COLLEGE-GOING BLACK MEN AND HIP-HOP

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife Jenna Scott and my daughter Masiel Scott. I love you both very much.

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Thank you to everyone who helped me through this process. My friends and family showed tremendous support and the staff at GMU were also terrific throughout my time there. Thank you all!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

COLLEGE-GOING BLACK MEN AND HIP HOP

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This thesis uses qualitative methods to determine the ways in which Hip-hop has shaped the identity formation of college going Black men. It also provides a literature review of previous work that has been done to discuss Hip-hop's impact on Black men in general. The men who participated in this study are all undergraduate students at the same university. In-depth interviews and focus groups were used to collect the data. The findings indicate that while Hip-hop is an integral part of the lives of these men; it is one of many factors that shape who they are. This work was limited by sample size and a more comprehensive version of this study with a larger sample would be beneficial to the field of sociology.

CHAPTER 1

Hip-hop culture is a part of everyday U.S. life. It crosses race, class, and gender

boundaries. Embedded in Hip-hop culture is rap music, which is one of the most popular

music genres in the world selling over 34.9 million total albums in 2012 (Business Wire

2013). However, Hip-hop culture and rap music were not always a part of mainstream

U.S. culture. Hip-hop culture arose organically in the mid-late 1970s in Black

neighborhoods in New York City (Rose 2008). The music and culture reflected the Black

urban (and often male) experience. It first began to gain national attention in 1979 with

the popular dance song "Rapper's Delight" performed by the Sugar Hill Gang

(Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). Importantly, according to legendary Hip-hop artist

KRS-One, Hip-hop is more than just rap music – it is an art form that can be broken

down into four core elements (also referred to as the "Core Four"): (1) B-Boyin also

known as break dancing; (2) MC-ing also known as rapping; (3) Aerosol Art also known

as graffiti art; and (4) DJ-ing which consists of cutting, scratching and mixing recorded

sounds together (Temple of Hip-hop 2013). As Hip-hop grew and expanded, the art form

evolved and developed into a culture and the Core Four transformed into nine cultural

elements: (1) Breakin or B-Boyin; (2) Emceein or MC-ing; (3) Graffiti Art or Aerosol

Arts; (4) Deejayin or DJ-ing; (5) Beat Boxin, a way of making music with just the sounds

one can produce from one's mouth; (6) Street Fashion or style of dress; (7) Street

Language or style of speech; (8) Street Knowledge or informal education gained within one's community; and (9) Street Entrepreneurialism or small business ownership (Temple of Hip-hop 2013). KRS-One is considered by many to be a "founding father" of Hip-hop. He was the leading artist in the successful 1980s Hip-hop group, "Boogie Down Productions" (Temple of Hip-hop 2013).

As Hip-hop, and particularly rap music, has become increasingly popular, record companies have gained more control over the cultural/aesthetic production. Their control has led to a mass commercialization of Hip-hop that promotes a uniform image of Black identity, particularly Black masculinity. This image often portrays Black male identity as uneducated, hyper-masculine, violent, and misogynistic (Dyson 2001; Hill and Ramaran 2009; Rose 2008; Sternheimer 2010; Worsley 2010). The aforementioned stereotypes help to negatively magnify, and even glorify, the structural standing of Black men in U.S. society. This glorification of negative images (such as the examples listed above) works (sometimes) to encourage young Black males to replicate Hip-hop music's images as they create their own identities, narrowing their range of identity options.

Social scientists, such as sociologists, study the disadvantaged position of Black men within the U.S. social structure. Drawing on a range of theories and conducting empirical research, social scientists provide context and identify social factors like socioeconomic status and level of educational attainment, among others, which contribute to the bleak social outcomes of many Black men. In addition to studying these outcomes of Black men, researchers also study how social factors, such as socioeconomic status and educational attainment, influence Black men's identity construction. One factor that

has emerged from this research is how Hip-hop, as a cultural form and institution, shapes Black men's identity, which in turn shapes life chances. Notably, most research focuses on the role of Hip-hop on Black men who reside in disadvantaged positions. This thesis, thus, seeks to expand this lens of inquiry to better understand the role of Hip-hop in the daily lives of college-going Black men. *How does Hip-hop culture affect the identity formation of college-going young Black men?*

To begin to understand how Hip-hop culture affects the identity of college-going young Black men, this thesis captures the experiences of 10 Black men enrolled at a selective university in the mid-Atlantic. I conducted individual interviews with each of the men, as well as held two focus groups with the same group of men. The interviews and focus groups help me to better understand how the students' social class, family structure, K-12 education experiences, childhood neighborhood, friends, as well as additional social factors contribute to how Hip-hop plays a role in shaping their identities. The interviews also helped me understand the meaning assigned to Hip-hop by these young men.

The thesis is organized in 7 chapters. Following Chapter 1 – the introduction, the remaining chapters are:

- Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework

- Chapter 3 – Literature review

- Chapter 4 – Research design and methods

- Chapter 5 – Findings: Demographic and contextual background of students

- Chapter 6 – Findings: Contextualizing what Hip-hop means to Black college-going men?

- Chapter 7 – Conclusion

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

In 2008, the U.S. elected its first Black man to lead the country. To some people, this historical moment symbolized a transformation in the U.S.'s racial politics and practices. Black children, specifically boys, across the country who aspired to become the U.S. president were able to see that their goal could become a reality. Black men could also, perhaps, be viewed more positively by non-Black peers in professional occupations. Importantly, while a growing percentage of Black men are represented in professional occupations, such as medicine, law, and business (Hogan, Connor, and Mustillo 2009), the social outcomes of Black men are still bleak compared to the social outcomes of other racial, ethnic, and gender groups. For example, Black men are less likely than Black women, as well as White and Asian American women and men to graduate from high school and enter postsecondary education (The Kaiser Family Foundation 2006; U.S Census Bureau 2011). In addition, Black men are incarcerated at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group (U.S. Department of Justice 2009). Black men also suffer from higher rates of unemployment compared to White, Hispanic (or Latina/o), and Asian American men and women, and Black women (U.S. Department of Labor 2011; U.S. Department of Labor 2008). Not surprisingly, when Black men have higher education attainment levels, they are more likely to be employed and less likely to be incarcerated (Center for American Progress 2009). Still, it is significant to note that when

Black men have the same educational attainment levels as White men, they have lower salaries and have greater unemployment rates (The Kaiser Family Foundation 2006). From these realities spawn the imagery of Black men most commonly represented in the entertainment industry today.

The entertainment industry – notably commercial mainstream Hip-hop music – capitalizes on these negative social outcomes to create essentializing – or one shoe fits all – notions of what it means to be a Black man in the U.S. This essentializing leads to dangerous stereotypes of Black men that permeate our society. Importantly, this essentialist discourse excludes the intersecting identities that shape Black men's experiences in the U.S. Therefore, the wider U.S. society often does not hear the stories of Black men who operate outside of these narrowing constructs – such as college-going Black men.

To better understand how Hip-hop plays a role in the lives of college-going Black men, I will draw primarily on the theoretical construct of intersectionality which highlights the interdependence of race as it interacts with class and gender. An intersectional approach concretely provides a lens in which we are able to think in more nuanced ways about the complexity of people's experiences, including those of Black men. This approach seeks to bring attention to how people's multiple identities and the social structures that they live in are all continuously and mutually interacting to construct one another (Collins 2000). A central premise of an intersectional approach is to understand how the macro structures of society connect to people's multiple intersecting identities (i.e. how the Hip-hop industry's portrayal of Black men connects to

the various identities within Black men) (Collins 2000; Collins 2004). For instance, Collins (2000) writes of the need to always interrogate personal experiences within the context of the larger social structure, since both are involved in the construction of one another. Given the focus on social structure and its inextricable link to personal identity, an intersectional approach powerfully addresses the multiplicity of discriminatory and oppressive structural regimes (e.g., institutions – such as the Hip-hop industry) that harm people. Notably, intersectional theorists (Collins 2000; Collins 2004; Crenshaw 2003) explain that the theory serves not simply to deconstruct or complicate how we think about identity and/or oppression; but, it also operates to rearticulate a more equal and humanitarian way to understand people's experiences and the discrimination they face in order to build a more just society.

Collins (2004) writes about how the various intersecting identities of Black men matter in how they experience U.S. life. She shows that while Black men may share similar experiences as a result of their skin color, their experiences often vary by social class, sexual orientation, education, age, and so forth. Collins' writing is very useful in helping to deconstruct stereotypical notions of Black men.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins (2004) examines the role of intersectionality to better understand the relationship between race and gender for Black men. Importantly, she explains that we must interrogate more than just race and gender to understand the positionality of Black men. Thus, Collins (2004) asserts that we must analyze how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect, not compete, in Black men's lives. According to Collins (2004), analyzing these intersecting systems of oppression (racism, classism, etc.)

are particularly important because they impact Black men's (as well as all people's) daily lives, making it difficult to discern if a particular oppression matters more. To Collins (2004), this nuanced way of understanding Black men's experiences helps to show the uniqueness of Black men's lives and struggles. She notes that this intersectional framework produces a Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity that is used to justify patterns of opportunity and discrimination that Black men encounter in schools, jobs, government agencies, and other institutions (such as the media, and more specifically the Hip-hop industry) within the U.S. (Collins 2004).

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins (2004) interrogates specific intersecting identities and oppressions (namely race, gender, class, and sexuality) that, she suggests, produce Black masculinity. Using historical (i.e., slavery) and present (e.g., media – such as the Hip-hop industry) structural forms of oppression, Collins (2004) argues that society socializes Black men to conquer as many women as possible. Collins (2004) illustrates how today's media – including the Hip-hop industry – creates this representation by drawing on the intersections of sexuality, class, race, and gender. Importantly, these representations are associated with working- or lower-class Black men; but, dominant society has come to view the representations as facts about *all* Black men – and thus these representations are associated with authentic (or real) Black men (Collins 2004). These stereotypes create a new form of racism that serves to alienate Black men who do not live up or conform to these representations.

