Guilli, could have easily fit more than one of him. He usually works in the shipyard cleaning and fixing different watercraft. The day we met he took off work for the interview. I could not tell if it was a justifiable excuse in his mind or if I should be honored that he felt this interview was important enough to clear his schedule. Pierre was soft-spoken, and gave the impression of someone with a lot of thoughts but reluctant to share them. He was informative with his thoughts, but after every response, I felt like he had more to say and I wanted to hear more. He shared that growing up he moved around a lot, attending various low-income neighborhood schools-even my place of former employment at one point. He almost didn't finish high school because he got involved with a troublesome crowd.

Both Guilli and Angelo are involved in rapping and producing music and were certain to make this clear. Guilli fully embraced the role of a young man who experiences 'the streets' and emphasizes it throughout our interview. As seen in the interview, his point of view affects his understanding of and place in the world, which served to inform my data. However, being that he is a performer by trade, he has much more invested in an authentic presentation of someone from the street than someone who is not involved in the music industry (discussed further in Chapter Four).

The rapper role is evident throughout both Guilli and Angelo's interviews. Angelo focused less on a gangsta[5] image, which is not so much his style, and more on the rapper

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[5] "Gangsta" is used throughout this thesis as opposed to "gangster" because it is more accurate in referring to illegal ghetto activities involving Blacks. "Gangster" references

role in general. In fact, he introduced himself with his rapping name and I had to ask his real name. He clearly presented himself as Angelo the rapper. Unfortunately, Angelo spent a lot of the interview talking about his own music including spitting actual lyrics from his songs for me. While it was all interesting, it distracted from the goals of discussing rap music in a broader sense and I did not use much of our conversation in data analysis.

Interestingly, Darrius and Pierre also have experience in the recording studio but did not present this aspect of themselves as strongly. Darrius has also spent time in the studio rapping, but to a less serious extent than Guilli or Angelo. In his interview, Darrius maintained an average interviewee role and did not stress a rapper's role like Guilli and Angelo. Pierre has serious goals for his rapping but like Darrius, he did not emphasize this role in our conversation. These different methods of presentation seemed to be due to personality differences, although I could never be entirely sure.

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organized crime, most notably the Mafia. The gangsta discussed here, mainly in Chapter Four, does not necessarily have any relationship to organized crime.

Chapter Three

Realness: An Authenticity Test

Throughout the interviews, there was a consistent theme of realness as a desirable quality of both rappers and hip hop music. Interviewees discussed what it means to be 'real' as a rapper and what 'real' music is. Although the realness criteria vary among the participants, all of the participants administer an authenticity test of sorts to rappers. In the literature, realness falls under the larger notion of authenticity. The hip hop industry is heavily invested in defining authenticity and similarly, the fans are heavily invested in specifying what is real and what is not (Dyson 2007; Forman 2002; Huq 2006; Epstein 1994). "Authenticity is not inherent in the object designated as authentic. Instead, an audience confers authenticity on the object—it is a socially agreed-upon construct" (Armstrong 2004:338). This paper examines the ways my interviewees describe and determine the authenticity of rap artists and rap music. Essentially, my interviews address the question, "How do adolescent hip hop fans assess the authenticity of rappers and their music?"

E.G. Armstrong (2004) defined three forms of hip hop authenticity in rap music: being true to oneself, claiming 'local allegiances and territorial identities,' and establishing a connection to 'an original source of rap' through locale, style, or links to an established artist. My data builds upon Armstrong's typology of hip hop authenticity. His first form, being true to oneself, can be located in the congruence between the artist's words and deeds. It also demonstrates the values of self-creation and individuality (Armstrong 2004). This is a major theme of my data and is discussed in the first chapter with authenticity and realness. The second form emphasizes the importance of spatiality in terms of where the rapper is from and the place with which he identifies. This criterion is also prevalent in my data and is addressed in the hoodness chapter.

The third form is most concretely defined in terms of who the rapper knows, what kind of associations he has with respected individuals in hip hop. This is more apparent in Armstrong's case because he examines the rapper Eminem, a White artist whose associations are closely inspected by observers in order to validate his authenticity. But this third form was not a topic directly discussed in any of my interviews. Therefore Armstrong's third form of hip hop authenticity is not discussed in this paper because it was not present in the data. It is, however, arguably an element of hip hop culture that is transmitted through popular culture.

This chapter highlights Armstrong's first form of authenticity of 'being true to oneself', which is most commonly referred to here as realness. Hip hop ideology demands that its practitioners 'keep it real,' by speaking from their lived experience not an ideal from dominant discourses (Richardson 2007). Since each interviewee has a different perspective and understanding about the world, their ideas of realness vary based on their cultural context. My interviewees discussed several characteristics of being true to oneself, as discussed in the following sections of this chapter: The Artist as a Real

Person, Relatability, What you see is what you get, Fake in Opposition to being Real, and Plies the rapper: Real or fake?

The Artist as a Real Person

Goffman (1959) writes that in everyday life, it is our habit to assume sincerity in the acts we see performed by others. While everyone is always performing an act tailored to their audience, everyone is also socialized to ignore such role playing. In this sense, everyone is socialized to give actors the benefit of the doubt and believe that there is sincerity in peoples' performances of their roles. Interviewees essentially described real rappers as artists whose thoughts, behavior, and personality seem unchanged between their performance as an artist and their performance as a real life person[6]. Being true to oneself is present in how believable the rapper is as a person. Authentic rappers are understood as fully embracing their role as an artist in both their personal and professional lives. The rappers who earn the most respect from my interviewees are ones who play the rapper role well, but are perceived as real people at the same time. The person rapping onstage is the same person you would run into on the street, or observe chillin' at home with his friends or family. As Charlotte says,

> *Do you believe what he is saying in his song?*[7] Charlotte: Yeah just the way he moves, because the way he-the way he is in other interviews, he really sounds like a real person. Yeah like you know how some people you can tell if they're fake or not and they're just trying to smile and be fake and be pretty? Well he just seems like an honest person. He does have a hard time getting his words out in interviews.

Charlotte likes how T.I. talks like an average person might in an interview. His lines do not appear rehearsed which gives a genuine feel to his overall character.

Sarah expands upon the idea of rappers appearing genuine in the public realm by expressing themselves as a real person, not an artist. When referring to Kanye West, Sarah says,

> Sarah: Well I think 'cause he's kinda controversial. He has that statement about George Bush, uh he hates black people or whatever, uh and I think it was great like that's just him and he's not trying to hide it. He doesn't try to fit any mold that anyone else has made. The kind of things he touches on are not things that are gonna be uh, politically correct or acceptable.

Sarah believes that Kanye speaks his mind even if it is not politically correct and that shows his true personality. She is referring to a comment Kanye made during a benefit, *A Concert for Hurricane Relief* on NBC. Kanye was a featured celebrity speaker who said, among other things, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." This comment was publicly received in various ways, and Sarah represents one common response among hip hop listeners. Sarah also discussed Jay-Z with me,

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[6] The term 'artist' here refers to the musical persona presented publicly while the term 'person' refers to the artist's private self.

[7] Materials from my interviews are enclosed with quotation marks unless they are passages, which are set apart with indention. My words are italicized and the respondent's words are in regular font.

> Sarah: I feel like his music is so real…but everything I've heard is just really cool. Um I don't think he's-like kinda like Kanye-he's not trying to make like the most uh forward songs or the most mainstream songs but he just makes great music and he's taken that pretty far so.

Jay-Z makes good music effortlessly, which shows that he is making music that is true to himself. He's not trying too hard. This is what makes his music real. Sarah thinks of Jay-Z as an artist who makes music that fits his personal style instead of one who tries to fit a particular mold. Sarah: "But he um, I just think he's true to what he says and he doesn't make like a public spotlight of himself. Like he's really like concealing of himself or whatever with like Beyonce, but I think that like he lets his music speak for him." By saying that "He lets his music speak for him," Sarah indicates that Jay-Z the artist expresses what Shawn 'Jay-Z' Carter the person would like to communicate publicly. He conceals private matters such as his relationship with Beyonce, but what Sean 'Jay-Z' Carter *does* share in his music is perceived by Sarah as what he actually believes.

Ciara makes an interesting comment about the emotion that her favorite artist, Lyfe Jennings, conveys through his music.

> Ciara: He just-he been through a lot in his life and he is just-I love how he just-- He's like a rapper but he sings. *Yea.* And it's like… *how do you know he's been through a lot in life?* 'cause you can, he, he writes about it through his songs and you can like feel it. *and you feel it so you believe it's true, he's not making it up or...* Yeah 'cause like, it's real, it's not like stuff you can't believe.

Ciara believes that Lyfe Jennings sings about his life because the scenarios are realistic and he sings with such emotion. She is convinced that the lyrics are his words. Above, Sarah refers to this as coming from the artist's heart. To Ciara, and the others, the artists present themselves as realistic people. They feel, think, and experience things that average people do so that fans do not perceive artists as personas, but rather as an extension of the actual person behind the artist. Ciara sees an outspoken quality in one of her favorite rappers, Eve, which is also a quality she desires in her friends.

> Ciara: She says whatever. I just love her 'cause she says whatever she thinks about. Like she doesn't care. I like people who outspoken. I like people who say what they want to say and like she gon' say what she wanna say, she gon' say what she gotta say, and that's why I like Eve. If you say what you wanna say and say what you gotta say, you can be my friend. Be real with me, don't-don't be playin'.

Here the *artist* Eve is equal to the *person* Eve Jihan Jeffers. Eve seems like someone Ciara could befriend and someone who is not afraid to be herself as an artist. These qualities make the artist more real.

For Ty, realness is associated with sexual imagery in hip hop. Ty addressed sex in the context of rap music, which is a particularly salient issue in all forms of popular music. He enjoys the sexually explicit quality of rap music and explains that the sexual content is just one way for rappers to demonstrate that they are being real.

> Ty: How I like how it's sexually explicit? *'Cause some people, that turns people off, why do you like it?* Oh. 'Cause you get to be real you know, like, not everybody needs to know like, 'Oh they said something nasty, change the channel.' Or the reason why they're doing that is the reason why you're here. *Mm*

> *hm.* 'Cause it's not like you're such a saint that you haven't done anything. You get to the club and you've done some things that your mom wouldn't expect you to do *<laugh>*. So it's just people being real and if they have a problem with it then listen to something else."

Ty argues that rap music is sexually explicit because everybody engages in sex and thinks about this aspect of life, even though it is not necessarily socially acceptable to blatantly discuss it. As Ty sees it, sex is part of everyone's reality, and talking about it in music makes the music and/or the rapper more real.

