

THE RELEVANCE OF REAL:
HOW AVID FANS DETERMINE AND VALUE AUTHENTICITY IN RAP MUSIC

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Sociology

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the

Master's Degree

By Erian J. Aquil

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ABSTRACT

Authenticity in rap music holds historical importance in hip hop culture. Low-income blacks in New York City used rap music to express their feelings about and bring awareness to issues in their communities. Rap music is no longer as closely tied to its origins, but authenticity remains a valuable part of these expressions. Though researchers acknowledge rap music has changed, they use historical markers to identify what is authentic in rap music and rarely investigate how fans understand authenticity today. In-depth interviews with eighteen avid rap fans illustrate new ways fans determine authenticity in rap music. Borrowing from Swidler's (1986) "cultural tool kit," this study shows how fans draw from their personal toolkits to determine authenticity. Specifically, fans determine authenticity based on whether they believe an artist is telling stories about personal lived experiences, whether they can relate to an artist's lyrics, and/or whether an artist shows vulnerability in some way. Conversely, fans consider lyrics inauthentic when a rapper tells exaggerated stories that do not seem plausible. While fans value music that fits with their own socially constructed understandings of authenticity, this study also reveals that authenticity is not always necessary to draw them to the genre. Given rap music's current popularity, this research shows the importance of authenticity for cultural consumption and opens avenues to explore further what draws the most avid fans.

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THE RELEVANCE OF REAL: HOW AVID FANS DETERMINE AND VALUE AUTHENTICITY IN RAP MUSIC

Authenticity has been relevant in rap music since its emergence (Boyd 2003; Harkness 2011; Maxwell 1991; McLeod 1999). Rap music arose in the 1970s from blacks in the ghettos of New York City and artists used the platform to speak about their lived experiences. Rappers were simply telling stories of their own situations in their music and very rarely were these recounts debated (Rose 2008). Consequently, researchers often identify “real rap” as it relates to its origins. The closer rap music content is to its origin, the more likely fans consider it authentic. Today, rap music has become more widespread. It is now the most popular genre of music in the United States (McIntyre 2017) and has distanced itself from its historical roots. Rappers come from various parts of the country and different socioeconomic backgrounds and in turn cover a variety of topics in their music.

While sociologists claim authenticity is socially constructed and particularly difficult to define (Bennett 2001; Peterson 2005; Williams 2007) and cultural objects are open to the interpretation of the consumer (Harrison 2008; Peterson 2005), scholars who study authenticity in rap music rarely take this into account. This research takes into consideration the socially constructed nature of cultural artifacts and aims to identify what avid fans currently determine is authentic, or what is genuine or real, in rap music and how they come to this decision. Using interview data from eighteen avid rap fans, I borrow from Ann Swidler’s (1986) concept of the “cultural tool kit” to explain how fans pull from their own tool kits to identify authenticity in rap music. Additionally, these data reveal the wavering relevance of authenticity in avid fans’ consumption of rap music and suggest the genre’s popularity be examined from other angles.

HISTORY

Historically, African American young adults created and consumed rap music and this remains the same today (Kitwana 2002). In the early 1970s in Bronx, New York, minority youth formed hip hop culture, which encompassed different forms of expression including graffiti, MCing, DJing, and b-boying (Dyson 1993, 2007; Forman 2004; Price 2006; Rose 1994). As these different forms of hip hop culture rose and fell, MCing managed to maintain its relevance throughout the years. MCing originally consisted only of introducing performers at events, entertaining the crowd, and keeping the show moving (Hip Hop Area 2008). Throughout the 1970s and 80s, MCing became a popular way for rappers to tell their stories over music and as hip hop culture developed, this came to be known as rap music (Edwards 2009). Rap music became synonymous with hip hop and is currently the most prominent form of expression in this culture.

Hip hop culture “emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished” (Rose 1994:34). Youth used this culture to express themselves and their feelings toward things that happened in their community that were usually out of their control. For example, in 1968 a significant change took place in the Bronx as many houses were torn down to make way for new buildings to house middle-class families (Price 2006). Many of the people were forced to leave their homes and then fell into poverty. Hip hop culture was one of the ways these individuals in New York were able to convey how they felt about gentrification in their neighborhoods. Rappers also used the music to express how they felt about their communities in efforts to shine a light on the plight of drug addiction and police violence around them (Dyson 1993). Mainstream media tended to shy away from these problems in low-income black communities,

so rap music was a way to get the message out (Rose 1994). Rap artists used music to bring attention to the problems they saw around them and fans supported this expression because they agreed with the content of the artists' lyrics.