In addition to portraying authentic Black men as overly sexualized, Collins (2004) contends that the media – such as the Hip-hop industry – and other U.S. institutions,

portray Black men as physically strong – which, at times, society compliments (i.e.,

athletics) and other times fears (i.e., thugs – or criminals). In the case of Black male

athletes and Hip-hop artists, the media often uses their strong bodies to sell products or

promote ideas (Collins 2004). However, mainstream media (and especially the Hip-hop

industry) uses Black men's bodies to represent violence, which mostly draws on

stereotypes of heterosexual, urban, working-class or poor Black men's images (Collins

2004). In both examples, U.S. institutions, like the Hip-hop industry, control what

represents Black masculinity. These representations encourage the U.S. public to view

Black men as athletes, as well as criminals. The images normalize Black men as criminal

and enable police to target them in random searches, etc. Even more, these images live in

the minds of Black working-class and poor male youth and men (and even in the minds

of those from middle- and upper-class families), suggesting that authentic Black men can

legitimately make it in the U.S. by becoming athletes or entertainers – industries

controlled by White, heterosexual, upper-class men; or, they can make an illegal living as

a drug dealer – or thug. Interestingly, Collins (2004) explains how the emergence of Hip-

hop and its thug image has interacted with athletics and created an avenue for Black men

to make it in sports and/or Hip-hop without completely selling out to White (male,

heterosexual, upper-class) America; yet, she notes that these industries are *run* by White

(male, heterosexual, upper-class) America – and thus the construction of what it means to

be a Black man in the U.S. is in fact dictated by the very people that many Black men

work to distance themselves from. Distancing themselves from White America is

important for many working-class and poor Black male youth and men as a way to

demonstrate racial membership, and selling out is labeled negatively in Black ghettos. Further, the Hip-hop industry's and other media's (as well as other U.S. institutions') representations of Black men divert the Black community's (particularly Black men's) as well as the larger society's attention away from the social policies and institutions – such as the media, criminal justice system, and U.S. education system – that oppress Black men (Collins 2004).

Interestingly, Collins (2004) articulates that U.S. institutions, such as the media, portray Black masculinity differently for Black middle- and upper-class men; but, this is not viewed as authentically Black (and male). Rather, images such as Bill Cosby's character in the Cosby Show are portrayed as loyal and nonthreatening, as well as committed to White, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, male norms. Collins (2004) labels this image as the Black Buddy, which is often associated with the old notion of Uncle Tom – selling out the authentic Black culture for the dominant White culture. Moreover, Black Buddies are asexual, and even feminized – making them even more appealing to dominant White America.

Collins (2004) also interrogates how the authentic image of Black masculinity plays out in the lives of homosexual or gay Black men. As a result of the narrowly constructed commonly presented image of Black masculinity, Black gay men are labeled as *sissies* – or pushovers (Collins 2004). This labeling serves to create a homophobic environment within the Black community (and other communities) and opens the door for hate crimes (Collins 2004). Further, it has also led to gay Black men living

heterosexual – or straight – lifestyles to the public and their families, but simultaneously living a gay lifestyle on the *Down Low* – or in secret (Collins 2004).

In each example illustrated above, the intersecting structural oppressions used controlling images that help to justify Black men's economic and social marginalization as well as create the labels for Black men and serve to protect hegemonic White masculinity (Collins 2004). Similarly, bell hooks' (2004) book, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, shows how White, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual men construct Black masculinity and at the same time protect their own. According to hooks (2004), the current imagery of Black masculinity is a result of European imperialism and the U.S. enslavement of Black men. She asserts that Black men today believe in the dominant discourse of Black masculinity because throughout U.S. history White men conditioned their thinking (hooks, 2004). This culture of domination, reflected by the Hip-hop industry and the larger media, oppresses Black men, and prevents the wider society, from understanding the complexity of Black men's identities; thus, Black men (as well as others) are unable to see the structural discrimination that Black men face on a daily basis.

Importantly, the culture of domination narrowly constructs what Black masculinity looks like, such as living in a violent *gangsta culture* – or thug life (as illustrated by Collins above). hooks (2004) asserts that while popular culture like commercial Hip-hop projects images that authenticate this lifestyle for Black men, structural barriers in the workplace also play a role in some Black men's participation in gangsta culture. hooks explains how dominant White (male, upper-class) culture

11

associates masculinity with making money; thus, many Black men feel that they must find any means to accrue wealth in order to be a man (hooks 2004). The image of Black men as violent also serves to legitimate the disproportionate incarceration rates of Black men (hooks 2004) and allows White hegemonic culture to deny U.S. structural oppression. Similar to Collins (2004), hooks (2004) also points out that essentialized notions of Black masculinity do not include intellectual achievement. Therefore, some Black men who achieve academically hide their intelligence in order to appear authentically Black (and male). This image also lives in the minds of many educators, and is embedded in the larger U.S. education system – which negatively affects the schooling of Black boys/men (hook 2004, Carter 2005).

An additional piece of work that I think is important to briefly highlight uses empirical research to magnify the importance of understanding Black boys'/men's experiences from an intersectional framework. Ferguson's (2004) work shows that while all Black boys who are students face a form of racist policing in public schools, those from more middle-class families are read differently by some teachers, illuminating how race and class intersect. Importantly, while educational institutions label Black masculinity negatively, which in turn negatively shapes the identities of Black boys and later men, this impact is often stronger for Black boys/men from lower social classes. Intersectional approaches guide social science researchers and society to better understand how oppression, such as the discrimination faced by Black boys and men in the U.S., operates in people's lives, as well as the larger U.S. society. I ascribe to the belief that it is very important to listen to the diversity of stories of all Black men. By

12

appropriately contextualizing these stories with an intersectional framework, as described

by Collins (2004), we can begin to better understand systems' of oppression impact on

identity and experience, while also deconstructing common place, limiting notions of

what it means to be a Black man so that we can see the complexity of their experiences.

Using an intersectional approach, we are able to reframe how we think about the

identities, experiences, and position of U.S. Black men. Through a critically reflexive

lens, this theory allows me to carefully contextualize the stories of 10 college-going

Black men to better understand how Hip-hop plays a role in their lives and their

formation of racial self and masculine self.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

Scholars use both theory and empirical research to better understand and

contextualize the social outcomes and identity constructions of Black men. In the

discussion that follows, I describe the theoretical frameworks (besides intersectional

approaches, discussed in Chapter 2) that scholars embrace when examining the

experiences and identities of Black men. In addition, I highlight the major findings that

scholars have gleaned using these frameworks. Importantly, I also outline the results of

theoretical and empirical work that focuses on the role of Hip-hop in Black men's lives.

Black Men's Positionality and Identity

Although this thesis centers an intersectional approach as the primary tool for

understanding the role of Hip-hop in shaping Black college-going men's identities, it is

important to acknowledge the multiple theoretical constructs that scholars use in seeking

to understand the social outcomes and the identity construction of Black men. Scholars

that emphasize structures (or stratification theory) explain that U.S. structures are

organized in a manner that leads to social class stratification and limited opportunities for

individuals from lower socio-economic groups (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Wilson 1996).

For example, Wilson (1996) argues that the position of people of color in the United

States is the result of structural discrimination. According to Wilson (1996), several

factors have contributed to this structural inequality that permeates inner-city

neighborhoods, where the Black population is segregated: (1) the decentralization of

work; (2) the construction of highways that cut directly through neighborhoods; and (3)

the lack of public transportation. Given this spatial jobs mismatch, many poor, Black

people, particularly Black men, are unable to find employment, leading to an unending

cycle of poverty.

In addition to spatial job mismatches, scholars suggest that lower socio-economic

groups, disproportionately comprised of Blacks, lack the necessary cultural capital to

navigate the U.S.'s hierarchically structured institutions (Bourdieu 1997; Ferguson 2004;

Lareau 2003). Cultural capital is the general cultural background and skills that are

passed from one generation to the next (Bourdieu 1997). Significantly, Bourdieu (1997)

explains how the elite are able to maintain the status quo by giving more "capital" to their

mores and transfer this knowledge to their children, while they simultaneously devalue

less advantaged groups' cultural ways. Carter (2005) refers to this as dominant capital.

Lacking the elite's cultural capital, these groups, such as many U.S. Blacks, are unable to

penetrate the glass ceiling and experience upward mobility. Although education is often

cited as a mechanism to help disadvantaged groups acquire the necessary capital needed

for upward mobility, it is often challenging to navigate the U.S. education system without

the adequate cultural capital. In fact, the U.S. education system often perpetuates the

social class hierarchies (Ferguson 2004, Carter 2005). Given that U.S. Blacks

disproportionately comprise lower social class groups, they often attend under-resourced

schools, have less effective teachers, and/or are tracked into coursework that does not

prepare them for postsecondary education (Ferguson 2004). Lacking cultural capital also serves as a barrier when seeking employment (Wilson 1996). For example, some White employers choose not to hire Black people, notably Black men, because they do not speak or dress "correctly."

To the contrary, some research suggests that while the majority of Black people lack the cultural capital to successfully climb the U.S. hierarchical social structure, they use their own form of cultural capital, known as street capital, to effectively navigate within their own neighborhoods, such as the urban ghetto (Anderson 1997). For instance, Anderson's (1997) and Wilson's (1996) work explains how Black people, particularly Black men, in urban ghettos often turn to "street" values (referred to as "the code of the streets") to "make it." Another interpretation of non-dominant groups' response to dominant structures is referred to as "oppositional culture," since these values conflict with "mainstream" values (Carter 2005; Anderson 1997; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that in reaction to White racism, Black students, especially Black men, embrace a culture that opposes "mainstream" mores, which may include as doing well in school. Even Black students who do succeed in school may mask their success to "fit in" with the oppositional culture (Fordham and Ogbu 1986).

While the concepts of spatial mismatch help to explain the position of Black men in the U.S., some scholars embrace a critical race (gender) theoretical framework (a more specific form of an intersectional approach) to explain their disadvantaged position. Critical race theory centers the role of race and racism in interpreting the social world (Collins 2000; Valdes, Culp and Harris 2002). Critical race theory emphasizes the role of

White privilege in the formation and day-to-day actions of U.S. institutions (Valdes, et al. 2002). While critical race theory focuses on structural racism, it also connects macro structures to micro-level daily *lived experiences* (Collins 2000). Critical race theorists argue that lived experiences are central to understanding the social world. To understand how people experience the world, critical race theory suggests that researchers focus on the intersecting identities of people, while recognizing that certain identities may play a larger role in people's daily experiences (Collins 2000; Valdes, et al. 2002). Importantly, critical race theorists recognize that race (and all identifies) are socially constructed (noted earlier under the intersectional approach discussion). In the case of Black men, critical race theorists assert that researchers must consider how race, gender, social class, sexuality operationally intersect to shape the lived experiences of Black men. As articulated in the previous chapter, in Ferguson's (2004) work, she is able to show that while all Black men who are students face a form of racist policing in public schools, those from more middle-class families are read differently by some teachers, illuminating how race and class intersect.