My interviewees give an overall impression that rappers' lyrics reflect the rappers speaking their mind. It doesn't seem possible to them that the artists are putting on a show or portraying an image. Jean M. Twenge (2006) identifies this idea of speaking your mind as a characteristic among what she calls Generation Me, those born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. She argues that members of GenMe assert their opinions bluntly because they are taught to be expressive without worrying about what other people think (Twenge 2006). Drawing in sociological theory, this assessment fits with the general trend away from traditional, authoritarian restrictions on public discourse and a movement toward personal liberties more characteristic of a neo-liberal state. Twenge's observation may not be confined solely to those individuals born during these three decades. Gradually, our society has shifted toward more impulsive and personally expressive forms of social interaction. With the restrictions of a more traditional and authoritarian society lifted, individualism and the freedom to express yourself has arisen as a widely shared value.

This may help to explain why my interviewees tended to consider it important and desirable that the rap artists' self-image present in their music is congruent with the rappers as people. Charlotte assumes that rappers are talking about their real lives.

> Charlotte: If he sings, if he's rapping he says it, he says what he means and all that stuff...Like Plies, but he's scary. Because he's like, all he does is sitting there talking bout on the streets and all that stuff. That's not somebody would want to be around! Um, I would not want to be around Rick Ross and Ludacris kinda scary. 'Cause if they're singing about their real life and their real life situations that I wouldn't want to set myself around.

In another interview, Jay also affirms that one of his favorite rappers, Lupe Fiasco talks about his own life.

> Jay: He talks about like what people do in society and stuff like what like what happens and goes on in **his** life. Like, like one song they talking 'bout this girl that always go with him. Wherever he goes she goes. *Lupe, when he sings do you think he's singing about his real life?* Yip. I think so. *And all his songs are basically about what he knows and what he's experienced?* Mm hm.

Perhaps modern fans and especially those belonging to Generation Me are taught to be expressive and therefore assume that rappers are equally honestly expressive without considering other possibilities. Regardless of the reason, listeners assume the artist is presenting his casual, everyday self without performing a fictional role in his music and celebrity persona.

Relatability

Another dimension of realness is how true a song's theme or narrative is to the listener. Participants shared how they relate to the first-person narratives of songs. One way listeners can relate to songs is to imagine that they wrote the song about themselves. Ronnie agrees with the message in the song "Get Like Me" by David Banner featuring Chris Brown and Yung Joc, in that he believes people need to be like him and that's what makes the song good in his eyes.

> Ronnie: It's got it's got like the truth. People need to stop tryin' to get like like, get like me. They need to get like me. *They need to? Why? What's so great about you?* 'cause it's like it's like what I do, how I play, everything yeah.

He feels like he could be able to place himself in the rapper's position and the lyrics would still be relevant. Charlotte and Mimi also expressed similar first-person connections to music.

> Charlotte: *What about teenage love affair?* She talks about having like a crush. She's in college but everyone can relate to it like--like having a crush, <exaggerates the listing by going slow> have someone liking you and talking on the phone all the time, and coming over you know and hanging out so.. *you relate to it?* yes of course <giggles>.

Ty also commented on the song "Teenage Love Affair" by Alicia Keys, exclaiming "Everybody relates to that!"

Mimi directly states how she personally perceives songs. She says she likes the dirty version of "I luv your girl" because "I can say it to my ex-boyfriend." Mimi can replace the general term 'he' for her boyfriend's name. She also says that she likes Rick Ross' song "The Boss" "'cause I'm the biggest boss." To discern what is real sometimes involves how realistic the song is in the listener's life.

Pierre says that when he listens to music, he considers how a song might relate to his personal experience.

> Pierre: I listen to music--what, nowadays a lot of people listen to music for like the beats but I listen for like lyrics. See what they sayin', see how I, you relate to it. *What do you mean like relate?* See if he went through the same thing. To understand what they talkin' 'bout…something I could relate to, something like what happened in my life.

Pierre's favorite song "American Dreamin'" by Jay-Z is something that he relates to.

> Pierre: …saying that talk about like stuff that he would like to have. 'Bout what he would like to do and stuff. And relating to like how his life is right now and how his life would be if he had that--if he had all the stuff. I can relate to it. Sometimes when I ain't doin' nuttin', I just sit in the chair right there and just think of some stuff. I need to--I need to get some things. So I could--so I won't have to worry 'bout this, know what I'm sayin'. It's on that scale, on the same thing that he on daydreamin'-- <chuckle> daydreaming about stuff.

In this instance, Pierre's favorite song is one that he feels he relates to because he daydreams just like the character of the song.

Sarah also discusses how relatable material is naturally perceived as real, since the listener also experiences it. *"What makes a song real?* Um it's relatable. It's really,

it's *relatable to you?* Yeah relatable to me. Relatable to my perspective." As a comparison, Sarah says that Chris Brown is more relatable to her because of his age. "More relatable to me yeah um like just like the things he's talking about you know he's not gonna be like you're gonna understand it or understand that situation no matter what."

Dave discussed the truth as something that listeners in general can relate to personally. Dave explains that Lil Wayne says things that are true, as if he simply points out the obvious.

> Dave: But if you like if you actually sit down and listen to his lyrics and analyze his music like I do 'cause I like music a lot, you can, you hear his lyrics and when you hear something that you like you're like holy shit that's so true or that's crazy, you know?
>
> Yeah it just, it…like if something's happened to you bad in your life that you wanna reflect on but you don't like thinking about it or listening to it or talking about it. *Mmhm.* Like if you hear it in a song it's like oh yea, true, you've been through the same thing I've been through, he's been through the same thing I've been through. You know, you say, true, you know. *And is that also why it appeals to everybody?* Yeah like 'cause, not only that but 'cause it confronts them with something in their life that happened but just like a lot of stuff he says is genuine like 100% true…Like, well, that's what makes you a different type of person as far as music goes like if you like a style of music then you're going to have to relate to the music. Like the lyrics. Like rap has a lot of lyrical background. It has beat but a lot of people that like rap is because of the lyrics.

Dave says that a listener will recognize something as true if they have had a similar experience and this is what draws listeners to their songs and music of interest. He says Lil Wayne's lyrics are "genuine like 100% true." In this sense, being true to oneself is also talking about things that are true in listeners' lives. He goes on to talk about how listeners relate to Tupac.

> Dave: Tupac has like more of the, he's another rapper that people can listen to and relate to 'cause he has a lot of music that talks about him and growing up and all the things around the world that are just so bad to him that are bad to other people that listen to him too… There's another song he sings about it's called 'Dear Mama' just sings to, he's trying to sing a song to his mom saying how much he appreciates everything and how bad of a kid he was and how she struggled to, to like, support her two kids on her own and how happy he is. You know Like when I listen to that song I think of my mom. He's talking about how his mom used to sell crack. My mom didn't used to sell crack but when he says certain things like what he's thanking his mom for and shit I'm just like aw, I just think about my mom and I'm just like wow this is crazy. The way it makes me feel.

While Dave tells me that he cannot relate to everything Tupac addresses, he tells me that he does relate to Tupac's feelings toward his mom in the song "Dear Mama." With this, Dave does not feel the exact same way as Tupac because his circumstances were different. However, he thinks about the aspect of the song that he *can* relate to. It almost

surprises him how the song makes him emotional when he listens and connects it to his own life, his own mother.

Later in our conversation Dave says "When I first started listening to [DMX's music] I was like 10 or 11 and 'cause I--I lived in a bad part of town where a lot of bad shit happened. And I listened to rap all the time so like stuff like this made me feel better about certain situations I was in and stuff." Here he is explaining to me how he got into rap music. DMX helped him cope with his circumstances out of his control. While he no longer lives in the same circumstances, Dave still listens to rap music and finds other things that relate to him in the music.

These comments indicate that one dimension of realness is relatability. These adolescent fans find ways narratives or messages of songs relate to their personal circumstances or social lives. Since listeners have experienced similar feelings, thoughts, or events as discussed in relatable songs, listeners know that these things exist firsthand. Therefore, rappers that communicate about relatable themes through their music are perceived as real.

"What You See is What You Get"

In addition to rappers being true to themselves, and being relatable, the rappers who are classified as 'real' all have a 'take it or leave it' attitude, as if they are themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. They are individual and will not change because of what others, or the record label, might think. When Dave talks about Lil' Wayne, he says "Like all his shit is like legit. It's--most of it's original" and goes on to explain that by legit he means "It's real. 100% what you see is what you get you know?" In this explanation, Dave is demonstrating that he sees Lil Wayne the rapper as Lil Wayne the person, with no front or performance occurring. This falls in line with Goffman's (1959) idea that people tend to assume that performances are not contrived.

To Sarah, a song is real "if they're not trying to talk about what you expect." She considers real songs to talk about things that listeners do not expect to hear. Regarding the artists that are not real:

> Sarah: They're just trying, they're just following an equation. They're trying to get a certain outcome so they do what someone else does to get that outcome. Um they're not taking like new paths or avenues to get there. Um, in terms of rap they're not just like the drugs, sex, alcohol thing. Your audience is not gonna be uh, supporting uh fans. They're gonna be just someone who hears it in their car or wherever it's played and I just feel like it's not **real**. It's not anything that's coming from this guy's heart or this girl's heart, uh it's just kinda like what their executive is telling them to write about and it's so obvious to me.

Real artists do not respond to what the music corporation or the audience wants, but instead they do what feels true to themselves. Sarah feels like songs are real when they come from the artists' heart and are creative. She also expresses a higher respect for an artist who has devoted and supporting fans, and these fans cannot be people who just listen to music on the radio. Indeed, audience response to the same music varies across different listening populations. We can distinguish between 'greatest hits fans' and critical listeners whose involvement in the music is broader and deeper (Riley 2005).

Supporting fans, to her, appreciate rap music that finds creative ways to discuss more than just drugs, sex or alcohol.

Artists are real when they make creative music that isn't an obvious attempt to appease the record company or the executives. When the artist isn't afraid to try new things it conveys that he is being true to himself and that he will not allow his creative expression to be stifled by what others think. On a larger scale, real artists are able to escape the corporate machine that mainstreams themes for the general public and is often understood as stifling creativity (Goodman and Dretzin 2001). Sarah comments specifically on Ne-yo, "He is kinda like established in the fact that like he knows who he is, he dresses the way he wants. He wears those whack hats to the side and he doesn't care <chuckle>. I mean I like him, I think he's cool." Her definition of real incorporates what is also cool to her: doing something unique while being true to oneself. Doing something that nobody else is doing is one definition of cool that attracts people to follow that trend (Gladwell 2005). In a sense, Sarah is outlining a formula for real music: *real* artists create *real* music that attracts *real* fans as opposed to casual listeners.