AUTHENTICITY

Hip hop academics often identify authenticity in rap music by its ties to its history. Since it stemmed from the expression of minorities, it was nearly impossible for these early recordings to be viewed as inauthentic (Perry 2004; Quinn 2005). Williams (2011) identifies 1970s rap as the purest form and uses the term "historical authenticity" to describe how current rap artists "borrow from the 'old school' as representative of a historically authentic hip-hop identity" (p. 135). Artists borrow from the "old school" by focusing on their environments and the struggles they face and put those experiences into their music. Recounting experiences of growing up in low-income communities is a key component of older rap music (Kubrin 2005; Orange 1996).

For example, public outcry occurred in the 1990s alongside the creation of many new laws and initiatives that were detrimental to lower income community members (Kitwana 2002). In 1992, the Bush administration created the Violence Initiative. This initiative funded studies to discover if there were any behavioral or biological markers that could help predict propensity for violence among males. Some felt as though this initiative targeted mostly young black males and aimed to "prove" that they are biologically more prone to violence than whites (Kitwana 2002). The Clinton administration created legislation to fund the prison industry and increase the punishment for minor drug crimes. During this time, many artists released songs that encouraged retaliation against the government and police and demanded that those in power do something to combat the issues within minority communities. Public Enemy's hit song "Fight the Power,"

focuses on this sense of community and uprising with lyrics like: “Got to give us what we want / Got to give us what we need / Our freedom of speech is freedom or death / We got to fight the powers that be / Lemme hear you say fight the power.” The members of Public Enemy used rap music to express how they felt. As a result, fans deem these recounts authentic as the lyrics underscored the presence of racial tensions in their communities.

Researchers further support this historical measure of authenticity by emphasizing ties to the black community. Tricia Rose (1994, 2008) writes extensively about hip hop and its relevance to this minority group. It is a common claim of rappers that they are just keeping it real. She states, “the notion of keeping it real is about both representing a particular black ghetto street life and being truthful about one’s relationship to that life” (2008:136). Rap music has historical ties to “black ghetto street life” and in order to “keep it real,” rappers tell stories about their connections to this life. Rose also posits rap music, from the outset, “articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” and is a “black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices” (1994:2). From this viewpoint, rap artists speak from their own personal experiences and those experiences are confirmed by their racial background. Since rap music is a product of black culture, researchers also tie authenticity to this historical racial measure (Bennett 2001). Being authentic is an important characteristic of a rapper and race plays a significant role in adding to that authenticity (McLeod 1999).

Rappers also confirm this historical view of authenticity. A quick internet search for the terms “real” or “authentic” in rap lyrics returns thousands of hits. These hits often evoke descriptions of street life and ties to black culture. Tupac’s “Ambitionz Az A Ridah” showcases this clearly. Arguably one of his most popular pieces, Tupac recounts his experiences as a young black man from a low-income area. He states his lyrics are what “really goes on in the mind of a

nigga” and claims his “history will prove authentic.” As an older rap artist, Tupac follows in the footsteps of rappers who proceeded him with this song. From this viewpoint, when rap artists bring in that which is common to older rap music, authenticity surfaces.

At the same time, sociologists maintain that authenticity is a socially constructed concept. It is dependent upon what cultural object is being evaluated and who is conducting the evaluation (Harrison 2008; Morgan and Warren 2010; Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2009). Harrison (2008) explains:

Authenticity, which is always constituted through the social institutions people participate within, demands that a person, performance, or object conforms to the set of socially agreed-upon authentic standards. Authenticity is never an organic quality naturally found in things; it is rather a ‘claim that is made’ which is either ‘accepted or rejected’. In this sense, authenticity aims to strike an agreement between the presentation of something or someone (as authentic) and the reception or acceptance of that presentation. (In-text citations removed, p.1785)

Tanner and colleagues support this view and argue rap music “works differently for different groups of fans” (2009:711). Consumption of cultural products is an active process. This process involves meaning making from the consumer. Cultural items may have a meaning intended by the producer, but it is not guaranteed each consumer will adopt this intended meaning. The social location and experiences of listeners influence how they determine authenticity. Similarly, Jeffries (2011) argues black rap fans tend to find more significance in the racial context of rap music than whites do, thus influencing how they determine what is authentic.