An intersectional (including critical race) approach is often combined with larger identity theories to understand how social structures intersect with people's daily lived experiences to help shape their identity. Ferguson (2004) describes how educational institutions label Black masculinity negatively, which in turn negatively shapes the identities of Black men and in her case Black boys, who may come to see themselves as "troublemakers." Other identity theories emphasize the role of "authenticity," which is often created in reaction to systemic discrimination (Dyson 1993; Fordham and Ogbu

1986). Noted earlier, Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) research discusses how Black men who are students adopt an identity in reaction to White racism. This identity, thus, becomes the "authentically" "Black" identity. Moreover, Dyson (1993) articulates that what is considered authentically Black identity is often policed by the Black community. For example, he illustrates how many people within the Black community questioned Michael Jordan's Blackness because of his speech and attire (Dyson 1993).

In reaction to narrowly, commonly held notions of identity, identity theories often draw on post-structural approaches to help researchers carefully interpret the experiences of a group of people. Jackson (2001) in his book, *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America*, magnifies the importance of examining Black people's social class, as well as race in order to better understand identity. He finds that class intersects with race to explain how Black people in Harlem view their neighborhood and construct their identity (Jackson 2001). Similarly, Lareau's (2003) work also illustrates the importance of examining the role of social class in the lives of Black students. Her research illuminates the power of social class in the daily experiences of Black families, particularly in shaping the future of their children (Lareau 2003). In addition, Pascoe's (2005) research brings attention to the importance of examining the intersection of gender and race in understanding how Black adolescent boys negotiate and construct masculine identities. The research draws on queer theory to center how masculinity is shaped in opposition to the concept of "fag" and how this interplays with race to influence the identity construction of Black adolescent boys (Pascoe 2005). Further, Wilkins (2012) explores the racial, gender and emotional challenges Black men face in university

18

settings. She explains how participation in predominately White institutions (and in this case institutions with less than 5 percent students of color) requires Black men to use emotional constraint to conceal anger which often conflicts with traditional notions of Black masculinity. By practicing *emotional* constraint, the students in turn work to create identities as Black, middle-class men. She labels this new shared identity, *modern blackness* – and describes it as the process by which Black men distance themselves from the controlling image of the angry Black man. According to Wilkins (2012), the new identity helps Black university men to navigate the racial politics at predominately White universities and get along better with White students and faculty.

The Role of Hip-hop in Black (Men's) America
          A growing, yet small, field of scholars examines the role of Hip-hop in the lives of Black people, particularly Black men. Many scholars draw on critical race (gender) theory and identity theories to interpret how Hip-hop operates in the lived experiences of the Black community. In addition, scholars draw on these theories to interrogate the image of Hip-hop projected to the wider society.

          In Hill's and Ramaran's (2009) book, *Hip-hop and Inequality: Searching for the "Real" Slim Shady*, Hill and Ramaran argue that the record labels control the image of Hip-hop. They suggest that since the rise of Niggas with Attitude (N.W.A.) in the late 1980s, record labels primarily sign and promote artists whose image embraces violence and misogyny (Hill and Ramaran 2009). Also, research shows that Hip-hop magazines, such as *The Source,* play a role in projecting Hip-hop's image (Worsley 2010). In addition to violence and misogyny, Worley's (2010) empirical research shows that Hip-

hop's image is also one of heteronormative, illegal activity, and "ghetto culture."

Drawing on critical race theory, the scholars articulate that Hip-hop is used as a medium

to promote the image of the "pathological Black male" (Worsley 2010; Sternheimer

2010). Importantly, while this image is promoted by the major record labels and Hip-hop

magazines that are owned and operated by mostly White men, other forms of media, as

well as other facets of White American society, vilify the young Black men and boys who

are rappers. Notably, Lipsitz (1998) articulates the role of U.S. lawmakers in painting

Black men as criminal, particularly during the 1994 Congressional Black Caucus

hearings to determine the effects of "Gangsta Rap" on the Black community and wider

U.S. society. Rose (2008) further explains (2008) how the mass commercialization of

Hip-hop by the White media (and others) has become the means by which race is

discussed – and more importantly stereotyped in the U.S.

　　　　According to some scholars, this paradox is a direct result of institutional racism

(Hill and Ramaran 2009; Iwamoto 2003; Rose 2008). As research points out, other forms

of music also promote misogyny and violence (Iwamoto 2003; Sternheimer 2010).

Further, and quite interestingly, empirical research shows that while Hip-hop is labeled as

misogynistic, the majority of Hip-hop music contains no misogynistic references[1]

(Weitzer and Kubrin 2009). However, when misogyny is present in Hip-hop, it

disproportionately is in the form of sexually objectifying women (Weitzer and Kubrin

2009).

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[1] It is important to note that this research only examined songs produced by artists that self-categorize their music from 1992 – 2000.

Significantly, while the negative portrayal of Hip-hop artists by the music industry and media leads the wider American society to view Hip-hop as a negative art form and stereotype young Black men as violent and misogynistic, these images also are extremely influential on how young Black men, particularly those who live in urban ghettos, view themselves (Dyson 2001; Iwamoto 2003; Rose 2008). For example, some scholars postulate that young Black men who grow up in the ghetto construct hyper-masculine identities, not only as a defense mechanism against institutional racism, but also as a result of the Hip-hop artists' images projected by media (Dyson 2001; Iwamoto 2003; Rose 2008).

In turn, this hyper-masculine image is labeled as the "authentically" young Black men's and boy's identity (Dyson 2001; Worsley 2010). Interestingly, empirical research shows the importance of authenticity within Hip-hop culture (McLeod 1999). For instance, to be authentically Black within Hip-hop culture, young Black men must: (1) reject mainstream values (i.e., White America values), (2) identify with authentic Blackness, (3) embrace the underground economy (i.e., drug economy), (4) project a "hard" masculine image, (5) live in the urban ghetto, and (6) know the roots of Hip-hop (a.k.a. The Old School). While these requirements of young Black men are the common images, there are some Hip-hop artists, like the group *A Tribe Called Quest,* who buck these images and/or denounce them.

Further, this commonly held but not universally accepted authentic definition of Hip-hop and Blackness, excludes many people from the Hip-hop world or *space*. For instance, middle- and upper-class Black men, Black men from small towns and suburbs,

any non-Black people, women, and gay/lesbian people are not permitted in this space. Specific to Black middle- and upper-class men from non-ghetto locations, research shows that the role of Hip-hop in their identity construction is different from young Black men from the urban ghetto. For instance, Jackson (2001) finds that Black middle- and upper-class Harlemites have created a space for themselves in the Hip-hop world that debunks essentialized notions of Blackness (and maleness). In fact, he argues that this space is reserved solely for middle- and upper-class Black Americans (Jackson 2001). In this world, Hip-hop (and Blackness and maleness) is equated with legitimate wealth, not wealth consumed via illegal activity.

Additional empirical research that considers the role of social class (or socio-economic status) on Black people's interpretation of Hip-hop finds that many middle-class Black people reject many of Hip-hop's negative stereotypes, such as misogyny and violence (Bryant 2003; Ward 2003). Despite rejecting some of Hip-hop's images that narrowly promote authenticity, many middle-class Black people still consider Hip-hop culture a relevant part of their identity construction (Ward 2003). Interestingly, Worley's (2003) research suggests that middle-class Blacks are able to explore authentic Blackness via Hip-hop, while maintaining their privileged status as middle-class.

Reflections on the Literature
As the literature discussed above indicates, there is significant social science theory and research that examines the social factors that play a role in the (1) social outcomes and (2) identify constructions of Black men. However, the majority of research

still tends to focus on the social outcomes and identity constructions of structurally disadvantaged lower- or working-class Black men, with less literature focused on the social outcomes and identity constructions of middle- and upper-class Black men, such as those who attend selective four year colleges. Further, and importantly, while some social science scholarship considers the role of Hip-hop on the social outcomes and identity constructions of Black men, it is clear that this an emerging field with less empirical work. In addition, the work that exists tends to focus on Hip-hop's role in the lives and identity constructions of lower- or working-class Black men in structurally disadvantaged situations.

My study "speaks to" some of the aforementioned emerging work in the literature. While it is important to study the social outcomes and identity constructions of Black men who are most structurally disadvantaged, it is also useful to better understand what social factors play a role in the lives and identity constructions of Black men who have successfully navigated the U.S. education system and are now attending a four-year selective college. My study shows that Hip-hop plays a role in the lives of college-educated Black men; but, similar to the work of Jackson (2001), Bryant (2003), Ward (2003), and Worley (2003) it operates differently than how researchers "speak" of Hip-hop's influence on the lives of structurally disadvantaged Black men. Thus, this study builds on the work of the research that works to deconstruct essentialized notions of Black men and Hip-hop. It also helps to inform education policy by sharing lived experiences of Black men who have negotiated structural discrimination, and yet have still made it to a selective four-year undergraduate university program.

Since the majority of previous research in this area uses ethnography and content analysis, it is clear that most work in this field presents findings that cannot be generalized to the wider population. Therefore, while it is beyond the scope of my work, it may be helpful for researchers to think about designing a study that surveys a representative sample of Black men to examine the effects of Hip-hop on their identity construction. Specific to this work, and discussed in detail below, I use two specific qualitative methods – interviews and focus groups – in order to gain deeper insight into the lives and identity constructions of the students in my sample.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

With the goal of beginning to better understand Hip-hop's influence in college-going Black men's lives, I chose to employ two qualitative methods – one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The one-on-one in-depth interviews enabled me to provide an environment for each student to describe their *lived experiences*, including how Hip-hop has played a role in shaping them. Following the interviews, I conducted two focus groups in order to dig deeper into how Hip-hop influence the students' lives. The group setting allowed the students' the ability to interact with one another to discuss the role of Hip-hop in their lives. Using these qualitative techniques, I was able to carefully listen to the students' stories and collect primary data to *tell* my participants' *stories* of their relationships with Hip-hop. The paragraphs below provide detail on the research questions, sample, and methods.

Research Questions

As stated in the beginning of the thesis, the primary research question is: *How does Hip-hop culture affect the identity formation of college-going young Black men?* In addition, a secondary guiding research question is: *How do other social factors (i.e., social class, family, school, neighborhood, peers, race, gender etc.) intersect with Hip-hop to shape the students' identities and lives?*

Sample

The ten students were selected using a convenience sample. To garner their participation, I posted flyers on campus. In addition, some professors announced the study in their classes and solicited participation. After speaking with students, I asked for referrals. It was important to ensure the students represented multiple social groups on campus, so as to avoid speaking only to athletes or fraternity members, for example. My sample represents athletes, fraternity members, racial and ethnic campus association members, and students who do not participate in formal campus organizations. Further, the sample is a combination of under- and upper-classmen.