Guilli creates and produces rap music with a partner and he lamented how people in the rap business make empty promises. He commented, "Real! Be real with yourself then see how easy it is, how easy you feel inside. You might end up regretting it sometimes but at least you were real with yourself know what I'm sayin'. You know at night I can lay my head on my pillow." Being real is being true to yourself, presenting yourself as who you genuinely are whether others receive it well or not. Guilli describes his own music as real. He supports the idea that realness is presented by the person, not the artist.

> *Tell me about your style.* Guilli: Um, it's just like whatever I want. It's very real music. *Ok so what makes it real music?* Um 'cause there's not, I'm not gonna show you yeah big spinning rims, $100,000 chains, big booty girls shakin' they breasts. Naw man, I'm not here to talk about that know what I'm sayin'. If I don't got it I ain't gonna talk about it. If I don't do it I'm not gonna talk about it. What I rap? For real. What you hearing is for real. If I say I might beat you up, take that into consideration. You know i--i--it's from the heart. You know we're gonna rap about some monetary and we gonna rap about what we got and that's that.

It seems to be labeled real if it is realistic to his life as it is now. His music comes from his actual experiences and his personality, not what he thinks the audience wants and not what is already circulated in rap music in terms of jewelry, cars, and women. "All artists position themselves as authentic and 'true to the game'" (Ogbar 2007:39) and it seems like Guilli does so as part of the territory. To be a rapper, you have to present your true self to be real and 'true to the game' and he asserts his authenticity to me. Later in the conversation he adds, "We can go from something as real as the current struggle that we're going through right now or we can switch up to something club, know what I'm sayin'…" Again here he emphasizes real as his current situation, described as the "current struggle," which is trying to succeed in rap music. Guilli's understanding of real also overlaps with notions of hoodness, discussed further in the hoodness chapter.

Overall these listeners determine a real rapper based on very loose criteria. It seems like it is more of an overall feeling that they get from the rappers rather than a definitive set of characteristics. All the interviewees agree that an authentic artist seems

like a real person who feels, thinks, and acts like a friend or someone that a fan could know in their life. This criterion builds upon Armstrong's first form of authenticity 'being true to oneself,' which incorporates specific factors that hip hop fans seek among rappers. While it was difficult for the participants to be specific with how they know a rapper is real, it was much easier for them to point out how they know that a rapper is fake.

Fake in Opposition to Being Real

Realness and fakeness operate together in a dichotomous relationship. Goffman comments on how we all attempt to distinguish real from false performances. "We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual's unself-conscious response to the facts in his situation" (Goffman 1959:70). This is how a real rapper is described, as real person who performs their artist role in line with their "unself-conscious," everyday self. "And contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behavior could be a direct response" (Goffman 1959:70). Rappers with contrived performances were fake according to interviewees.

In practical lived experience, we make a great deal out of the distinction between real and false performances. First we assume people are genuine unless a performance is compromised and becomes seen as unnatural or artificial. Dyson notes that authenticity was debated from the beginning of hip hop culture "perhaps because their culture was under assault by older members of black culture and society at large" (Dyson 2007:6). Those who were inside of the hip hop culture began to determine authenticity and identify the legitimate outlines of their culture from their perspective as opposed to outsiders imposing it upon them. Thus the other dichotomous relationship that surrounds hip hop, as with most subcultures is the insider-outsider relationship. Insiders to hip hop culture are able to cite which rappers are real or fake because they share subcultural capital. Part of distinguishing realness comes from the deduction that it is not fake, and vice versa.

One method of distinguishing a fake rapper is to study if their words are inconsistent with their actual experiences or behaviors. Ty shared an interesting scene from the MTV show *Punked,* on which celebrities are tricked into thinking horrible things are happening to them while being videotaped for the reaction.

> Ty: T.I. they called him out on uh, they got him on what is it, Punked with Ashton Kutcher? *Ok, yeah Punked.* They got him real good with uh, with Punked. They said they found guns on his private jet like AKs and stuff. *Right.* That boy was cryin'. *Really?* That boy was cryin'! <chuckles> on TV! And that ruined his reputation. *So that makes him fake 'cause he cried?* I think so 'cause what if you said oh fuck the police, this and that, FBI and then they knockin' on your plane <knocks>, we got guns for you, you're going away for 70 years, and you start crying…Kanye West was real though 'cause they were about to take away his uh album right. *Uh huh.* And they said you can't shoot here. So they took the camera. He snatched the camera away and started runnin' with it. *<laugh>* like he was 'bout to fight somebody. *So he's ok. He's alright.* I just like 'cause like they made fun of it 'cause he was like actin' a fool. I'm not sayin he's real

because he snatched somebody's camera and started runnin' away--I mean he was gonna act a fool. Then that might make me buy the buy his album 'cause like that dude cool!

Ty explains here the inconsistency between T.I.'s lyrics and rap image. He calls T.I. fake because his everyday behaviors as a person do not correspond to his reputation as an artist. He contrasts the T.I. example with Kanye West's reaction. Ty is careful not to say that Kanye is real for snatching a camera and running, but he is clear in saying that this makes Kanye cool. Kanye has demonstrated a component of the 'cool pose' by acting deviantly, refusing to be subservient (Majors & Billson 1992). Here Kanye is being himself and is consistent with the personality seen in the media and his music which checks out with Ty's authenticity test.

Ty's example with *Punked* follows Goffman's ideas in that the show is testing the rappers, looking for their 'unself-conscious' (Goffman 1959), unscripted reaction to given situations. Watching the show *Punked* could be one way that hip hop fans look for slip-ups of performance or a discrepancy of character. Gossip news and interviews are other media fans might consult for slip-ups. For example, Mimi mentioned that she keeps up with these things and that is how she knows about Mary J. Blige's life. Goffman (1959) notes that people are generally aware of such discrepancies but since hip hop fans are heavily invested in authenticity, they will tend to be hyper vigilant of such slip-ups. Here the lesson is that rappers must be consistent with their everyday lives and their reputation as an artist because a slip-up between these two roles would deem them fake.

Plies the Rapper: Real or Fake?

Plies came up in a few interviews when talking about authenticity. Plies' hometown is close to my sample site, where Plies reportedly has a home, so that interviewees were slightly more aware of him. Local artists make more appearances and tend to be promoted more heavily by the local radio, but aside from this some of the interviewees claimed they had connections to people who know or knew Plies personally. Darrius considers Plies a fake rapper because of a personal experience he's had with Plies that he did not discuss in detail. He did offer explanation about what makes Plies a fake rapper.

Darrius: But, like, I just know he's fake. He rap on a song like—he wanna rap about something but don't do it like, <in rap mode> 'I never call police or like I--I shoot you or something'. But I know for a FACT he calls the police. I know for a fact, I know for a fact. I'm 100% sure he calls the police. He's not a rapper who be like, who sits in your face be like 'I kill you son, I kill you' just in you like, no. He's a snitch.

Darrius is well informed and does his homework and speaks about rappers and rap music with confidence. "Other rappers who say he's fake. It's OTHER rappers who been in the game a long time who say he's fake. I seen a video on Youtube." Darrius trusts other veteran rappers who have inside information to be informing the public honestly. He is actively researching hip hop gossip in the media, which informs his ideas of who is real and who is fake. Thornton recognizes the media's role in determining authenticity, "'*The* media' is therefore a vague monolith against which subcultural credibilities are measured" (Thornton 1995:6). If he finds enough inconsistency between a rapper's everyday behaviors and his reputation, Darrius will decide that rapper is fake.

Guilli also called Plies fake.

> Guilli: He's a faker man. Everybody knows man. A lot of people ain't doin' what they say they are. *So what is he saying he's doin'?* That he a real nigger, fuckin' doin' everything that he says he does. He kills people, he doesn't do all that stuff that's his brother's life he raps. I know people that know his ass know what I'm sayin', personally.

Plies says that he kills people but doesn't--he is claiming activities that his brother was involved in, not him. This causes him to loose credibility, exposing that his words are inconsistent with his actions. To Darrius and Guilli, Plies is an example of a rapper who is misrepresenting himself because his persona as an artist does not correspond with his life experiences and behaviors as a person. An incongruent performance of self is received very poorly among fans and others in the rap industry since authenticity is highly valued.

Contrary to the rapper image, Ty and Ronnie mentioned that Plies attended a nearby university and earned a degree. For most fans, this might cause Plies to lose credibility. Having a poor education is part of being real. This is part of the 'real nigga' image that is highly criticized by scholars in terms of minstrelsy as Ogbar states here; "One is not 'real' by doing well in school, being rasied middle class, or even speaking proper grammar. The articulation of a 'real nigga' among many MCs reads nearly exactly as a 'zip coon' character of the early twentieth century" (Ogbar 2007:34). Part of Plies' image is someone from 'the streets,' as Charlotte indicated earlier when she called Plies, Rick Ross and Ludacris 'scary.' This is typical of a rapper image-someone who grew up in impoverished conditions with very little resources, including little education. This rapper image has been criticized by academics as a replica of minstrelsy of the nineteenth century (Ogbar 2007; Watkins 2005; Cobb 2007) because it negatively portrays Blacks succumbing to dominant racial stereotypes by embracing them. Despite the dissonance of Plies' street image and his alleged college degree, neither Ty nor Ronnie seemed to mind that Plies had a degree. Ty actually likes Plies regardless of his personal experience.

> W*hat if he did go to [name of the local university] would that change?* Ty: Wouldn't matter. Go get your education. *<Chuckle> He's still ok with you?* Yea! I dunno I like Plies 'cause he's that southern Florida rapper and you don't have that many like deep south Florida rappers…And Plies is more <pause> sexually explicit.

Similarly, Mimi listed Plies as one of her favorite rappers independent of his personal life, "I think I like Plies 'cause he's a freak." It's unclear how these participants would feel about Plies if they were to know what Darrius and Guilli know, but it remains that at least Ty and Ronnie like Plies despite his educated status. must not be inconsistent with their everyday lives and their reputation as an artist because this slip-up would deem them fake.

From my interviews it is clear that these young hip hop fans are constructing notions of what it means to be real. My interviewees mentioned several qualities that are necessary to pass the authenticity test, but they fit under four general criteria detailed above: 1) The artist as a real person 2) Relatability 3) What you see is what you get. 4) Fake in opposition to being real. "Young people take the cultural resources provided by the popular culture industries and use the prescribed meanings attached to such resources as templates around which to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity"

(Bennett 2000:27). This interpretive practice is seen here my participants' responses. They draw from media sources to develop their subcultural capital and then apply this knowledge to understanding realness of rappers. In addition, these interviewees indicate that they understand what it means to be real in their own everyday lives- to speak your mind, express your emotions and thoughts, and to not care what others think. Hip hop offers certain meanings of authenticity, as seen here in what it means to be a real rapper or to 'keep it real' with the fans.

