

50 CENT ON THE DOLLAR: SHORTCHANGING CONTEMPORARY POPULAR  
HIP-HOP CONSUMERS THROUGH AUTHENTICATING DOMINANCE

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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HIP-HOP CONSUMERS THROUGH AUTHENTICATING DOMIONANCE

by

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Popular music often, unsuspectingly, promotes social and political inequalities and the commodification of hip-hop culture in the United States represents is one example of capitalist mechanisms that operate the country's music industries. This thesis constructs a theoretical frame around authenticity, a notion that centers on expressions of materialism and misogyny in the lyrics of contemporary, popular hip-hop music. By understanding the evolution of hip-hop from its early years, through gangsta rap, and into contemporary hip-hop, it is clear that generations represent authenticity differently. In the prior two periods of hip-hop, illumination of the urban condition by hip-hop artists was central to the expressions of power. However, today, discussion of those conditions is omitted from the lyrics of contemporary hip-hop, creating a misrepresentation of the artist's epistemic stratification in popular culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

2004 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the debut of Elvis Presley, a young southerner whose vibrant style—a combination of ‘country-western’ and ‘R&B (rhythm and blues)—and infectious demeanor ushered a revolution into the hearts and wallets of teenagers across the country (Weinstein, 105–06). Presley single-handedly conventionalized the ‘rock’n’roll’ culture, a culture that has been embraced by adolescents every generation since. Today, popular culture continues to provide a stage for voice(s)? of dissent against the dominant culture. The multitude of genres only grow as segments of society search for more ways to express their unique values. Perhaps more important than the political/cultural messages embedded in the texts of popular music genres is the appeal popular music has to its consumers, the majority of which are in their teens and early twenties.

Popular music, like any cultural text, often represents social and political inequalities through conventionally acceptable modes (for example, Toby Keith’s “Taliban Song”, an anti-Taliban tune produced in the country music genre). However, it is clear that particular genres of popular music highlight certain issues that are pertinent to specific groups of listeners, and this includes the listeners who identify with particular genres that express racial or ethnic values. More importantly, the values that served as the catalysts for the creation of music in the countercultures—cultures that do not adhere to nor promote the values of dominant ‘American’ values—have now been commercialized and marketed for consumption across the country, threatening the ‘purity’ of such values that have linked youth countercultures and popular rock and hip-hop since before World War II.

Popular music embodies the spirit of those who produce the art and those who consume it—whether through radio airwaves, at a live concert, or from downloadable music files on an mp3 player. For many in the United States, the study of popular music coincides with cultural examinations of American youth or serves as a mechanism to criticize capitalist entrepreneurship. Popular music provides a channel for cultural values, whether through trends in fashion or calls to political activism. In fact, the study of popular music is largely political; politics and popular music are often paired in the public arena. Politics in music often manifests in disputes between contractual rights or free speech issues that arise due to an artist's sense of expression. In this case, popular music will be considered as the mechanism through which musicians express overt social and cultural values in relation to those consumers who identify with them. For this study, popular music will be evaluated on its ability to narrate cultural values associated with youth, rebellion, and identification against dominant society.

A vast number of the genres fall under the umbrella of popular music, despite each encompassing sounds, images, and values that vary tremendously. Since the mid-twentieth century, so many genres, and subgenres, have appeared that it is difficult now to enumerate them all; so many subdivisions of musical genres exist that it often becomes difficult to distinguish one from so many others. What is characteristic of popular music across genres is the transmission of meaning, or as Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert (1991) call it, the “interactive relations among musicians, audiences, and the layers of social context within which they live” (Robinson, et al, p. 13). They argue that the production and circulation of meaning in popular music today is influenced by ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ factors. These factors shape both the influences that culminate in the performance, or



recording, of the text by the musician and the interpretation the listener of the text creates in relation to his or her cultural, social, or political values.

For Robinson, et al. (1991), ‘macro factors’ were largely examined through two aspects: historical influences and sociopolitical influences. In terms of historical constraints placed on the production of music, much of what constitutes the tactical aspect of musicianship is time-oriented. For example, rhythms and styles that were essential to music in all generations across all ethnicities have contributed to the evolution of popular music in today’s world. In other words, much of the music that is considered popular incorporates dated musical techniques with current trends to produce the sounds for the next generations. ‘Macro’ factors also include sociopolitical constraints, which Robinson, et al, argue, happens through internationally and nationally. Internationally, it is indisputable that Western-based globalization contributes to every country’s creation/distribution of popular music. With the domination of market capitalism (perhaps not invented by Americans, but arguably perfected by them) in global economics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the distribution of music occurs through globally competitive media conglomerates. Thus, true expression to large audiences becomes difficult if it is not within the ideological scope the industry ‘core.’

On the ‘micro’ level of factors contributing to the creation of meaning, more immediate influences contribute to the musician’s production of cultural texts. Construction of ideological values emerges largely in relation to “social roles, conventions and norms that we call ‘demographics’—a host of relationships constrained by class, religion, and ethnicity” (Robinson et al., 1991, p. 13). In terms of popular music in the United States, ‘micro’ factors include socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic

identification, proximity to international borders, and a host of several other factors that dictate the daily routines of citizens. These restraints often include the ‘business’ side of popular music, where musicians by the dozen vie for a record contract, often at the expense of other hopeful musicians. Additionally, expectations are often lofty for potential musicians, creating a cycle of brief success for bands who fail to maintain commercial success. Geographical restraints also restrict certain musicians from ‘small-market’ cities to aspire to national success and often get lost in the competitive markets in major cities, such as New York City, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Seattle—each of which, in its own right, contributes to the construction of meaning in music. Musicians will then create a text encoded with the cultural, political, and social values that have constructed his or her perceptions; and, through the channels mentioned before (radio, compact disc, etc.), will transmit tangible meaning to listeners in a particular market.