Methods

To ensure confidentiality, no personal identifiers were used in the research. All students' confidentiality was paramount to ensuring that the project met ethical standards. Further, I received Institutional Review Board approval to conduct this research.

I conducted ten interviews that lasted approximately 1 – 3 hours each. Each interview was audio recorded to ensure that the conversation was captured in entirety. All interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. Questions were open-ended questions to prevent binary responses. While the protocol served to provide structured questions, each student organically guided the conversation. Topics covered during the interview included the students' family background, racial identity, education experiences, peer relationships, childhood neighborhood, college selection, college experiences, career aspirations, and opinions on many Hip-hop topics. For example, students were asked to

26

discuss: (1) when they began listening to Hip-hop; (2) how the type of Hip-hop they listened to over the years has changed (or not); (3) how do they see Hip-hop's role in shaping popular culture (i.e., clothing, speech, etc.); (4) how do they view Hip-hop's depiction of gender roles; (5) what (if any) Hip-hop songs or artists have impacted them or their lives; and (6) how they interpret the themes embedded in Hip-hop music.

Following the interviews, I conducted two focus groups with the students that I interviewed. Each student participated in one focus group. Focus groups were comprised of approximately the same number of students, and lasted between 1 – 2 hours. Each focus group was audio recorded to ensure that the conversation was captured in its entirety. During the focus groups, I used an interview protocol to make sure the students did not stray too far from the topic of conversation and to ensure that I collected data relevant to my research questions. The protocol incorporated multiple questions that focused on the students' relationship with Hip-hop music. While the protocol helped to structure the conversations, the discussions moved freely to give students the opportunity to share the *stories* that were most important to them. During the focus groups, students discussed: (1) music preference, (2) perception of Hip-hop and rap, (3) Hip-hop style, (4) perception of artists' authenticity, (5) views on the importance of Hip-hop's authenticity, (6) opinions of alcohol and drug use practices referenced in Hip-hop music (and its relationship to the participants' own lives), (7) views on Hip-hop style, (8) perception of the portrayal of gender roles (including misogyny) in Hip-hop music and its relationship to the participants' own lives, and (9) Hip-hop's role on community. More generally, I

asked the students to talk broadly about what Hip-hop means to them, including how

Hip-hop has positively and/or negatively impacted their lives.

Following the interviews and focus groups, I transcribed the recordings. I used the

first few interviews to develop my coding scheme. Examples of codes include:

intersectionality (race, age, gender, social class, college student), Hip-hop messages

(construction of Blackness, mainstream versus underground), mass commercialization

(essentialization – stereotypes, construction of Blackness/maleness), cultural capital

(parents, teachers, friends), gender roles (relationships, family), and Hip-hop and identity

(Black culture, Black families). I created a spreadsheet with the coding categories to

categorize the data. The data revealed important emergent themes discussed in the

findings in Chapters 5 and 6.

Limitations

Although this research design effectively answers my research questions, I

acknowledge that there are limitations. For example, since this design only incorporates

cross-sectional data, I am unable to capture changes and similarities across time.

Additionally, given that my sample is based on a small group of ten Black men who are

undergraduate students at one university, I am unable to generalize my findings,

including achieving external validity. Further, based on my selected methods, I did not

come into this research with a stated hypothesis and therefore cannot test the internal

validity of my research project. Even with these limitations in mind, it is still important to

emphasize that design provides a lens to understand a small sample of college-going

Black men's interactions with Hip-hop. These qualitative methods give voice to a

population often neglected when interrogating Hip-hop's role in the lives of Black men.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

Developing an understanding of the demographic characteristics and other contextual information of the students helps to tease out the later themes that are articulated in Chapter 6. The students' descriptions of their backgrounds took into account their race, class, hometown community, education experiences, family, friends, etc. As they talked about their backgrounds, it became clear that the students' identities were multifaceted – embracing an intersectional framework.

The table below describes each participant's demographic characteristics and other contextual information. Specially, the table provides information on the students':

- Age,

- Family structure,

- Parental occupation and level of education,

- Parental expectations,

- Hometown,

- Race and/or ethnicity and social class,

- Friends' race and social class,

- School and college experiences,

- Extra-curricular activities ,

- Relationships with teachers and professors,

- Relationships with friends, and

- College choice and major.

Following the table, there is a more detailed summary describing the major findings.

Table 1	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Age	19	20	20	20	21
Family Structure (who the student grew up with in the home)	Mother, father, 3 younger sisters	Mother, father, grandmother, aunt, only child	Mother, father, younger sister	Mother, father, 2 younger sisters, 1 younger brother	Mother, father, older sister
Parent Occupation & Education	Mother – federal employee, college dropout Father – military; computer science degree	Mother – middle school special education teacher; master's degree Father – elementary school principal; master's degree	Mother – human resources employee; working on doctorate Father – truck driver; high school degree	Mother – salesperson; high school degree Father – home improvement business owner; high school degree	Mother – nurse; high school degree Father – retired carpenter and tailor (owned tailoring business); high school degree
Parent Expectations	To be successful and give back to community	To work hard and not quit	To be happy and get a good job	To get good grades and stay out of trouble	To graduate college, stay out of trouble, and get a good job
Hometown	Ashburn, VA	Queens, NY then Freeport, Long Island	Hampton, VA then Woodbridge, VA	Fredericksburg, VA	Bronx, NY
Hometown Description	Suburban affluent area	Suburban, upper-middle and middle class area Calm and quiet Racially and ethnically diverse	Hampton – "bad" inner-city area Woodbridge – nice, suburban area, but some kids are "thugs with opportunity" – meaning privileged kids who act out	Suburban middle-class area A good place to grow up, but it can be bad if a person falls into the wrong crowd	Up-tempo, urban area Lots of subway stations and housing projects A lot of police harassment of Black teenagers

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Racial and Ethnic Identity	Black, with some Native American (Note: father is Jamaican)	Black, with some Native American	African-American	Mixed (Note: mother is White, father is Black)	Black (Note: African-American with Caribbean roots)
K-12 Schools	Private Christian school until 4th grade, skipped a grade and went to public school	K-4th grade NYC public school in Queens, NY, 5th-12th public school in Long Island, NY	Elementary schools were military schools, mostly White middle school in Alexandria, VA, and mostly Black high school in Woodbridge, VA	Many different schools in Fredericksburg, Manassas, Fairfax and Falls Church (all in VA)	Public school (attended in two districts – and the latter district was better academically)
K-12 Academic Experiences	Enjoyed school, teachers were "cool," did well academically but slacked off senior year	In honors classes middle and high school, took 2 college credit courses as a senior	Had good grades and socially enjoyed high school	Positive experience, took honors classes in both middle and high school	Honor roll student (AP classes, receiving A's and B's) in high school, but slacked off after college acceptance
K-12 Extra-curricular Activities	Creative writing club, cross country and track, school paper	Alto saxophone in band, star athlete in track, basketball and football in middle school, basketball and football in high school	Track, football, heavily involved in church (Note: stayed busy to prevent bad habits and network with new people)	Basketball, pool, hung out with friends	Basketball, track, Future Black Leaders of America (Note: very social and went to a lot of events and organizational meetings)

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Relationship with High School Teachers	Good relationship with teachers, especially the one in charge of the creative writing club and school paper; cross country coach helped get into college	Good relationship with teachers, only 4 detentions all of high school; even better relationship with coaches	Got along with teachers and never got in trouble; African-American teachers harder because saw potential	Not much of a relationship with teachers because changed schools a lot	Good relationship with teachers because asked a lot of questions to ensure visibility with teachers; still in contact with 2 teachers; felt important to establish good relationships with teachers
Relationship with High School Friends	Friends with band kids and creative writing kids	Friends with many kids; hung out with friends a lot	Friends with many kids; was a "cool nerd" before starting sports; fit in well with everyone.	No core group of friends until moving to Fredericksburg; still keeps in touch with friends from other places	Friends with many people; popular guy who attended parties, movies, etc.
High School Friends' Race and Social Class	Mostly White and middle class, though one kid acted like a wannabe gang banger; also, hung out with Blacks and Hispanics	Mostly Black (including some Caribbean, but differentiated between them and other Black students) with some White and Asian friends	Black, White, Asian, Arab, Spanish; "all over the place" racially and economically; best friend came from a single parent home that struggled	All races and socioeconomic backgrounds; varied widely	Mostly middle and upper class Black kids, a few Latinos; the rich kids were not spoiled; some of the rich kids were NBA players' sons and daughters; a Hip-hop CEO's daughter was a best friend
Label for High School Friends	Nerdy kids, but hung out with popular kids and "stoners" (marijuana smokers),	In crowd and athletes, but hung out with honors students too; mixed group	Athletes	Not very popular - kind of a middle ground, people who did their own thing and stayed	Athletes and popular kids that all got good grades, nerds "on the low" (without people

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
	too			under the radar	knowing)
Decision to Attend College	Strong economics program, all his "smart" friends went to Mason (George Mason)	Diversity of the school; liked the students on visit to school and still friends with them	Recruited for track; both high school coach and gym teacher were track athletes at Mason	Visited Mason and liked the school; only had money to apply to one school and another school did not save personal statement	Really liked visit; felt would be able to land a job after graduation easily; school has a good name and good IT program
Major	Economics	Sports Management	Sports Management	Information Technology	Information Technology
College Activities	Nothing, except class and hanging out with friends	Works out at the gym, plays basketball and attends minority organization activities	Track, member of the Caribbean Student Association, attends some meetings for almost all the African American Organizations on campus, member of the Student Athlete Advisory Council	Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity, pick-up basketball, hanging out with friends	Black Student Alliance, Caribbean Student Association, National Society of Black Engineers, Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, Kappa League Mentoring Program, donated food to families over Thanksgiving the past 3 years, pickup basketball and Gen Men
Relationship with Professors	Not as close as wants to be	Not close to any in large lecture class - "just another number"; closer to professors in smaller classroom settings and very close to advisors	Not as personal as relationship with high school teachers because college professors have more students, so it's harder to form those	Kept in contact with some of his past professors in classes really found interesting, like psychology and global affairs	Good relationship with 3 professors at Mason; class size makes it difficult to build relationships; better relationship with some

			close relationships; never struggles to get help from a professor when needed		general faculty members than professors
	Student 1	**Student 2**	**Student 3**	**Student 4**	**Student 5**
Relationship with College Friends	Great relationship with his friends - hang out, watch movies, throw the football around and play a lot of cards; groups was larger freshman year but it has gotten smaller and more tight knit	Goes along with everyone but has 3 main core friends he hangs out with most of the time - roommates from freshman year	5 true friends that would do anything for each other; a lot of acquaintances outside of that group	Organically hangs out with friends every day	Good group of about 5 friends; frat brothers; knows a lot of people but values core group of friends