Chapter Four

Hoodness: The Characteristic of Being 'Hood'

Realness is an ever-present element of authenticity that verifies if a person is who they claim to be. As seen thus far, fans work to connect the performer to their performed role to discern realness. Another aspect of authenticity is hoodness, the understanding of the ghetto and the experiences that occur within these neighborhoods.

> In gangsta rap and hip hop culture, authenticity means being 'the realest,' or the one most in touch (through purportedly direct life experience) with the agonistic, tragic rules of the subculture—the one most able to face, affirm, and overcome suffering and to report it unflinchingly to others (Riley 2005:309).

Notions of hoodness, toughness developed from a ghetto lived experience, indicate authenticity (Xie et al. 2007). To be authentic, one can be real but not hood, or one can be both real and hood.

Hoodness is a marker of subcultural capital that enhances one's realness. Recall that subcultural capital is similar to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital but recognizes the influence of media. Subcultural capital is what rappers assert to affirm their membership within hip hop culture. "Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (Thornton 1995:11). Just like one cannot claim coolness without others confirming it to be so, one cannot claim subcultural capital without the confirmation of others. During my interviews, fans confirmed the subcultural capital of rappers. "Hardness and authentic 'ghetto centricity' are of central significance. Most rappers would lay claim to describing 'reality' in some form or another" (Huq 2006:114). According to my interviewees, hood rappers present the reality of their life experiences within the setting of ghetto life.

The hood is part of Armstrong's (2004) second form of authenticity, as described in Chapter One, 'local allegiances and territorial identities.' This is a prominent theme recognized by hip hop fans. Talk of a difficult ghetto life or challenges they've been through serve to authenticate a rapper's realness. It presents subcultural capital that is highly respected within hip hop culture, whether the fans have experienced it themselves or not. Armstrong (2004) also notes three other dimensions of rap authenticity: racial, gender/sexual, and social location. While race, gender, and sexuality were mentioned in some of my interviews, they were not nearly as prominent a theme as the social location of the ghetto.

The notion of the 'hood, the streets, or the ghetto, and the struggles that artists encounter in this neighborhood environment came up in nearly all the interviews. "…the emphasis on 'the real' can also be linked to a range of emergent spatial concerns, especially those that are sedimented within the geocultural construct of 'the 'hood'" (Forman 2002:Xxviii). The extent of a rapper or rap piece's authenticity is partially

determined on how well it represents notions of the hood. As demonstrated in these interviews, characteristics of ghetto life carry with them credibility, as long as they are deemed real. The interviewees used several different terms to describe rap music and artists classified with a tough, underprivileged, urban lifestyle. Hood, gutter, the streets, struggle, gangsta, real, hard, and ghetto are all terms that were attached to this portrayal of a person who experienced difficult times in the ghetto. These terms were also attached to the music that expresses such experiences. Some participants stated that certain artists have 'been through a lot' and alluded to this sort of ghetto experience.

The hood label is a component of authenticity that corresponds to subcultural understandings of rap music. For a listener to identify what is authentic, hood, or real, is to position themselves as an insider to this cultural component. As seen in the comments below, hoodness is an important component of realness to these fans. Darrius is a big fan of Young Jeezy, partially because he is so hood.

> *Ok, what makes him your favorite?* Darrius: Jeezy so hood man, he like— *What do you mean so hood?* Like hood, like—like—the way he rap he like he rappin' like he gangsta. He like--there some people who like go out there to rap and like they–they act like they gangsta. You know people who like, look at him like, why the hell he rappin' like that, he no gangsta. But you can look at Jeezy and I got, I got another documentary I bought, I bought from somebody and he was on there and he was saying stuff what he was into.

Here Darrius begins to explain how Young Jeezy raps like a gangsta and plays the role well whereas sometimes others do not. Darrius stops himself and mentions that in a documentary about Jeezy other people vouched for him. People from Jeezy's hometown talk about him in the documentary and confirm that Jeezy is as hood in person as he is in his rap music.

> *Ok, so young Jeezy's your favorite, 'cause he's so hood.* Darrius: So hood- -H to the double O-D. *What makes him so hood?* So hood, Jeezy's so— *can you describe the hood, it's the swagger[8]?* It's the swagger, it's yea--*Is it what they rap **about**?* It's what they rap about and the way they, I guess, and the way they act. We see Jeezy on like shows and stuff, interviews and he be so cool, like, he just… <leaning back on the couch as if to imitate Jeezy> 'What's up Young Jeezy?' 'I'm just chillin' man.' You know I have one DVD where like, he's like man, like, 'I hate snitches. Like man I'm not a mean person or nothing like that but all snitches should just die.' I remember hearing that on the DVD and I'm like damn. He's hood. He's hood. For real.

Darrius describes the hood characteristic as one's general behavior. A rapper is hood because of the way he acts and what he raps about. Darrius says that a rapper's hoodness comes from "what they rap about and the way they act" but then does not mention lyrics or what Jeezy raps about. Instead, Darrius cites what Jeezy says in an actual interview. The quote that sticks out in his mind, "I hate snitches…all snitches should just die" gives off a very tough attitude which contributes to the definition of hood. Snitching is to tell a

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[8] Swagger, swagga, or swag is a term that refers to one's personal style. It is apparent in how one presents himself and is discussed further below.

higher authority about criminal activity and to do so is to rupture bonds of loyalty. To be hood means to have strong opinions that align with stereotypical notions of gangstas. In addition to the baggy pants, shoes, hairstyles, tattoos, and jewelry characteristic of hip hop culture, violence is a valued commodity of rap music and has been argued to be a marketing tool (Richardson and Scott 2002; Kubrin 2005). Gangstas are typically callous and connected to criminal activity that creates a strong anti-snitch sentiment within the gangsta subculture (Xie et al. 2007; Hurt 2006). Jeezy's line stands out to Darrius as hood because it is strongly connected to this gangsta mentality. In this instance, Jeezy's tough attitude does not seem forced, does not seem like a basic marketing tool, but rather Darrius perceives it as genuine. Jeezy's hoodness adds to his realness. After cross-referencing with documentaries, Jeezy passes Darrius' authenticity test.

Many of the participants attributed their knowledge of rappers' real lives to YouTube videos, interviews, and things they learn from listening to their music. Darrius went so far as to get documentaries on his favorite rappers and referenced those to support his claims.

> Darrius: You just look at rap and they be on their songs like I did this, I killed such and such and I sold such and such. I don't know if they did it, but like you see this documentary and you go through and see the actual people still stay like in they neighborhoods or whatever, but go on and tell you what this happened this and how it is.

In looking for the consistency between the rapper's life as an artist and his life as a person, Darrius is searching for "slip-ups" (Goffman 1959) in Jeezy's presentation of self. Because Darrius did not find any inconsistencies, Jeezy has done a thorough job of what Goffman (1959) calls impression management. Such successful performances are a constant negotiation between avoiding performance disruptions and possessing attributes that support one's role (Bell 2008). Young Jeezy convinces fans like Darrius that his real life is hood. Talking about it makes his music real, and demonstrates that he is being true to himself.

Coolness

Another hood characteristic Darrius mentions is the relaxed, chill, cool pose. Jeezy's demeanor is described as "so cool" as he is "just chillin'" in interviews. Coolness is part of subcultural capital. To be accepted within hip hop culture, an artist must be perceived by audiences as cool. This is also a gangsta quality and is described by social scientists as a coping mechanism in response to dire conditions (Majors & Billson 1992). "It is also regarded by these ethnographers as a peculiarly black expression of masculinity. Indeed, the entire discussion of cool centers entirely on black men" (Kelley 1997:24). The hip hop industry is comprised of predominantly Black men so coolness is a factor of hip hop culture.

Cool manifests in various forms. It is an aesthetic, a style, and an art form expressed through language and the body (Kelley 1997).Coolness is an adaptive strategy that will be found most frequently among those who experience racism and poverty as found in ghettos. Being cool is a survival technique where one acts competent and successful to be more interesting and attractive to others (Kelley 1997). Those who are perceived to be cool can manipulate others with this charm of coolness. An air of admiration surrounds those who are labeled 'cool.' Ciara also says "Out of anybody I

could meet, I would love to meet [Lyfe Jennings]. I would love to meet him cuz he's, he's hot too. Naw, he's cool, I would love to meet him." For someone who has 'been through a lot'—of presumably difficult stuff as discussed below—it is no wonder that rappers who are 'so hood' have adapted with "poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters" (Majors & Billson 1992:2). Naturally, hood rappers will also be cool in their mannerisms and behaviors.

Swag is something fans recognize that factors into a rapper's coolness. Short for swagger, often pronounced swagga, this is a term used to describe demeanor or how one carries oneself. Similar to how hoodness can enhance a rapper's realness, swagger can enhance a rapper's coolness. A rapper's swag encompasses one's personal style of rapping, dressing, and even moving. Therefore it can be apparent in one's presence, but it was most often discussed in my interviews as something understood from a rapper's style of rapping. Angelo gave me examples of lyrics without swag, and then with swag, demonstrating that the delivery and flow of words reveal one's swag. Swag is like a rapper's signature because as Angelo remarked, "When people hear the song they already know it's you" from the way words are delivered. Angelo also made the point that swag can make a song or a rapper a success. Angelo: "Sometimes, sometimes I don't like Lil Wayne but I respect him that he--that he--that he got swag like in his song." Even though Angelo may not like Lil Wayne as an artist, he admits that he has swag and this makes him a respectable artist. Guilli spoke in more detail about swag.

> *People tell me I have a very distinct voice. But it doesn't give it swag. What would give me swag?* Guilli: I would say speaking naturally. The way you carry yourself, your body language, your choice of words, the way you sayin' it. *Ok.* It's all faded know what I'm sayin'? It's just how you come off. You come off a little <monotonously> la la la la la but not with swag know what I'm sayin', everybody got swag. Southern swag know what I'm sayin' come locked out, know what I'm sayin' so if you want southern swag, the way you carry yourself. It's about how you carry yourself. A person on beats, talking 'bout rap, it's about how you carry yourself on the beat it's just like if you start goin' la wah la wah la la or whatever you say it's just how YOU say it determines the swag. Your cadence got to be on point. You got, you just gotta get the cadence down, ride the beat, ride the beat.

Guilli point out the specifics of swag: the way you carry yourself, body language, choice of words, and the way you say things. Hip hop is a genre of music where flow has always been a prominent component of artistry, arguably even second to content (Kitwana 2005). While flow may be an old concept, swag is the current terminology to address flow and other elements of a rapper's style. Swag is part of one's personality and it contributes to a rapper's subcultural capital since it can be the factor that grants acceptance into hip hop culture.