Popular music is such that it is often interpreted passively, as it has largely become customary to encounter it in television shows, restaurants, shopping malls, commercials, and strewn through popular films (popular again referring to the commercial success rather than the highly admired). Therefore, the casual listener of music must be segregated from the ‘fan’ of a particular genre of popular music. Hills (2002) argues that fandom be recognized in its contributing role to knowledge in academia; the immersed fan is able to access some areas that scholars may not. Popularly, music has been categorized as many consumers see it marketed in record stores, divided nicely into rows and columns, organized alphabetically, so a follower of a certain band or genre may easily access their music. Often, the result is the creation of the fad, a way for fans of particular artists of genres to identify with the musicians they adore, while

asserting their ‘individuality’ in opposition to the dominant culture. One example of this, as Deena Weinstein (1999), contributing author of *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Bruce Horner & Thomas Swiss, eds.), cleverly observes, maybe the ‘thrift-store living-on-the-street look’ popularized by the popular grunge band that emerged from the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s. The homemade shorts and flannel shirts worn by Eddie Vedder (lead vocalist for Pearl Jam), Chris Cornell (then lead vocalist and guitarist for Soundgarden), and Kurt Cobain (former lead vocalist and lead guitarist for Nirvana) were staples of the ‘grunge’ scene, and were soon marketed in local apparel outlets and fashion magazines with hefty price tags. It turns out the musicians and record labels were not the only ones profiting from the successful establishment of a popular counterculture.

It seems that the commodification of hip-hop culture in the United States represents the larger capitalist mechanism that operates in the country. The flow of media in the 20<sup>th</sup>, and now 21<sup>st</sup> century has limited the widespread distribution of values that conflict with the values of the dominant culture. As cultural artifacts, texts that originated out of the subversion by the dominant culture observed the cultural conditions that embody minority groups across the country, whether racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, or otherwise. However, popular success in the United State is dictated through sales, meaning national distribution is only attainable through submission to corporate agents. If the message is ‘rage,’ then the ‘machine’ is the one who profits the most from the popularization of the trend. Shuker (2001) writes that “against the interplay with authentic genres can be placed a tradition of artifice, with surface images and transitory sounds predominant” (p.149). It has been said that youth is wasted on the young; however, in this case, youth is marketed to the young, sold for a significant price,

only to be redefined some weeks later, where it again will be marketed, packaged, and sold.

PREVIEW

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship that musicians and their fans maintain is quite unique. The interaction between the two groups allows for influence to ebb and flow from artist to consumer and back, providing record labels ideal markets for widespread consumption (Perry, 197). In 1981, Music Television (MTV) was founded in the United States, and “immediately had an impact on popular music, visual style, and culture” (Jones, 2005, p. 83). Most importantly, MTV offered widespread distribution of music videos in the United States, which further perpetuated the images of contemporary popular musicians into the mainstream—further allowing musicians, with certain censorship, to depict cultural realities for pre-teen, suburban youth to consume at startling rates (Shuker, 168–171; Jones, 83–85). Like most cultural texts, the product of the musicians’ experiences largely reflects the social and cultural environment from which the artist produced the music (Robinson, et al, 13–15).

This chapter presents a review of the literature related to the relevant scholarly contributions describing the emergence of hip-hop out of social and cultural subordination. The chapter will then present a review of literature used to construct the theoretical frame of authenticity, a notion that centers on expressions of materialism and misogyny in the lyrics of contemporary, popular hip-hop music. Popular music’s emergence as a marketing giant has changed the reputability of the art form; heavy metal bands that are expressing their ‘rage against’ the mass consumerism and capitalist stagnation of the United States, otherwise known as ‘the machine,’ are at the mercy of the networks of communication conglomerates to distribute their products. This paradox is often at the center of criticism for popular music scholars (Robinson, et al, 1991; Perry,

2004; Shuker 2001) Popular music, more specifically rock and rap music, has become commodity, with a very high demand and very low cost of production (Robinson, et al., 46), and as long as ‘Anglo-American’ popular music dominates as the largest article of trade culturally from the United States and Britain, (Robinson, et al., 49), the commodification of such cultural texts will continue. Hip-hop represents a truly American genre, born and raised in the United States; and as perhaps the first uniquely American genre, it should be scrutinized to demonstrate the values of American culture with relation to its ethnic and social subcultures.

### History

Historically, hip-hop can be divided into three periods: *early hip-hop*, which lies between hip-hop’s conception—scholars will place this date between 1977 and 1978—and Run DMC’s mainstream debut; *gangsta rap*, which constitutes the years from 1986-1996 when the popular artists like NWA, Public Enemy, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G (Christopher Wallace) were the celebrated norm in hip-hop; and *modern hip-hop*, which marks the years after the deaths of Shakur and Wallace. Hip-hop culture is constantly changing. In the short time that the genre has been around—nearly 30 years—many styles and themes have come and gone. However, by understanding the significance of perhaps the two most significant events in hip-hop culture since, it becomes clear that its evolution from resistance to complacency is due in large part to the social and economic factors that have shaped the genre.

#### *Early hip-hop*

The origins of hip-hop, often called rap music, can be traced to the Bronx, New York, in the late 1970s, coinciding with a feverous ‘anti-disco’ movement around the