	Student 6	**Student 7**	**Student 8**	**Student 9**	**Student 10**
Age	23	18	20	19	24
Family Structure (who the student grew up with in the home)	Mother, step father, 1 older sister, 1 younger sister	Mother, father, only child	Mother, father, 3 younger brothers	Mother, father, only child	Mother, father (later divorced), younger brother
Parent Occupation & Education	Mother – contractor for a government agency; bachelor's degree Father – military doctor;	Mother – air force secretary; high school degree Father – retired military	Mother – nurse practitioner; master's degree, Father – works for the	Mother – retired from the government of Richmond; bachelor's degree	Mother – financial aid consultant; PhD Father – works in sales,

	medical doctorate in medicine	and does contractor work; associate's degree	city of Norfolk; master's degree	Father – military service (Navy); high school degree	bachelor's degree
	Student 6	**Student 7**	**Student 8**	**Student 9**	**Student 10**
Parent Expectations	To work hard, get a degree and get a good job	To graduate college and find a job he likes	To get A's and B's in school and graduate; they do not expect failure	To succeed and thinks he has the potential to do so	To graduate college and get a job he likes; live with no regrets
Hometown	Springfield, VA then Woodbridge, VA	Davie, FL	Chesapeake, VA	Richmond, VA	Virginia Beach, VA
Hometown Description	Upper middle class; becoming more diverse over time	Mostly Spanish people; not a high crime area, but the trailer park down the street was a little shadier	Suburban area 5 minutes from the country and swampy area; mainly Black and White people	Urban neighborhood that is "semi-ghetto"; overall good community with an occasional drug dealer on the street	Lived in a rough area of Virginia Beach originally, but then grew up in a typical suburb area
Racial and Ethnic Identity	Straight Black, does not say African-American because Africans that come here are different than Black people with slave roots	African-American; mother is from Guyana with Indian roots and father is Black; familiar with mother's culture	Black, with African and Cuban in his history	African-American	Black
K-12 Schools	Missed a lot of school because of Crohns disease; homebound for much of middle and high school; teachers would	Mostly White elementary school; mostly Black middle school, but transferred to a mostly White, gifted middle school; mostly	Baptist K-4th grade; had to switch elementary schools 3 times because of behavior issues, but got good grades; 95% Black public middle	Attended public schools; gifted program for Black students in high school	Diverse public schools; working – middle class high school, with a sprinkle of rich kids and nobody under the

	come to home	Latina/o high school	school; 80% White public high school		poverty line
	Student 6	**Student 7**	**Student 8**	**Student 9**	**Student 10**
K-12 Academic Experiences	Disease made it difficult, but still did well and thought the work was easy; hung out with kids that did not care about school, but that did not impact him	Took high school algebra and geometry in middle school; did not have difficulty and got A's and B's in high school	Straight A's until college, which is more challenging	Graduated with a 3.8, but was lazy in 11th and 12th grade	Did well, but did not apply himself 100% until after going to community college
K-12 Extra-curricular Activities	Didn't do anything in middle or high school	Robotics, multicultural club, the National Spanish Honors Society, National Technical Honor Society (all high school)	Football, track, band for 1 year; mainly focused on sports and not much else	Played baseball, Mu Alpha Theta (math organization), FBLA, band, a lot of creative drawing	Football and basketball
Relationship with High School Teachers	Personal relationship with teachers because came to home to teach	Middle school teacher helped get act together struggling early on; never had a close relationship with high school teachers; but, teachers were nice and happy to be in their classes	Fun, good experience with high school teachers; talked often and helped with college plans; plans to go back and visit them soon	Great relationship with teachers and they all loved him	Got along well with teachers
Relationship with High School Friends	Popular and funny and people liked being around him; some friends took the wrong	Still talk to some of high school friends in Virginia; texts with	Had friends that were cool with; spent most time with long term girlfriend throughout	Social person and very friendly - so lots of friends	Good group of friends that joked around a lot and talked about typical

	path; since sick it kind of helped him stay out of trouble	Florida friends	high school; most friends were teammates.		high school stuff
	Student 6	**Student 7**	**Student 8**	**Student 9**	**Student 10**
High School Friends' Race and Social Class	Mainly Black and middle class (though some had more than others) growing up but now it is a more diverse group	Mostly middle or lower middle class; White and Latino in Florida; White or Black in Virginia	Middle class and all Black (one was half Black and half Latino); most of their parents were Army or Navy; nobody was really rich or really poor	Black, some came from well off families and some came from bad homes and stayed at his house sometimes; but, most came from pretty good backgrounds	Racially and socioeconomically mixed
Label for High School Friends	Only nerd with thugs; they all smoked and drank, but he still did his homework unlike his friends	Nerds	Athletes	A little of everything: some athletes, some nerds, some popular (some were all of the above)	Different circles of friends: some nerds, some popular, some athletes.
Decision to Attend College	Liked the film school; good financial aid package	Research school and programs and chose school based on Global Affairs program	Old girlfriend suggested he check out the school, visited and liked the Engineering program; recruited for track	Second choice and really enjoyed his visit	Basketball team reaching the final four got his attention; researched the school and like it; in-state tuition; just far enough from home, but not too far
Major	Film Production with a minor in Sociology	Global Affairs with a minor in Arabic	Civil Engineering, but switched to Information Technology	Information Technology	History with a minor in Sports Communication

	Student 6	Student 7	Student 8	Student 8	Student 10
College Activities	Helps fellow students with their filming needs, art committee	Attended a few KSA (Korean Student Association) meetings; thinking about attending Lebanese Student Association meetings because they speak a lot of Arabic there and it would be good practice for major/minor	Track (only activity because he is focusing on getting his grades up)	Intramural referee, works for college recreation, National Society of Black Engineers	Intramural sports; videographer for basketball team
Relationship with Professors	No close relationships with professors; keeps relationship with them business-like	Positive relationship with professors and has received help when needed it	Talks to some professors, but is distant from most of them; would like to build closer relationships with them but it is difficult	Some professors do not like him because he skips class sometimes, but most like him once they get to know him	No close relationships with professors, but he can go to them with concerns and vice versa
Relationship with College Friends	Cordial with classmates; mostly White students, thinks they are uncomfortable around Black people; closer with a few, gets offended when they think they know Black people because they know rap – rap represents a small percentage of the Black experience	Small group of close friends he hangs out with mostly; good relationships with friends; small arguments with his roommate over typical roommate problems	Small group of close friends and other people he associates with; core group met as freshman and have maintained a close relationship the whole time; they were the only 4 Black people on their floor freshman year and still live together now	Wide variety of friends and knows a lot of different people; close friends are mostly Black and are a small, tight knit group	A lot of good friends he hangs out with

Demographic and additional contextual information

The data in the table highlight demographic and contextual similarities and differences among the students in the sample. Most were between 18-21 years old, but one student was 23 and another was 24. All students, but two, identified themselves as Black or African-American. The other two students described themselves as multiracial, with their Black identity playing a major role in their racial and ethnic background. All students grew up in a middle-class, two-parent home in which both parents worked. However, one student grew up with an extended family in the house; he also was the only student without siblings. Most of the students' parents had at least a four-year college degree; but, three students came from households where no parent had a four-year college degree.

Most students grew up in Virginia; however, two of the students are from New York City and one student considers Florida his home state (but moved to and now resides in Virginia). All students described their childhood neighborhoods as "good places." However, some noted that while there childhood neighborhoods are generally good places, there are certain sections or people that are "sketchy" – meaning dangerous.

Although every student attended public schools for the majority of their primary and secondary education, the racial and socioeconomic composition of the student bodies at the schools varied. The socioeconomic compositions ranged from upper-middle class to working-class; no students attended schools with majority student populations below the poverty line. Each student enjoyed their schooling experiences and performed well academically. Almost all the students were involved in extra-curricular activities. Due to

an illness, one student's activities were limited; this student also was homeschooled for most of his life. Nine out of ten students emphasized positive relationship with their teachers, such as discussing connections with a history teacher and creative writing teacher. The student who did not have a close relationship with his teachers explained that he was unable to develop close relationships because he frequently moved schools due to his parent's employment with the military.

Prior to college, almost all of the students described having large groups of friends comprised mostly of high academic achievers (that they unanimously labeled as nerds) and/or athletes. Most of their friends went on to college. One student spent the majority of his time with his longtime girlfriend and therefore did not have as large a group of friends. Another student hung out with "thugs" or people who often got into trouble with authority; but, explained that he was still a good student as a result of his parents' and teachers' expectations. All of the students echoed the importance of their parents' expectations and teachers' guidance in their academic success.

In selecting a college, the students described choosing the school based primarily on their academic program of interest, and enjoying the onsite visit. Some were also recruited for athletics. Their academic majors cover many disciplines; but, the most common major is information technology. It is also worth noting that few are majoring in the liberal arts. All students (but one) participate in extra-curricular activities, such as organizations focused on racial and ethnic issues. Additional activities included other student organizations, sports, and fraternities. Interestingly, in contrast to their relationship with high school teachers, most of the students do not have close

relationships with their college professors. They attributed the lack of relationships to class size. If close to professors, the students noted that the class size was smaller and/or the professor was an advisor. Unlike high school where the students described having large groups of friends (and in some cases racially and ethnically heterogeneous), the students now have small groups of core friends who tend to also be Black.

The above paragraphs describe the multiple identities and social experiences that help define the 10 students. The students intersecting identities and experiences articulated in this chapter will aid in the analysis of the findings in the following chapter. Importantly, this chapter highlights two very important themes. First, the students define themselves and their experiences through multiple, intersecting identities. For instance, the students see themselves as middle-class (and mostly suburban), Black, college students - not simply as one or the other. Second, the students used and continue to use their acquired cultural capital (see examples below) to effectively navigate their social world. For example, as middle-class students (and mostly from families where parents have at least a bachelor's degree), they note the importance of their parents' values and expectations in helping shape their success. Notably, they also highlighted the role of their high school teachers (and mentors, coaches, etc.) in providing them with helpful guidance to attain their goals. In the next chapter, the students' narratives shed light on the importance of their intersectional identities and cultural capital in their understanding and interpretation of Hip-hop – specifically what it means in the broader social context, as well as how it shapes who they are as individuals.