"A Hood Meaning"

When discussing different types of hip hop or rap, Darrius compares Lupe Fiasco's poetic rap to Rick Ross' basic rap.

> Darrius: Rick Ross I guess just one of the basic rappers: money, cars, clothes. *Ok so like Rick Ross, he's got meaning but what kind of meaning*

does he have? A hood meaning, like a hood meaning. Lupe don't rap like he in the hood. He just rap like he tryin' to, like he came from like, he wasn't a problem. He had a good life and he just decided to become a rapper, like that's how I see it with him. Rick Ross he started from the bottom and he made it up to the tippy.

Here Darrius indicates that a song with a hood meaning entails a rapper who has had a problematic life. He contrasts Rick Ross to Lupe because Lupe is not a gangsta rapper. "Rap is from the streets, the music of the underclass essentially opposed to those enjoying a bourgeois suburban life" (Armstrong 2004:338). It seems to Darrius that Lupe's rap reflects a bourgeois suburban life.

…some people actually make it seem like poetry like Lupe Fiasco. His raps are like poetry…'Hip hop saved my life' know what I'm saying, like he he actually like he rap about, I guess stuff with meaning…Like I tell you Lupe, he rap about more realistic stuff like stuff that's just more, I don't know how to put it but he just Lupe just…

Even though Lupe's music is not hood, he can still be real because Lupe's poetic rap can be what's true to him and real for experiences that aren't hood. According to Darrius, hood rappers would be those who came from a place of few resources, "the bottom" and worked their way to success or "the tippy" top. These rappers then take the ghetto life they've experienced and communicate it through their music.

Guilli has a slightly different perspective than Darrius because he writes and produces various types of rap songs, including hard, gangsta ones according to him.

Guilli: It's just very, it's whatever--a gangsta song, um rep-your-city type song. Whatever you feel at the moment. *So like a gangsta song, what are those like?* Real hard shit, <giggles> real hard shit. I mean me and my team come up with songs we just let it be known know what I'm sayin'. It sounds like the streets is talking to you like something mournful like the grim reaper talking to you. It's hard to explain. When you hear the song it's like melodic and mournful at the same time you just feel like damn, you know, it comes at you like somethin'.

Guilli describes gangsta rap as "hard" as if the streets are speaking to you through the song. He associates the term 'the streets' with a 'hard' attitude, behavior, or life. The music itself is "melodic and mournful" giving it a sad but hauntingly attractive quality. Guilli talks about the hood, the streets, and gangsta life interchangeably. He mentioned "the streets" a few times throughout the interview. He says that his music has an element of "down south swag" which I asked about. Guilli: "Down south swagga? That's that straight street love for you right there." He describes down south swagga as something that, among other things, represents the streets and gives credit to those from the streets, to people like him.

Guilli discussed the tattooes on his knuckles, explaining what they represent. Guilli: …the struggles I've gone through in life. Heartbreak. *Heartbreak?* Yeah heartbreak, death in the family, all the street struggles. *So did you get them all at once?* Yeah, yeah, yeah stuff I need to get still. *You gonna get them?* I don't want to <giggle> *why not?* 'cause that would signify something I had to go through in my life know what I'm sayin'--struggles.

I did not ask him to elaborate on street struggles, perhaps because I assumed myself that these were things depicted in hip hop--drug issues, death, violence, crime, etc. Indeed these were all things that Guilli addressed at some point in the conversation. Guilli: "Please show me respect and I will show you the utmost respect. But if you gotta take it to a hood level, I live it. I live the streets. I live the whole bangin' shit. I live that life so life ain't a party whatsoever. What I'm telling you a lot of people want." Guilli tells me that he experiences the hood, the streets, the rough life that a lot of rappers wished they could detail firsthand. The hood life is not respectful and involves illegal and unpleasant activities.

As mentioned earlier, Guilli clearly presents himself as someone from the streets, probably because he is a rap artist and has more invested in a hard image than the others. He describes that he lives ghetto life and then discusses another component of hood authenticity; illegal drug activity. "In the impoverished inner-city neighborhood, the drug trade is everywhere, and it becomes ever more difficult to separate the drug culture from the experience of poverty" (Anderson 1999:29). Since drug dealing is connected to ghetto life, it is another aspect of experiencing the hood and adds to one's realness. Guilli spoke to me about the relationship between the illegal drug business and the rap industry. He does not agree with rappers blatantly discussing their drug business and explains why he thinks it occurs.

> Guilli: You got Weezy saying $750 bucks for a pound. Why are you going to do that? For what? *What do you think they think it adds to them, I mean like Jeezy's calls himself the snowman.* Yeah they think that it adds that gangster appeal to it, it's something very commercial 'cause everybody wants to look cool. Everybody wants to be a gangster but don't nobody want to be a gangster. *So having the gangster image is cool.* That's--that's what you see so much. You know people nowadays they think that they're gangster. 95% of them don't even know half the fucking--everybody wants to be Scarface that's what it really boils down to. Everybody wants to be 'that man,' know what I'm sayin', that super guy that controls the fuckin' platoon of blood thirsty killers.
> *Does it have to do with drugs or is it everyone?* It could be anyone it's all about power, everybody wants to be God all of em, a lot of em are dead. A lot of them want to be held higher than they are. The higher they are held the more persuasive a man is. A lot of people wanna be gangster, not everyone wanna be gangster. It'll make you throw up. Being gangster will make you shit on yourself. *<laugh> you're so disgusted!* Yeah, yeah man 'cause real life is no joke. Real life is very scary.

Guilli thinks that people want to have a "gangster appeal" because this image earns power and respect. These street qualities are revered in the rap business. In this sense, the drug business and gangsta activities are like prerequisites to success in the rap industry because such experience gives you street cred. Street cred could be interpreted either as credibility which is qualitative and comparable to social capital, or street credit which implies the option of building up quantitative amounts, more comparable to economic capital (Huq 2006). As Guilli discusses it, it seems like the latter, street credit, is most appropriate. For those in the hood, gaining power and respect can be more easily

achieved through the drug or rap business than through education and legitimately successful endeavors.

Bourdieu's use of the terms 'acquire' and 'accumulate' when describing capital (2001) are purposeful because they indicate accretion over time. Guilli is describing how street knowledge through accumulated experiences with drug and gangsta activities is relevant. In following Thornton's subcultural capital theory, street knowledge that Guilli describes is valued in hip hop culture. "This kind and form of capital is not always useful or valued in the wider society, but it is capital nonetheless. It is recognized and valued on the streets, and to lack it is to be vulnerable there" (Anderson 1999:105).

Guilli finds it absurd that people would want to live a gangsta lifestyle because he experiences it himself and according to him, it is a hard and painful life. Guilli speaks about ghetto life just like hood rappers do in their songs. He offers a vocabulary of motives, or logic to his words above: talking about the absurdity of glorifying the hood that he experiences personally serves to elevate his own hoodness and realness while dismissing so many others as mere performers and wannabes. He points out that a lot of people want to be recognized as gangsta to earn respect, but nobody actually wants to live a gangsta lifestyle because it is not as glorious as it is portrayed. To him, living in the hood, experiencing the streets, or being gangsta all develop as a necessity, as a method of coping with difficult circumstances. "A lot of people in the ghetto are trying to get the hell up out of there. They don't want to romanticize it" (Dyson 2007:11). Dyson (2007) argues that rappers can expressively orient themselves around the ghetto and logically legitimate the ghetto in rap discourse because it serves as a common reference point of understanding. Xie et al. (2007) proposes that cultural tourists or outsiders are drawn to ghetto life and are most likely to romanticize it. To attract these audiences, a caricature of the street life is perpetuated. Life in the hood is serious, and it is ironic to Guilli that people want to claim a life of the streets simply for the respect that it yields. However, it makes perfect sense to assert street knowledge for the subcultural capital it represents and the respect that it earns, both important factors of hoodness. This suggests that hood may be make-believe—a complete performance—in most rap music, a point I will return to under "Significations and the hyperreal" below.

Of all my interviewees, it was most transparent that Guilli lives in an unfavorable part of town. What he told me about his past, his dress, speech, seeing the actual place where he lives, and the self he presented to me, all revealed to me how he connects his lived reality to the hoodness characteristics of hip hop. For Guilli to be telling me that he experiences hood life, he is asserting his own authenticity. By calling out other rappers for trying to have a gangsta appeal, Guilli is reaffirming his own authority in presenting a gangsta self to me. It demonstrates the pervasiveness of the hood characteristics in hip hop culture: one could disagree that the gangsta image should be coveted, yet continue to perpetuate such an image because it is so respected. Of course, Guilli's firm stance on being true to oneself suggests that no matter how desired or undesired a gangsta image is, he would continue to present this self since it comes from his actual experience.

Pierre expands upon ideas of the struggle and difficult experiences. He recognizes that rappers talk about their experiences but that they should not be glorified. He uses Jay-Z's music as an example of a rapper who talks about his difficult experiences but does not necessarily praise them.

Pierre: Like what's going on in the context they're living in and the world around them. A lot of times, violence is what's going on around them. But [Jay-Z]'s sayin' that in order to entice people to do violence, like you talk about violence in a form--you should talk about it 'cause you would have to do it. I know it's a bad idea and stuff.

Pierre is emphasizing that Jay-Z's lyrics of violence are a reflection of his experiences and are framed in a manner of necessity, not recreation. Critically successful rappers like Jay-Z have to establish that their authentic connection to street life. "They will often justify the violent themes, drug references, and profane language in their music as honest reflections of the real-life environments from whence they came" (Rodman 2006:105). As Pierre described above, Jay-Z is doing this very thing, justifying violent themes as a reflection of his experience. Guilli does this same sort of thing when claiming that his music represents his personal struggles and then talks about how his life is very street—which alludes to drugs and violence. As Thornton (1995) notes, Guilli is learning the best way to apply subcultural capital from the media in order to be successful in the rap business. As an aspiring rapper, Guilli learns to replicate this process of justifying rap themes as lived experience from respected rappers such as Jay-Z.

Guilli also shares insight into how he thinks rap music is perceived by larger society. He talks about how Lupe Fiasco, an artist he respects for his creativity, writes innovative lyrics. When discussing metaphors in a song by Lupe, Guilli says that

He personifies the streets know what I'm sayin'? And I'm like dang! 'Cause that's what you're supposed to do, you're supposed to bring, you're supposed to bring up 'cause of all the people I could listen to, majority is trash man. So when you bring good music like that around, if more music like that was around, I betcha the rap game would be a lot more respected and not be seen as every man, time for me to get out of the hood or something like that.

Guilli likes Lupe's use of language and the literary elements such as personification that he incorporates into his craft. Guilli mentions Lupe as an example of an artist who brings literary art to his music. He thinks that people do not perceive rap music as art but rather a means for men to escape the hood. Somehow he feels this sentiment is transmitted through rap music and images. He is telling us that the hood is understood as an undesirable place to be by those who do not live there. In discussing this, Guilli is regretful that people only see rap music as something rappers create to get them out of poor circumstances in the hood. Instead he would like to see higher quality rap music, according to his standards. At the same time he admits that a lot of rap music is trash, almost agreeing with the idea that a lot of it is created to get rappers out of the hood.

Charlotte interprets the streets as a hostile place to be as well. She says one of her favorite rappers, Akon, communicates the negative aspects of the street life. Charlotte: "He talks bout the streets and how it's not somewhere to be cuz you're not going anywhere. It's just difficult and you're going to get arrested or shot or something like that." Her description here with "or something like that" indicates she does not experience the streets as Akon describes it. She is showing her distance from this sort of life. It seems that this perception of the ghetto is understood by listeners as a miserable place to live, where residents struggle to survive.

Ciara used the term 'gutter' to depict a gangsta characteristic that specifically applies to girls. She explained it from a slightly different angle. Rather than referring to street struggles or criminal activity, she mentions more subtle behaviors that seem to outline a general attitude.

But I like, I like women rappers. I love Eve. *Oh yea?* She's like a dude. Like, like she's so gutter! She don't care. She got a song…it's called 'Let's Talk About'…and she's like 'I wanna talk about fake, <mouthing these words> ass, bitches' *<laughing> What's gutter mean to you like?* Like she more hood, she more down to, I don't wanna say she's more down to earth...she more like gutter. It's like, to me, gutter is gutter. Like you gutter, like you gangsta. You like if you a girl, you gutter. It's like you're a dude but you're a girl. It's like you just be cussin' and like—not really cussin'. It's just like you ain't feelin' nobody, you gutter. *Ok.* You don't see nobody. Nobody ain't gonna try you 'cause you gonna get with 'em. She's like all Hollywood now. And she's like, sh--sh--she still gutter now, I know it's still in her. *<Laugh>.* But it's just like, it's not like she changed. It's just...like through her albums, when they go up, up, up, it's changing!

Eve is gutter because she doesn't care about what other people think. Ciara references gender traits in her explanation by saying that Eve being gutter is similar to a man being gangsta. Such characteristics include independence, toughness, and a raw quality that men are culturally allowed to possess but women are traditionally not. Instead, women are often expected to take a sexualized position in hip hop culture (Guevara 1996; Littlefield 2008; Esposito and Love 2008). This is perhaps why Ciara began to say that cussing is part of acting gutter. "Ain't feelin' nobody" means that you are independent of others, you don't need to rely on anybody else. Nobody "tries you" because you are tough and nobody wants to mess with you. Ciara sadly admits that Eve is Hollywood now, meaning she's transformed into a more feminine, glamorous style. Even though Eve may be Hollywood now, gutter is part of an attitude. Just like gangsta, hood, and street are part of one's character, gutter is part of Eve which is why Ciara says that Eve still has it in her.

"Been Through a Lot"

The phrase "been through a lot" refers to what Guilli called "street struggles." The assumption here is that the artist has endured difficult struggles related to living in disadvantaged conditions, which in turn adds to the rapper's realness. Part of staying true to oneself comes from the authority to speak on claims to knowledge gained through lived experience (Hess 2005). Ciara discussed what she meant by this phrase when talking about a favorite artist, Lyfe Jennings.

Ciara: He just--he been through a lot in his life... *How do you know he's been through a lot in life?...* It's [the music is] real, it's not like stuff you can't believe. Yea, one of his songs was like he <speaking rhythmically> 'Grew up in the gutter eat peanut butter sandwiches with no jam' uh, he say 'We looked up to the hustlers on the corner.' Like, like he's like saying he looked up to hustlers. He was ghetto. He grew up--they didn't have two things that matched. Peanut butter sandwiches with no jam, oh

my, I don't even like peanut butter sandwiches. *You would have to if you were him!* Oh man! You can tell by--he's been to jail too. He--like he says in his songs he was in jail. Um, I think he went to jail for like 12 years, no 10 years! 10 years for like hustling and stuff…

Going through a lot in life means you have endured difficult situations. Ciara describes going through a lot as growing up as a kid in a ghetto neighborhood without much in terms of things, food, and even hope. The rapper says he looked up to hustlers, demonstrating a lack of legitimate role models in his life and the admiration a kid in his position held for those involved in illegal activity. He's been to jail for hustling which adds to his street credibility and proves that he went through difficult situations both inside and outside of jail. The fact that he was in prison for so long exaggerates the coveted gangsta image since he must have been involved in some serious crime to receive such a long sentence.

Mimi used "been through a lot" in reference to circumstances that arose during adulthood. She is a big fan of T.I., even jokingly claiming that he's her husband. She talks through T.I.'s recent comeback following his arrest for federal weapons charges. Mimi expresses that she will always be a fan and support T.I. and takes an understanding perspective.

Mimi: I think I like T.I because he been through a lot in his life and he always come back on top. *So you think now he's gonna come back on top?* He already back on top. Ah, like, he did all these remixes. Like he did a "Umma do me" remix. He did like-- he talks about like what happened and like stuff like that. Other people got mad at him when he got like, other people got mad at him and stopped bein' his fan 'cause he got arrested and not me. W*hy do you think that people get mad at him for getting arrested?* Well that's how people is. Some people get jealous. No, I don't wanna say jealous, they get-- I don't know the word like, so they gon' think that's not what he's supposed to do, he's supposed to know better, but they don't understand how many people out to kill him! *Yeah.* So like he think safe and stuff. I don't care, I'd do the same thing too!

Mimi is referring to T.I. going through a lot of troubles with the law in his current situation. She supports him because she believes he possesses weapons for his own protection against people who want to kill him. The implication is that if T.I. has people who want him dead, he must have done something to upset them, assumingly something illegal. Such actions would also fall under the 'going through a lot' category. She also indicates admiration for T.I. because no matter the obstacles he has faced, he has always persevered triumphantly.

Mimi talked with slightly more detail about what Mary J. Blige has been through. Mimi: My favorite artist would be…Mary J Blige. She's been through a lot in her life and—she like, Mary J. Blige she'll tell you her life story. But you'll see her all over the news about what's going on in celebrity life. But Mary J. Blige is like, when what's his name used to beat her she told everybody. And she'll make you cry and she'll show you 'bout the pain you go through but I <silly, dramatic fake cry, big sniff> love her stuff.

Mimi names Mary J. Blige as the first artist that comes to mind when asked about her favorite. She has learned through both celebrity news and Mary's music about her life.

One example of Mary going through a lot was the abusive relationship that became known to the public. Mimi loves how Mary expresses the emotion and pain of such hardships through her music which also reveal that she's been through a lot. Both T.I. and Mary J. Blige have different experiences but both have endured difficulties which have earned them another level of respect that adds to their authenticity as a real person. T.I. faces legal challenges as a consequence of his gangsta activities while Mary J. Blige has survived domestic abuse and by sharing these stories in their music they earn authenticity.

Throughout the interviews the participants express an underlying sense of admiration for various hip hop artists. There is a theme of perseverance among a lot of the artists. Darrius voiced a phrase that we hear a lot of rappers saying in their songs when he said, "Rick Ross he started from the bottom and he made it up to the tippy." The whole idea of escaping the hood is perceived as a difficult feat and for some rappers to have 'been through a lot' but turn out successful is respectable. Mimi discussed Mary J. Blige and T.I. as her favorite artists who have also 'been through a lot.' Surviving and sharing their hardships earns artists respect for being real, but is also admirable.

When Pierre and Charlotte talk about their respect for not only the rappers' success but also *how* they address issues of their past circumstances in their music. Pierre likes how Jay-Z approaches violence from a contextual angle. He feels like Jay-Z talks about how violence was embedded in his upbringing and does not exactly praise it. Charlotte similarly likes how Akon "talks 'bout the streets and how it's not somewhere to be cuz you're not going anywhere." Pierre and Charlotte both highlight how these rappers frame the struggle in a way that does not glorify street life or violence. Hip hop fans are already keenly aware of a rapper's authenticity, as discussed in this paper. It earns a rapper respect when they have a rags-to-riches story that demonstrates the American dream of bettering oneself. This makes the hood experience even more respectable, since becoming a successful rapper shows determination in the face of adversity. Fans seem to find such perseverance admirable. Hip-Hop incorporates much of American culture, and also the 'outlaw hero' of America's mythology which mirrors the violence that has plagued American society since its beginnings (Rose, 1994). "Ultimately, [hip hop] symbolizes the struggle for survival which has always been at the basis of African American culture" (Xie et al. 2007:457). Surely, hip hop and its embodiment of American values will continue to be admired by fans.

Significations and the Hyperreal

The interviewees are outlining a certain perception of ghetto reality from what they have heard and seen in the media. They are drawing from what the media has taught them about the hood to verify that rap stories are true. "The media are not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction, but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge" (Thornton 1995:13-14). Thus fans learn the definition of hood from hip hop and other sources, and then they look for markers of hoodness in particular hip hop artists and pieces. My participants characterized certain aspects of hip hop as hood based on the cultural representations that have been labeled as such. These media representations can be framed within Barthes' mythologies and signification ideologies.

What my participants have come to understand as ghetto life or the streets originates in media representations of what it means to be hood, not necessarily from their own life experience. 'The hood' can be seen as a sign in the word itself or as an idealized place that exists in a signified state. The hood refers to the spatial image of the ghetto but is more flexible in delineating locality without the negative connotation of the word 'ghetto' (Forman 2002). The term 'hood' even signifies a special meaning separate from 'ghetto,' referring "inwardly to local sites and the specificities of place while simultaneously constituting a concept that isolates a real or imagined 'here' from other places, from 'there.'" (Forman 2002:65). The term 'hood' thus provokes an 'us' and 'them' relationship and its use establishes the 'in' status of its user.

Following the significations and mythologies logic of Roland Barthes, the signs or signifiers construct a signified story of hip hop as a hood reality. Images, gestures, and stories that circulate in hip hop culture signify the concept of the hood. All the things my interviewees described as characteristics of hood--an independent and hard attitude, violence, drugs, cool demeanor, and 'going through a lot,' are all signifiers that convey the signified story of the hood. The participants described the story of the signified hood: it is an unpleasant place to live, rife with struggles involving drugs and violence; to live in the hood one has to be hard and tough, gangsta. "Reality, conceived of as the physical and material plane where actual social practices occur, exists at a crucial remove from the textual representations that circulate in its name" (Forman 2002:14). Representational forms are based on a foundation that can be identified as 'reality,' but always can be only partially 'real' (Forman 2002). What was once reality has been removed from its context and circulated throughout the media to represent a signified place, the hood. This story of the signified hood connects to a larger myth that hoodness is intrinsically related hip hop authenticity.