CHAPTER 6

> *…if you listen to Hip-hop, it doesn't mean that you are the same people as the artists... Hip-hop artists are glamourized in the media. The majority of them (the artists) are Black men. Some of them don't do the right things. I don't attest to some of the struggles that (a lot of) Black men go through. The media puts out negative stereotypes of Black men. Black men aren't in the media when they're succeeding and becoming CEOs. They're in the media when there is a domestic violence case, or somebody just got shot or there is a gun charge… something like that. …but the music, it's just something you can relate to; something that's in the music that makes you happy. I try to stress that to people so that I don't ever feel that I'm being stereotyped, even though it happens. It's inevitable, but I feel like Hip-hop is something that a lot of Black men listen to. …I think that it's something that gets people through the day. I like keeping my conversations open about music all the time… Everybody listens to music in some way, shape, or form. It creates a lot of friendships… You get introduced to new things (through friends' music)...- Student 5*

Hip-hop has played and continues to play an important role in the lives of each student interviewed. The students, however, recognize the role that the media plays in shaping Hip-hop's discourse to the general public, particularly in its negative stereotypes of Black men. Most of the students see Hip-hop as integral form of entertainment in their lives, but carefully negotiate how it shapes their identity. This careful negotiation is necessary to avoid the negative stereotypes of Black men portrayed in a large proportion of mainstream Hip-hop music.

Still, Hip-hop remains the dominant music that all of the students listen to most often. The students shared that they listen to all genres of Hip-hop, and really have no preference to any particular one. They select Hip-hop genres based on their mood or situation. For example, many listen to Conscious Rap while alone or studying, Gangsta

Rap in the gym, and Trap Music when partying with friends. While each student listens to multiple genres of Hip-hop depending on the situation, all students seem to most frequently listen to Conscious and Gangsta Rap.

The students described the various Hip-hop music genres based on region and subject matter. They explained that Hip-hop genres are most often defined by regional location demonstrating their level of Black cultural knowledge. These genres include: (1) East Coast (i.e., Notorious B.I.G.), (2) West Coast (i.e., Kenderick Lamar), (3) Southern or the "Dirty South" (i.e., T.I.) and (4) Mid-West (i.e., Kanye West). Each of these genres has their own distinctive sound and style. In addition to regional genres, the students discussed how Hip-hop is also defined by subject matter. These genres include: (1) Gangsta Rap – defined by violence (i.e., Lloyd Banks); (2) Conscious Rap – defined by social awareness (i.e., Lupe Fiasco); (3) Battle Rap – defined by two rappers competing against one another for supremacy (i.e., Eminem); (4) Trap Music – defined by underground economies (i.e., Pusha T); (5) Lyrical Rap – defined by poetic lyrics (i.e., J. Cole); and (6) Strip Club Music – defined by exotic dancing (i.e., Rick Ross). Importantly, some genres receive more air time than others (i.e., Gangsta, Trap, and Strip Club), and become known as "mainstream Hip-hop." These forms of Hip-hop often promote many negative stereotypes of Black men. The students recognize the danger in these stereotypes; but, they still enjoy the music (that they refer to as "mindless") in certain social settings, such as working out at the gym or while attending parties. Conversely, genres that receive less publicity (i.e., Conscious, Battle, and Lyrical) are often referred to as "underground Hip-hop." Most of the students described underground

45

Hip-hop as the form of Hip-hop music "that makes you think." They explained that they are able to "see themselves" in this form of music; in essence, they identify with it more because it speaks to their lives more accurately, as Black middle-class men who are college students.

The students demonstrate a good understanding of how Hip-hop music touches different listeners in different ways. For example, some artists and their music relate to the students' lives; but, other artists and their music do not. These forms may relate to the hardships of many Black people in "poor, urban America." Still, they also explained that some music is entirely commercialized and misrepresents realistic life experiences of all Black people. It is essentialized notions of Black men's experiences (such as the heavy display of criminal activities present in the music) that many of the students work to distance themselves from because of the danger in being stereotyped as, one student noted, "a menace to society." The paragraphs below dig deeper into how Hip-hop relates to their lives and/or others, as well as how the mass commercialization of Hip-hop narrowly represents the experiences of Black people (and at times fantasizes those images) and thus contributes to the stereotyping of the Black community and Black people – notably those who are teenagers and young adults.

Hip-hop culture

Despite the mass commercialization of Hip-hop, the students clearly explained that there is no one definition of Hip-hop culture. Rather, it is complex and nuanced, and influences more than just music. Hip-hop culture contributes to today's fashion and

46

speech, as well as people's interpretation of what it means to be Black (and a man/boy or woman/girl) in the U.S. Hip-hop influences people from all corners of the world in many ways. According to one student:

> *…I think today Hip-hop has influences on everybody no matter where you come from, because it's just gotten so big. It's crossing over into different genres… I've seen it influence a lot of my friends, especially the slang and dances. - Student 4*

In addition, another student shared:

> *…when people see Black men, they all think of the things that get put out by the media of Black men. Sometimes or the majority of times it's just all negative things. Black men aren't in the media when they're succeeding and becoming CEOs. They're in the media when… somebody got shot or there is a gun charge – felony, drug violation, DUI... I try to educate people that if you listen to Hip-hop is doesn't mean you are the same people that those artists are. - Student 5*

Hip-hop culture, according to the students, has both positive and negative effects on society. Importantly, they all argued that the Hip-hop consumer extrapolates and understands each Hip-hop song, video, etc. from his or her perspective. Therefore, a student shared that while a Hip-hop song may remind a middle class Black teenager of the struggles many other Black people in the U.S. face, it may also encourage a poor Black teenager to "act out" a violent lifestyle portrayed in the same song. Further, this song may also encourage a White middle class person to think that all Black people are poor, uneducated, and violent. One student asserted that in his hometown neighborhood:

> *…White people think that reckless, Black youth bring the property values down. It's the negative stuff in Hip-hop that allows people to connect bad things to Black youth. …They assume that he (the Black youth) is wasting his life away; they just put him in a "box." – Student 6*

Thus, while the students see Hip-hop music and culture as contributing to an oral history of the U.S. Black experience, they recognize that its messages are viewed and

47

interpreted differently by various audiences. Even more, they see mainstream Hip-hop culture that is mass consumed by the general public as creating a dangerous essentializing discourse on the U.S. Black experience. Underground Hip-hop helps balance the stereotypes portrayed in mainstream Hip-hop; but, the majority of U.S. music consumers and the general public do not listen to or see the images put forth by underground Hip-hop artists.

Interestingly, the students shared that at their university, most of the students are only influenced by the stereotyped discourse of mainstream Hip-hop. The students attribute this to the racial and socioeconomic composition of their university. They see the university as a mostly White, middle-class space. While this may not be entirely true of their university, it is their perspective of the university. The students interpret most of their White classmates' consumption of Hip-hop as a way to view the Black experience from a distance. A student noted:

> *…the other day I saw the preppiest looking white girl with a Biggie shirt on…It's like yes, she may not know everything that comes with Biggie, but people know the main Hip-hop figures – Unidentified focus group participant*

However, most of these White students do not recognize that the mainstream Hip-hop music and culture does not represent all Black people's experiences. While the students believe that mainstream Hip-hop culture impacts their university, including the mostly White, middle class study body, the students see House Music and Techno Music as the most popular genres on campus. For instance, one student shared:

> *{University name} is more like a house music, techno type. Even when Luda (Ludacris, a Hip-hop artist that recently performed a concert at the university) had like a break-in segment…The DJ like just played the most recent house music-techno. – Student 6*

The students' perspectives summarized above speak directly to work of several researchers described in the literature review. Notably, like Hill and Ramaran (2009) and Rose (2008), the students see mainstream Hip-hop music as controlled by the record labels to promote negative stereotypical images of the Black experiences that, as Collins (2004) and hooks (2004) write, become normalized in the public's mind to represent all Black people. Similar to Bryant's (2003) findings, the students reject this commonplace notion of the Black experience because it does not speak to their lives; yet, as Ward (2003) argues, the students still see Hip-hop as relevant to their lives despite the contradicting experiences depicted by mainstream Hip-hop. The section below digs deeper into the role of Hip-hop in the students' lives.

Hip-hop music's relationship to the students' lives

Despite the mass commercialization of mainstream Hip-hop music, the students explained how some Hip-hop music, especially the underground music, articulates messages that relate to their lives or social issues that are relevant to them. For example, one student (and echoed by others) spoke of the stereotypes that he experiences negotiating racial identity as a college educated Black man. He explained how one Hip-hop artist, Earl Sweatshirt, talks about the frustrations of "being too White for the Black kids; too Black for the White kids," explaining how the lyrics are often true. In fact, generally the students talked about their connection to lyrics that magnified the frustration of not being seen as "Black enough" if you grow up in a two-parent, middle-class home. The students articulated other messages in the music that they relate to including: negotiating growing up and trying to find yourself; struggling financially and

49

working to make a better life for yourself; living life the "right" way despite negative pressures; being comfortable as an outcast and doing your own "thing". They found they could relate to: living the American Dream, but remembering where you came from and giving back to the community; magnifying Black and African history and culture; having ambition; being in love and having intimate relationships; connecting to all human emotions; living as a "Black nerd"; expressing fashion; and contributing to everyday speech through slang.

Specific to fashion and speech, the students talked about how they and their friends embrace certain Hip-hop clothing style and slang trends. However, when they or their friends are in more "formal" settings (i.e., a university classroom, internship, etc.), they carefully select how to embrace or distance themselves from the Hip-hop style. This negotiation is important because Hip-hop style is often stereotyped as representing urban, poor, uneducated Black people (especially Black teenagers and young adults), and the students do not want people to label them in this way.

Further, students described how much of the mainstream Hip-hop music creates messages that do not relate to their lives. For instance, students articulated that they cannot relate to the fantasy life in many Hip-hop songs. One student explained, "I can't relate to having the Bentley or having fifty women just running up to me." Additional examples include: living a "Scarface lifestyle" (e.g., drug dealing empire lifestyle); being a "thug," gang member or murderer; and having a misogynistic lifestyle.

Interestingly, many of the students talked about how their relationship with Hip-hop music has changed as they have gotten older. Some of the students expressed that

they now relate more closely to Hip-hop music, while others stated that they felt a tighter connection to Hip-hop as a high school student. The students who are closer to Hip-hop music now articulated that the music they listen to as young adults focuses more on thought provoking issues, such as facing police harassment simply for being a Black man in the U.S. In addition, they are now better able to comprehend and dissect the meaning of powerful lyrics. One student said:

> *...I remember like just recently when I went back home – me and my boys, I was out driving. We got pulled over even though we had literally just parked the car. We were on our way out (of the car). The cop was just like, "Well, what's going on?" I'm like, "I'm just parking my car trying to get out. Is there a problem?" He was like, "I don't know, you tell me?" This is like Jay-Z saying, "Pull me over officer, I don't know." I didn't do anything. I'm just here. There must be a problem with you (meaning the officer)! That's the relatable things in the music. – Student 2*

In contrast, the students that noted that they were more connected to Hip-hop music when they were younger explained that when they were teenagers, more Hip-hop artists rapped about realistic life experiences, as opposed to unaffordable lifestyles projected in much of Hip-hop music today. In addition, a few students who grew up in "rougher" neighborhoods before moving to more affluent neighborhoods were able to relate better to the "thug life" discussed in Hip-hop music as young teenagers, as opposed to later in their lives (and now) because their social surroundings changed and conflicted (and continue to conflict) with the dominant Hip-hop music discourse. One student articulated:

> *When I was younger, I was right down the street from the projects. It was all like the stuff that they rap about with drug dealers and the people on the corner and all that stuff. That's real life. I saw that firsthand with my own eyes. ...There's all types of craziness. – Student 5*

Also, some students talked about how their identity now as college students makes it more difficult to relate to a lot of Hip-hop music, since very little Hip-hop music discusses that perspective.

Still, there are songs that continue to resonate with the students – whether it be because the song lyrics "speak to" situations in their own lives, help them understand others' perspectives, or provide them pure entertainment (i.e., when they party or exercise). Most of the students felt personal connections to artists and songs if they could relate to the lyrics and/or message. Some examples include:

(1) Drake because his music focuses on more realistic relationships with women, as well as trying to succeed in life;

(2) Kendrick Lamar because his music talks about remaining true to yourself, making the most out of life, and doing what is best for your family;

(3) *Memories Back Then* by T.I. because it reflects on the hard work needed to become successful;

(4) *Lights Out* by J. Cole because it talks about being successful as a young and Black man and still needing to negotiate society's stereotypes of young Black men;

(5) *The Book of Soul* by Ab-Soul because the song tells a story of a girlfriend tragically passing away; and

(6) *Touch the Sky* by Kanye West because it encourages people to be optimistic, accomplish their goals, and be grateful to God.

Importantly, many of the students explained that as they have gotten older they are better able to dissect the songs to comprehend the true meanings. This enables them to more accurately see if and how the music relates to their lives. Still, while some Hip-hop music may not relate personally to their lives, Hip-hop still serves a bonding tool for them with their friends and even family.

The above findings shed light on how the students' intersectional identities matter in how they *read* Hip-hop. They interpret Hip-hop through the lens of middle-class, mostly suburban, college-going, Black men – not through the eyes of underprivileged Black men (likewise not through the eyes of their White classmates). Their identity leads them to reject the dominant discourse of mainstream Hip-hop that they see as projecting, like Dyson's (1993, 2001) and Rose's (2008) work suggest, an authentic image of Blackness that depicts Black men as criminal, over-sexual, thugs. These images often play directly into racist views harbored by some non-Black people about Black Americans. The students are very aware of how Black men are read in the wider, White-controlled U.S. institutions. Importantly, their middle-class upbringings enable them with mainstream or dominate cultural capital to more successfully navigate U.S. racism than Black men from underprivileged circumstances. For example, a student stated:

> *Hip-hop is supposed to be played loudly, you know? ...I like listening to loud music. Sometimes depending on where you are, that's not acceptable... I try to be aware of where I am sometimes and how my appearance is going to come off – depending on the area I'm in. – Student 5*

Still, while they are able to more strategically deal with racism, they are not immune to it as Black men, and therefore see that common connection with all Black Americans. To

them, this message is universal to all Black people through the Hip-hop discourse. One

student explained:

> *I feel like when I'm with my friends, we're speaking that whole slang terminology and different dialects as if we were like, you know, Asians or a group of Korean friends speaking Korean around each other. Like it's just* normal*. You try to like switch it up when you get into the whole classroom setting where you get more professional. – Student 2*

However, as middle-class, college-going Black men, the alienating dominant

discourse still forces them, similar to Jackson's (2001) participants, to find their own

space in Hip-hop. Their space is most tightly aligned to the messages of underground

Hip-hop music, as well as some mainstream artists who present messages that connect to

them as middle-class, college-going, Black men. Like Ward's (2003) work shows, the

Black middle-class is still able to keep Hip-hop as a relevant part of their identity, while

rejecting the negative essentializing messages of the dominant Hip-hop discourse. The

section below digs deeper into the students' understanding of the messages shared in Hip-

hop music.

General messages portrayed by Hip-hop music
     In addition to expressing how Hip-hop's relatability to their personal lives, the

students talked at length about the perception of the general experiences portrayed in

Hip-hop music. Noted at the beginning of the chapter, the students emphasized that Hip-

hop music is complicated and nuanced – there is no monolithic voice. With that being

said, and as described above, the students see mainstream Hip-hop music as often

portraying negative stereotyped images of being Black, as well as being Black and a man.

Still, they expressed that this form of the music has positive impacts. For example, the

music allows: (1) people to see a world that they may not otherwise be exposed to, such

as the urban, Black ghetto; (2) neighborhood kids and teenagers to participate in music

videos with artists who have made it in the industry; (3) urban Black youth to dream of

ways to make it out of the ghetto; and (4) listeners to be entertained. Importantly, most of

the students expressed how underground Hip-hop music gives voice to experiences often

neglected in mainstream Hip-hop that helps combat the essentialized stereotypes

portrayed in dominant Hip-hop music and other mainstream outlets. However, they

acknowledge that this music takes a "back seat" to the music consumed by most people.

As the students explained, although there are positive experiences depicted in

mainstream Hip-hop, there are also negative experiences portrayed. According to the

students (and similar to the research of McLeod (1999), Rose (2008), and others noted

above), the music sends the following negative messages: (1) being disrespectful to

women is acceptable and even glorified, including treating them as sexual objects; (2)

using sex and violence as themes in the music to simply sell albums, rather than trying to

truly be creative; (3) focusing on mass consumerism that leads to individualism and a

neglect for community outreach; (4) abusing drugs and alcohol; (5) selling an image that

contradicts with the artists' life experiences – simply to make money; and (6) promoting

criminal activity and underground economies. Significantly, while the above experiences

portrayed by some Hip-hop artists promote negative behaviors, the students articulated

that some of these experiences document the lived realities of some urban (and non-

urban) Black people, particularly teenagers and young adults. While the students believe

it is important for this voice to be heard, they worry that these negative images are

internalized or adopted by the general public to stereotype Black culture, notably Black

(young) men. Further, the students expressed danger in these essentialized experiences being viewed uncritically and influencing negative behaviors of Black youth in poor, inner-city neighborhoods.

Importantly, similar to the work of Hill and Ramaran (2009) and Rose (2008), the students collectively see Hip-hop as mass produced. Due to the control mass production lends itself to, artists must compromise their own life experiences to make it in the industry. While the students understand that artists must initially "put out" the image dictated by those that run the industry, the students reject mainstream Hip-hop's description of what it means to be authentically Black, as specifically described in McLeod's (1999) work. Their intersectional identities, notably as middle-class, college-going, Black men, contribute to their rejection of narrow constructions of authentic Black masculinity defined in mainstream Hip-hop. To them, to be a *true* Hip-hop artist – the artist must eventually return to his/her authentic roots and create music that speaks to their lived experiences (i.e., the production of mixed tapes). This is similar to the views of the participants in Jackson's (2001) work. Although, unlike Jackson's (2001) participants, the students are not suggesting that artists create an exclusionary space for middle-class Black people. Notably, the students understand "selling out" and promoting negative messages to begin an artists' career, as they recognize that most artists will never make it without making this initial comprise, as a result of an industry controlled by White elites. However, the students pointedly question when artists continue to "sell out" to make money based on narrow experiences that in turn create negative and essentialized messages of Blackness (and Black masculinity).

56

Gender Roles in Hip-hop

A major negative theme that the students feel is promoted in mainstream (and mass commercialized) Hip-hop music is it narrowly constructs masculinity, manhood, and womanhood in a way that is highly problematic for men and women. Importantly, the students see the Hip-hop industry as dominated by men; and, therefore believe that the gender roles portrayed in Hip-hop are a reflection of this control. Notably, all of the students magnified how men are almost always positioned as aggressive and dominant, while women are typically portrayed as submissive and helpless. In the relationships, men are shown as sexual aggressors (and even abusers) who see women as sexual objects. Men are glorified for having sexual relationships with as many women as they can possibly "conquer."

The women, however, who have sexual relationships with the men are said to be promiscuous – and labeled as hoes. Interestingly, one student pointed out the contradiction in the artists' messaging of women as hoes. He noted that many artists would be offended if someone called one of their family members a ho; yet, explained that the artists do not seem to draw the connection that they are labeling someone else's family member with this derogatory term. Further, many of the students talked about how if a woman wants to make it as a Hip-hop artist, she is typically framed as sexually promiscuous. For example, one student noted:

> *I feel like females are highly misrepresented... Most of them that come to mind easily are portrayed as promiscuous and stuff like that. There are female rappers out there who aren't like that... They're not as well represented as they should be. – Student 4*

Another student shared:

57

I know it's sexist…The only female rappers are over-sexualized that do well. – Student 10

In addition to mainstream Hip-hop music promoting images of submissive, helpless, and promiscuous women, the students also talked about how the music paints many women as "gold diggers" (meaning trying to develop a sexual relationship with a man simply to tie him down for monetary support). In contrast, the music suggests that men must have money to be considered attractive to women. For example, a student said:

> *And the women, they just look like they want to be around it (the money and fame). Like some make themselves look like gold diggers and like they just want to get the guy for the money and that's that. Like they just want his money and make a child by him so that they're set for life and just live off child support or something. – Student 2*

While mainstream Hip-hop has clearly defined sexual roles for men and women, the students also highlighted how the music promotes stereotypical images of men and women as fathers and mothers. One student explained:

> *You've got the deadbeat dad who has like no job and is doing drugs. Or, he is doing something illegal. Then, you've got the mom who's struggling, or even doing drugs and is strung out. They are not the positive images that you want to see. – Student 2*

All the students offered similar descriptions of mainstream Hip-hop's essentialized roles of mothers and fathers, and see the depictions as destructive and not representative of their family dynamics.

A few students noted exception to the negative portrayal of men and women in Hip-hop music. However, each of these students articulated that the exceptions reside in underground Hip-hop music that less people consume. Therefore, these positive messages are not heard by the wider society and are thus unable to combat the negative depictions promoted by mainstream, commercialized Hip-hop.

While the students are concerned about the negative images of men and women in Hip-hop music, they said that these stereotypes have not really impacted their lives. The students articulated that the relationships modeled to them by their families, as well as their ability to critically and reflexively think about the music's messages enable them to reject these views. As one student stated, "My mom taught me how to view women; therefore, the music genre does not influence me to think of women in a negative way."