Hip hop signs such as fashionable Nike shoes or Jordans, baggy pants, oversized plain white or black t-shirts, or words such as hood, gutter, struggles, serve as signs within the greater hood mythology. Such symbols are commodities of hip hop that connect the user to the hood myth and place them as an insider of the signified hip hop culture. "Commodity signs provide people with real social indicators of identity—after all, consumers do use signs to construct identities and to make invidious distinctions between themselves and others" (Goldman and Papson 2000:92). Participants applied signs of hip hop culture in our conversations partly to indicate their identity as a hip hop insider. The conversations reveal that they understand a hood reality from what they've learned from media representations. These representations, having been removed from context and redefined for audiences, no longer stand for reality but rather a reified myth.

The hip hop mythology exists outside of reality. Hip hop music's cultural text tells a story that has been so oversignified that it now exists in a state of hyperreality. Congruent with Baudrillard's theories, this level of existence is a detached state where signs and signifiers represent actual reality, but have been distorted by continuous replication to become a signification of a signification. The hyperreal is an artificial simulation with endless reproductions of fundamentally empty appearance (Baudrillard 1994). Thus hoodness and realness do not always draw from the audience's experience but rather from what the media have presented to audiences. This seems to be accepted among my interviewees who admit their lack of personal experience with ghetto life, but are proud to speak with authority on something they have essentially studied through hip

hop. By speaking to the authenticity of a rapper or his music, my participants are positioning themselves as insiders of hip hop culture because of their understanding of the greater mythology of the signified hood and hip hop culture, regardless of their personal experience.

The Truth as Understood but not Experienced by the Listener

My participants talked about rap music and rappers speaking 'the truth.' When fans believe rappers are speaking the truth it adds to the artist's credibility. There were a few different meanings to this label of truth. Truth could be expressed through an actual experience or event that can be verified by the audience such as growing up in the hood or being in a car accident. A rapper could be speaking the truth because he is true to himself. Commonly interviewees labeled rap music or the rappers themselves true because they felt they could relate, as discussed above. It could also be that the listener agrees with what the rapper says insomuch as it is true to the listener's experience or understanding of the world. Some interviewees labeled music true if the rapper addressed larger social issues that might not have directly affected them, but do exist in the world. Sometimes music was labeled true when listeners' understanding of *other* people's experiences is described in the music.

Participants interestingly expressed that rappers could be speaking the truth of a hood life that exists in hyperreality. On the topic of relatability, they both acknowledge how other people can relate to songs they do not relate to themselves. My participants learned what other people could relate to through hyperreal media portrayals of ghetto life. This is an example of how the hyperreal representation of hood life is understood and interpreted by listeners, and then applied to their understanding of the world. Even if he hasn't experienced things a song addresses himself, Dave, for example, perceives these things as real and things that actually happen. He is assuming from his understanding of the world that people experience this signified ghetto life discussed in songs that really only exists as a myth. Dave: "That song everything he talks about, it not necessarily all happened to me but there's certain parts of the song where he says like, wow he's speaking the truth you know." Not only is relatability understood as something a listener can *personally* relate to, but also something that *other* people can relate to.

The reified concept of the hood is present in my conversation with Sarah. Her descriptions of Lil Wayne and Jay-Z demonstrate the complexities of how listeners might apply the signified hood to their understanding of reality. Sarah says that Lil Wayne has been through a lot.

> *What kind of stuff do you think he's been through?* Sarah: Um I think he's he's been through poverty, been through, definitely been through drug abuse. Uh family issues for sure, um probably been through great highs, great lows. I think the best musicians are the ones who've gone through the most.

The verification on Lil Wayne's background rests on the general consensus Sarah perceives.

> *And how, what makes you think that he's been through poverty, drugs, and family? Is there like a source that you've learned it from?* Sarah: Um I think the fact that he can just relate to so many groups of people just like demonstrates it. Like people aren't giving--like give him respect because

he's raised in a high class family and he's rappin' about the streets--quote on quote the streets. Um but it's just I think it's obvious like his demeanor, the way he walks, the way he talks, like he definitely wasn't raised in Beverly hills. It's blatantly obvious. So yeah just his overall look I guess.

She puts the streets in quotation marks. Perhaps this is because she herself knows that the streets exist as a media fabrication of reality. Sarah knows that she has not lived in a low-income area and could only trust her understanding based on what the media, and specifically hip hop, have presented to her. She attributes Lil Wayne's demeanor and look to his upbringing. In addition to that, Sarah says that other people respect him so this validates his street credit. Sarah also respects Lil Wayne and demonstrates this by saying he is a rapper that she would listen to for his opinion whereas other with other artists she would not be so inclined to do so. She mentioned that Lil Wayne has one song, "Just Don't Understand" that ends with minutes of him talking about his opinion on things.

Sarah: Just the fact that he--you know he has knowledge about the stuff he's talking about and he's been through stuff. And when you listen to his music I think it's pretty cool that he could like have some of that all of it in a song. I mean when you know that someone has an opinion it's cool to listen to it rather than someone who's just talking 'bout whatever he talks about so.

His street credit earns him more respect from others as well as Sarah, and makes him more of a reliable source. Lil Wayne is not just talking about 'whatever' because his opinion is based on experience and wisdom of the streets.

Sarah talks about music that she can relate to personally, and is actually the first interviewee to use the term 'relatability' with me, but agrees that music can still be very real even if she does not relate.

Sarah: Jay-Z just like, he is like hip hop. Like him, Diddy, all those guys who just took rapping and turned it into an empire. Like and still his music is what hits home for me most, not even like relatable to him because clearly not gonna relate much to Jay-Z on a direct level. *That's just 'cause you're not a guy?* Yea, I'm not a guy, I haven't been through anything prolly that he's been through. Yeah I mean I'm not a black male thirty-five or that is getting there. But like he, I feel like his music is so real.

Jay-Z might not be representing Sarah's reality, but he is expressing his, and because she believes in his performance, that makes it real and true. According to Sarah, real music talks about something different from the standard themes of rap music, comes from the artist's heart, or it is something relatable to the listener. Sarah categorizes Jay-Z's music as "so real" because she perceives it to be an expression of his thoughts and experiences as a person. Jay-Z's status as a hip hop mogul and business icon reinforce her opinion that his music is real. This is where authenticity prevails; when an artist is not relatable, they could be respected and well-liked for their overall authenticity.

Although it might not have happened to him, Darrius talks about the rapper Lil Boosie's experience with the hood.

Darrius: Like a lot of rappers rap about stuff that happened or stuff that might happen or did happen. Know what I'm saying so like—*to them?* To them or the world, or like everybody, most of the people it's just…C*an you give me an example?* Like uh, like uh, Lil Boosie, Lil Boosie? He got

a song called my struggle. He talks about the struggle he had when he was young and stuff and everything, know I feel like I know people, I know people who deal with that type of stuff --or whatever-- that he was talking 'bout. *Do you think the stuff he's saying is real? Like that's actually what happened to him?* Yeah 'cause like I got a documentary on him at my house and like pretty much like it goes through his whole hood and stuff he still know everybody and everything…

In this sense Lil' Boosie talks about true situations that are within Darrius' understanding of struggles, but not necessarily from his personal experience. He can relate because he knows other people who experience similar struggles. This struggle, just as Guilli discussed, refers to difficult situations encountered while growing up in poor conditions of the hood. Therefore Darrius believes Lil Boosie's struggles based on what he has learned from friends, people he knows, and from rap music. Darrius also believes Lil Boosie's claims because, in looking for slip-ups, he has verified Boosie's claims with the documentary.

Charlotte made an interesting statement about what audiences can relate to when talking about Plies.

Um, Plies is <pause> ugh. He sings about women and sex and his P.O officer all the time. *What's a P.O officer?* Um parole officer. *Oh oh oh. so you don't like that?* Um not really it's like he's like a defiant singer. *Defiant?* He sings about things that like he knows or whatever he's talking 'bout how he doesn't care about what he's--other people, only cares about him. And a lot of people can relate to that but not really <both laughing>.

Charlotte does not like Plies and seems to dislike the themes of his songs. She says that "people can relate to that, but not really" which could mean that people want to feel as if they can relate when they really don't have similar experiences to Plies. Or it could mean that based on her own experience, Plies' music is not something that other listeners could relate to.

Angelo talks about what is true for other people, not himself. Our conversation briefly stepped outside of rap music because I might have I phrased the question poorly here and he thought I wanted him to speak in terms of genres when I asked what music makes you think. Nonetheless, his answer indicates that good music is true no matter what genre. He also points to films as other media that circulate true events.

Angelo: That shit is hot right there. He told a story it's SO true! That part that 'everybody got a drug dealer on speed dial' that is SO TRUE. That shit is, that's prolly hotter than 'Tha Carter III' right there just 'cause he said that one line. Yo that line is so true. I just finished watching "Blow" and I was watching "Cocaine Cowboys" too you know what I'm talking about right? *Yeah I haven't seen it but I know what you're talking about.* See cocaine cowboys. When I seen that I was like ok alright, like damn that's hot. *And you like it because you relate to it or…you say it's true, what do you mean it's true? For you?* No it's not true for me but I KNOW they be doin' that shit, they be like all fucked up on that lipo' shit and that crack shit.

Angelo agrees with the rock song "Rockstar" by Nickelback that among the famous, everybody has a drug dealer on speed dial. He also agrees that famous people do drugs

and get plastic surgery, commenting that the lyrics to this song and the accounts in the movies are "SO TRUE" not because he has experienced these things himself, but because he has learned from the media that these practices are real among celebrity culture.

    Mimi was also enthusiastic in discussing how the truth is communicated in rap music. She says that Lil Wayne is "stupid but deep" and that he raps the truth. Mimi pulls from other favorite artists of hers to describe what deep means in slightly more detail.

> *Whats so great about Lil Wayne, he was the first one you said?* Mimi: 'Cause the stupid stuff he's sayin' and he's so good, like when he raps, its like he rappin' the truth! It's like, and Lil Wayne is rappin' he's rappin' the truth! And his stuff is so stupid it's like, it be, you can relate to what he's sayin', and he be rappin' is so deep. Gotta listen to him! *So it's stupid but deep?* Yeah stupid but deep, that's what I'm sayin', stupid but deep…

Mimi says that Lil Wayne's rap is stupid but deep. Later in the conversation she explains that by stupid she means that there is a silly quality to his mode of expression and points out that he makes up words as an example. Lil Wayne's material is the truth and also something relatable. She adds that Lil Boosie raps true life and also makes her think.

> Mimi: Like Boosie rap true life and it be real so it's not stupid. It's like daaang, I ain't never think of that but Lil Boosie say stuff like that. I ain't think of that! But it makes you think like when he raps. That's why I like Boosie…

When Mimi listens to Lil Boosie, he encourages her to think about real life situations. She provides more detail about how Cassidy also encourages her to think critically about true life experiences.

> Mimi: Cassidy is just another Lil Wayne, but his stuff don't be stupid. I dunno about Cassidy. It's like his stuff deep. Most of all the rappers on his crew, they deep, real deep and Cassidy real deep like… *What does he talk about?* Talkin' 'bout women getting pregnant out of wedlock and he's talking about true life! And that's like, like, dang, make me wanna cry when Cassidy rappin'. You be like dang. I used to think that he was stupid but when you think about it, he rappin', make you wanna boo-hoo cry <pretending to cry> I ain't never think of that before, change your mind. *<Laughing>* I'm for real, make you wanna cry when he rap like daaang. And plus he makes you think. Talkin' 'bout like havin' sex and stuff like that he like, and he like, be like, having sex and getting AIDS and stuff like that. When you be rappin' they be thinking like all they talk about is sex and stuff but they don't! You gotta listen to what they be sayin'. You be like <sniffle> oh man! You be boo-hoo cryin' for real! *And so, true life you say, like stuff that happens in your life?* Yea, or stuff that happens in anybody life. Like your life or <points to others> crazy people over there life, anybody alive he talk about. It don't matter. He just talk about true life. What's going on in America today.

Mimi finds herself defending rap music as she explains that it can be deep and not always about sex. When talking about Cassidy Mimi explains that deep music makes her think about things she hasn't thought of before such as social problems like pregnancy or AIDS. Deep music can relate to anyone because it addresses issues in American society. If Mimi were to write a rap song, she thinks that it would include true life, "*If you wrote a*

rap song what would it be about? Mimi: About me! *Ok.* Talk about me or I--I don't talk about, it'd be about [city]. You know I love my city so. Talk about livin' in [city] and true life." Mimi definitely understands that rap music has a serious, social dimension that discusses true life experiences and situations.

Sarah elaborates on the term 'deep' when discussing Lil Wayne and shares the meaning of what is 'deep' with Mimi.

> Sarah: Well like I know they have songs and he also talks about like an issue. Whether he's talking about like a girlfriend or he's talking about politics it's like when you hear him like he'll say something and it'll be like a metaphor. Like you don't expect like something like maybe it's something else. Or he'll bring in something that's a political issue or um, a social issue just things you don't expect.

Like Mimi, Sarah finds that rap music sometimes makes her think about political or social issues. Sarah also feels like rappers who talk about personal experiences will relate to a wide audience. She calls this "being honest with their music."

> Mimi: Like I was talking to someone who like after Nelly's sister died and I was like 'Oh he's gonna have a great album.' Like I felt bad but I was like his next album is gonna be really good because if it talks about what they've been through, like so many people have gone through--like so many people can relate to going through a tragedy. *Mm hm.* And you know that they're gonna like if they're really being honest with their music that's gonna come up. So I think that Lil Wayne's prolly been through a great deal.

She attributes Lil Wayne's success to the relatablity and honesty of his material. If fans feel like they can relate to what a rapper talks about, they are more likely to think he is talking about his own life. This earns him characteristics of being real and speaking the truth.

Occasionally my interviewees spoke about what they think other listeners would like and why. Just as they assume they know what the hood is like, they assume to know what would appeal to others. As seen above, Sarah seems to estimate that listeners like Lil Wayne because they relate to him. Ty guessed that other listeners relate to certain songs because they share similar experience with what the song depicts. When looking at the Billboard charts Keyshia Cole's "Heaven Sent" Ty made the following remark.

> Ty: I guess a lot of people will pick Keyshia Cole for number one 'cause she's like, she brings both of 'em together. Like urban and the prayers. Like 'sent from heaven' I guess oh you're like the best thing that ever happened to me. *Mm hm.* So I guess the young girls consider like that I guess. Say to their little high school boyfriends <high pitched>'oh you're sent from heaven.'

Pierre commented on the same song, saying that he relates the message to his own experiences and beliefs. From there he makes the generalization to how it could apply to other people's lives.

> Pierre: Like heaven sent, I like that song a lot. *Why?* Because a lot of people in relationships come up with the question--I know a lot of people, a lot of female friends who well not a lot, I don't know too much like that, but most of the females I've been with actually, they think we was meant

to be and I-- I'm like a, a, we don't need to be talking bout that right now.

If you do care about a…if you do care about a female a lot, you feel like it

is meant to be and God, and God made that up so. I like that song a lot.

It seems from these comments that listeners use music to either learn or affirm beliefs about how other people think, experience, or believe based on what they have learned from the media. The interviewees understand hoodness as a signification of ghetto life based on what they learn from the media. Because the hood is really an abstract creation of the media, no one really lives a "ghetto experience" as it is described through hip hop media because it is all a media caricature of actual ghetto life. However, these media conceptions are valued by my interviewees as reality, suggesting the power of media messages. In addition, if you are hood, you are automatically deemed real. One's hoodness—which is essentially a performance mimicking a signified reality—can surpass the authenticity test and earn a rapper the realness label.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The research presented in this thesis suggests that adolescent hip hop fans are making interpretations from the media and applying them to their understanding of themselves and the world. This study shows that these adolescent hip hop fans most saliently describe their interactions and understandings of hip hop music in terms of authenticity. In determining the authenticity of rappers, participants demonstrated their belief in the signified concept of the hood as an accurate portrayal of ghetto reality. These interviews also indicate that fans are attracted by stories of perseverance. They respect artists who have worked hard for their success, which encourages the optimism of the American dream.

Hip hop music is a form of media that is carefully followed and criticized by insiders and outsiders to the culture. My interviews revealed teens to be critical of rappers' presentation of self. These participants use their subcultural capital to administer an authenticity test where artists only pass if they are true to themselves, as Armstrong (2004) states in his typology. This study builds upon this form of Armstrong's authenticity typology because these interviews revealed the dimensions of this realness. These are: 1) The artist as a real person: The artist speaks their mind and expresses their thoughts and feelings through their autobiographical music or in interviews, and acts like a real person listeners might know personally. Their music is real because it incorporates the artist's individual creativity; it comes from their heart or personal thoughts and/or conveys realistic emotions. They include things from their real life experience, from sex to their personal struggles. 2) Relatability: An artist's music is true to the listener's life or communicates experiences, feelings, or thoughts that listeners can relate to. 3) What you see is what you get: Rappers are always being themselves, paying little mind to what others might think. They do not try to fit a corporate mold or fulfill others' expectations. 4) Fake in opposition to real: Rappers must be consistent with their everyday lives and their reputation as an artist to avoid being labeled fake.

Hoodness is a characteristic of realness that can enhance a rapper's authenticity. Hoodness falls under Armstrong's (2004) second form of authenticity in his typology, described as 'local allegiances and territorial identities.' This study builds upon this by specifying how fans identify these allegiances. Some qualifications for a rapper to be hood include that he has been through a lot or experienced ghetto life, portrays toughness or a gangsta quality, and has a cool demeanor. Hoodness is a quality learned through the signified hyperreal hood that hip hop media has created. Participants referred to these representations of the hood as actual reality. When discussing the truth with me, listeners described how they use hip hop texts to learn or affirm beliefs about how other people think, experience, or believe. They described the truth of other people's experiences as they understood them from the media. This demonstrates the strength of music and

images transmitted through the media to adolescents who saturate themselves with a genre of music.

As Thornton (1995) notes, subcultural capital is heavily intertwined with messages transmitted through mass media. The participants internalized the importance of authenticity among rappers in terms of realness and hoodness. They assume that artists are performing a genuine self, but are constantly seeking affirmation and looking for slip-ups, which is consistent with Goffman's (1959) assertions about performance. In this sense, fans are no more critical in their reception of hip hop than anyone is in their reception of performances by people they interact with daily. In their search for slip-ups, they are indicating that they know everything is a performance.

In another respect, interviewees indicated that they are listening to hip hop's critical perspective of our culture. They talked about how hip hop describes underprivileged living, drugs, violence, and the consequences of sexual behavior. Drugs and violence in particular are understood as normalized adaptations to underprivileged living, survival techniques to aspects of the hood's impoverished conditions. In this sense hip hop offers a critical viewpoint that fans understand as logical consequences of poverty. However, being that these were open-ended interviews where they could discuss whatever they wanted regarding hip hop music, there was not much discussion involving critical thought about the larger issues of race and gender. This leads me to believe that these participants are not so critical about what the media presents to them. Instead, interviewees were more interested in discussing how their subcultural capital operates in their view of the world.

Although hip hop's predominantly Black artists suggest the topic of race would inevitably arise, there was little discussion about race in my interviews. The topic of gender roles arose on occasion but was omitted from many of the conversations, partly due to the fact that interviewees focused mostly on male rappers. Female rappers are not as common and females are most often featured as accessories in rap videos (Littlefield 2008, Stephens and Few 2007, Stephens and Phillips 2003, Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 2008, Emerson 2002, Ward et al. 2005). In future studies hip hop fans can be asked to address the complexities of authenticity as how they pertain to race and gender. Since this study is limited by the small sample group of 12, future studies should include larger generalizable numbers.

It is important for social service workers, parents, educators and other adults who interact with youth to understand the roles hip hop music and culture can play in the identities of those who are listening. This study indicates that youth may understand hip hop images and messages as types of lived realities. Although further research is necessary, these findings suggest there may be a need for adolescents to refine media literacy skills to be critical of media images and messages.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about the last time that you listened to music? When was this? What did you listen to? How long did you listen? Was there something else you were doing at this time?
2. How would you describe this kind of music? Do you listen often to this kind of music? Are there other kinds of music that you listen to?
3. Can you describe the different kinds of rap and hip hop? Which kinds do you like best? How come?
4. How do you get music? Do you download it, buy it, borrow it, pirate it?
5. Can you describe your favorite musical artist?
6. Can you describe your favorite song? Can you describe what it is about?

<Present the Billboard Music Charts for the week: Top 10 'Hot Rap Tracks' and 'Hot R&B/Hip Hop Songs'>
7. Have you heard any of these songs listed here? When have you heard them? Are there any that you have made an effort to listen to by purchasing or borrowing it?

8. When did you first learn about hip hop? What did you think about it? Have your perceptions of hip hop changed over time? In what way?
9. Can you describe to me what hip hop culture is?
10. Who do you think hip hop is about?
11. How would you describe the typical person who listens to hip hop?
12. If you could write a rap song, what would it be about?

13. How would your parents describe the music you listen to?

14. Are there other things you want to mention that I didn't ask?