This same student, as well as the other students, recognizes that those who have not had positive role models may be negatively impacted by these essentialized images. For example, several students described women who they know that have low self-esteem and dress provocatively; and, they believe these women are negatively influenced by Hip-hop's message. The students suspected that these women come from less privileged families, where they believe the women were not privy to positive role models. But, most of the students' friends who are women do not ascribe to Hip-hop's negative gender roles. In fact, the students explained that many of these friends do not listen to Hip-hop music that promotes this type of image or they opt not to listen to Hip-hop music at all. All of the students said that if these friends ask them to turn off a song that they find offensive, they immediately do so. They seem to be aware of the symbolic boundaries that come with being a conscientious member of society. One student stated that he and one of his friends have had a lot of conversations on how she views the negative gender roles portrayed in Hip-hop. He shared one of those conversations:

> *I was in my car and my friend and I were going somewhere. The song playing was,* Going' Steady *by Rocko. It basically talks about he's not committing himself to a girl. Instead, they're just kickin' it, chillin', having sex, and don't catch feelings, etc. I was in the car rapping and she like turned it down. She's like, "see, that's the problem. This is why none of you guys ever want to be with*

59

somebody. You guys are always just thinking it's okay to play [sleep around with] this person and that person. – Student 5

Although the students overwhelmingly explained that Hip-hop has had little influence on how they view men and women, a few students shared how the music may have played a role on their perception of women. For example, a few students confessed that they have prejudged women to be promiscuous based on how they dressed (as represented in Hip-hop music). One student also admits that Hip-hop music's portrayal of what defines an attractive women (essentially looking like a model) may have created unrealistic expectations for him when looking for a partner; still, he understands that he should value his partner's personality over her physical appearance.

Interestingly, only one of the students talked about the dominance of heterosexuality in Hip-hop music. He finds this dominance as a major contributor to homophobia in the Black community. Although, he thinks that the Black church is more responsible for the rampant homophobia among Black people. He believes it would be helpful for Hip-hop music to be accountable for pushing this negative message. Specifically, he shared:

> *It's like Hip-hop has gotten more accepting about fashion... but homosexuality is still looked down upon. You can see that reflecting in the Black community as a whole. Homophobia I think is really rampant... I think Hip-hop has just exacerbated it, because it started out as really aggressive and it still has aggressive fronts today. – Student 10*

The students' views on the portrayal of gender in Hip-hop are linked to their intersectional identities and positionality as middle-class, college-going Black men from nuclear families. The students' cultural capital – both acquired through their schooling experiences and families – have enabled them to reflexively think about and (mostly)

60

reject the negative imagery of gender roles put forth by mainstream Hip-hop. While the students disagree with mainstream Hip-hop's construction of Black masculinity and femininity, they did not specifically articulate how, as Collins (2004) and hooks (2004) contend that, these constructions serve to protect hegemonic White masculinity.

Hip-hop and identity

While the students recognize the negative images and messages conveyed by a large proportion of Hip-hop music today, they still believe that there are many positive aspects of it. Importantly, they believe that Hip-hop is a part of them. Most students could not explain how Hip-hop has specifically contributed to shaping their identity because it has culturally been a part of their everyday life since they can remember. They grew up listening to Hip-hop music with their friends and family, and continue to listen to Hip-hop music today. One student explained:

> *If something has always been there it's hard to notice and imagine how life would be without it. It's like a fish that does not know it's in water until you take it out of the water. That is my relationship with Hip-hop and my identity. I can't imagine who I would be without it. – Student 1*

Very importantly, while the students see Hip-hop as a part of their identity – they, like the participants in Bryant's (2003) and Ward's (2003) work, firmly reject the narrow negative stereotypes of Black men promoted by much of mainstream Hip-hop. They are middle-class college-going Black men who see Hip-hop as a major part of their life; but, its negative images do not define them. The students would like to see a more complicated and nuanced picture of Hip-hop music presented to the wider U.S. society (and even the global society). This picture would ideally represent diverse and intersectional experiences of Black men (and the Black community), while also painting

a more complex picture of Blackness. Similar to the message conveyed by Dyson (2001), Hill and Ramaran (2009), and Rose (2008) (noted earlier), the students feel that if underground music received more airtime, a better holistic (meaning de-essentialized) representation of Black men (and the Black community) would be shared with Hip-hop listeners and contribute to the deconstruction of negative stereotypes of Black men (and the Black community).

CHAPTER 7

The students' narratives show how Hip-hop is one of a multiplicity of factors that shape who they are. Just like the diversity of Hip-hop music and culture, the students' many identity markers and experiences intersect to shape their relationship with Hip-hop. As college-going Black men, they express the role Hip-hop has played and continues to play in their lives; but, its role is not without dilemmas. Rather, it is intricate and nuanced – magnifying how intersectional identities are always situated in and constituted by the U.S. system of penalty and privilege.

As Black Americans, the students' unanimously identify how they have grown up with Hip-hop as part of their culture. But, as middle-class, educated Black men, they grapple with and reject the dominant discourse of Hip-hop that they see as projecting, like Dyson's (1993, 2001) and Rose's (2008) work suggest, a narrow image of authentic Blackness that depicts Black men as criminal thugs and sexual aggressors. To them, the White-controlled mainstream Hip-hop industry contributes to the negative stereotyping and essentializing of Black men (and more generally Black people). Their privileged status as middle-class gives them the cultural capital to more successfully navigate U.S. racism than Black men (and more widely Black people) from underprivileged circumstances without education and economic resources. Although they may be able to more strategically deal with racism, they still confront it. It is this common thread that

63

universally connects them to all Black Americans, regardless of social class. It is also the struggle of race and racism, that to them, is a universal message in Hip-hop music and culture that unites all Black people.

However, as middle-class, college-going Black men, the mainstream negative Hip-hop discourse forces them to create their own space in Hip-hop. This space embraces many messages from underground Hip-hop music, as well as some mainstream artists who present messages that connect to them as middle-class, college-going, Black men. Thus, they are able to keep Hip-hop as a relevant part of their identity, while rejecting the negative essentializing messages of the dominant commercial Hip-hop discourse.

The Role for Sociologists

Given the hegemonic messaging on race and gender in the media that provide narrow identity options for young Black men –as in Hip-hop – (and even on Capitol Hill), that most often centers an essentializing discourse, sociologists can help redirect conversations about race and gender, such as the positionality of Black men, by producing research that steers clear of essentializing discourse that helps contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes and overgeneralizations of Black men in the political arena, media, and wider U.S. society. Attending to intersectional perspectives, sociologists will be in a position to help policymakers create more effective policies to begin to dismantle oppressive structures (i.e., the music industry) because policy makers too often talk about *the Black community* without seeing the differences within it. At the same time, we can help the media (and the Hip-hop industry) to portray a more realistic and nuanced picture

of Black men that reflects the diversity of their experiences, while at the same time shows the common oppression that they face. By helping to change the discourse in the media (and in politics) around Black men, this will hopefully encourage the larger U.S. society (including institutions and individual citizens) to truly understand that we are far from living in a colorblind world and that to overcome oppression, we must engage in careful conversations about race and gender (as well as other identities, such as class).

Personal reflections

Throughout this thesis project, I could not help but consider how Hip-hop has contributed to the shaping of who I am as an educated Biracial (Black and White) – *who people most often read as Black, though sometimes Latino or Indian* – professional man in my mid-30s. Unlike the students who I interviewed who were from racially diverse suburban areas (or attended high schools in suburban areas), I grew up in a predominately Black neighborhood in inner-city Rochester. Neither of my parents attended college, though both had professional jobs at the University of Rochester Hospital. Most of my neighborhood friends never attended college. However, like the students who I interviewed, my mother was determined to ensure that I attended the best city schools and attended college.

Similar to the students who I interviewed, I too have a personal relationship with Hip-hop. It is very much a part of me. But, quite different from the students, I grew up in a different era of Hip-hop. During my childhood and teenage years, Hip-hop was not as much a part of mainstream (or White) music culture, and its consumers were

primarily Black people. Music that is considered underground today was more widely

listened to by Black people (and others who listened to Hip-hop). Radio stations that

targeted Black audiences played a diverse selection of Hip-hop music. Politically

conscious music received airtime, as did music that focused on battling for lyrical

superiority. This music greatly influenced me, as I saw the music as representing truths

about systemic oppression, as well as encouraging Black people to educate themselves to

better combat hegemony. (And, I admittedly was easily entertained by the rappers who

simply put together complex lyrics – they were and still are poets in my eyes.)

As I watch and listen to the current mainstream Hip-hop discourse, it saddens

me because, as the students articulated, it is simply messaging a destructive essentializing

discourse about what it means to be Black. These stereotypes become a commonplace

understanding for how many White people (and other people, and sometimes even certain

Black people) read and define Black people. The negative discourse also contributes to

the brainwashing of some Black youth (and even those who are older), particularly those

that lack the social and cultural capital to navigate systemic oppression, to see themselves

as nothing more than thugs and pimps and/or hoes.

Despite the current stereotypes promoted by those that control mainstream Hip-

hop, I still believe in Hip-hop. I believe in its authentic art form to politically galvanize

people, as well as its ability to make people think, laugh, and dance. Hip-hop cannot be

defined by those (meaning the elite, White, mostly male controlled media) that have

taken over the marketing and distribution of Hip-hop. Real Hip-hop still lives in the art

produced by the likes of Talib Kweli, Jedi Mind Tricks, Lupe Fiasco, Yasiin Bey (a.k.a

Mos Def), Immortal Technique, the Roots, Common, Nas, Logic, KRS-One, and others.

We must work to make "underground" Hip-hop music have a voice again in the

mainstream discourse. It is this music that will always remain a part of me, as it

represents who I am. As KRS-One rapped not that long ago:

> My intellectual battle will make your brains rattle
> I'll unwrap you and your crew from the same shackle
> I'm on many different planes like an airport
> Psychologically you be rethinkin your identity and cuttin ya hair short
> Now there's a thought, that exposes your insecurity
> You put no fear in me, I break the M from the C
> And reverse it to say "See 'em? See 'em?"
> They allow the devil to lead 'em, and they be givin up they freedom
> So, huh, gather round for the raptism
> Wake up
> When the spirit hear it the lyric long before the track get 'em
> Wake up
> I spit 'em out, gotta get 'em out, the world I never been about
> I see them glitter but their spirit's goin in and out
> We see them fading, we also see them hating
> We also see those living for musical chart ratings
> Hear what I'm stating or trading for what you're paying
> Replace fear with faith and you'll stop decaying

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68

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