Peterson’s (2005) work on country music further illustrates the social construction of authenticity. As supported by the historical perspective of hip hop academics, he found country music fans come to a definition of authenticity by comparing country music to what was done in the past. He also found that there were fans who did not agree with using this comparison to

determine authenticity. Instead, they felt that what was real in country music was solely based on their own understandings of country music.

As time progresses and rap music continues to gain popularity, authenticity has the potential to move past historical understandings. The meaning a cultural object has for a person can override other possible meanings that object may have (Zerubavel 1997). It is no longer viable to focus on authenticity in rap music the same way, and research is needed to uncover other ways cultural consumers determine and value authenticity. Consumption of cultural products is an active process (Morgan and Warren 2010). This process involves continuous meaning making from the consumer. From this viewpoint, consumers take a cultural product and make their own decisions about the relevance of this object. Rap music fans may understand authenticity from a historical vantage point, but they may also construct their own understandings of authenticity in rap music. In this way, Ann Swidler's (1986) cultural tool kit is useful in understanding how fans determine and value authenticity in rap music today.

SWIDLER'S CULTURAL TOOL KIT

Swidler (1986) argues people "use" culture in different ways depending on the situation they are in. This theory "offers an image of culture as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" and focuses on strategies of action (p. 273). Culture does not simply dictate the decisions people will make. Instead, people use varying elements of their understanding of culture to inform their decision-making.

In her study of love among married and divorced couples, Swidler (2001) provides insight into how her respondents use their tool kits to make decisions about what love is and

what it is not. She maintains that the tools a person uses to make sense of love do not need a “coherent rationale;” instead, it is a “patchwork of the cultural accounts on which one can draw” (Swidler 2001:27). She finds that even though people have varying opinions about what love is, they each draw from a repertoire of cultural resources to make sense of what they are dealing with. Additionally, she finds that some of her respondents were able to explain in better detail why they felt and understood love the way they do. Also, even if two people share the same view of love, they differ in how much emphasis they put on particular aspects of the concept.

Much like love, rap music is open to interpretation. As rap music no longer solely comes from a certain group of people in a certain area of the United States, this study explores the ways avid rap fans determine and value authenticity in rap music. Swidler’s cultural tool kit is useful in understanding how avid rap music fans determine and value authenticity in rap music.

Prinsky and Rosenbaum (1987) note that social scientists and academics conduct a significant portion of rap music analyses and rarely take into consideration how consumers interpret the very lyrics they seek to understand. While seeking to understand rap music’s lyrical content, academics tend to conduct content analyses from their own viewpoints (Kubrin 2005; Perry 2004). When researchers do expand their studies to include consumers’ perspectives of rap music, they often use quantitative methods (Martino et. al 2006; Peterson et. al 2007; Tanner et. al 2009; Wingwood et. al 2003). Close-ended survey instruments constrain the consumer to the researcher’s questions and do not allow participants to freely express themselves in their responses. To capture nuanced understandings of rap music’s meanings in everyday lives, researchers must turn to qualitative methods.

In light of historical measures of authenticity and evidence that supports the social construction of authenticity, my research addresses two questions: How do avid rap fans

determine authenticity in rap music? What is the role of authenticity in their consumption of rap music? I argue that avid rap fans use their cultural tool kits and pull from their own experiences and value systems to arrive at determinations of what is authentic in the music they consume. While devoted fans express appreciation toward artists and lyrics they feel are authentic, they also decide how much relevance these genuine recounts have for their consumption.

METHODS

Data Collection

To understand how avid rap music fans determine and evaluate authenticity in rap music, I interviewed eighteen individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 who identified as African American and consider themselves avid rap music fans. Avid rap music fans listen to rap music every day for multiple hours a day, attend rap music concerts, and follow their favorite rap artists' careers very closely. To recruit participants, I posted institutional review board (IRB) approved flyers on the University of Houston's main campus and on three social media sites: Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. These social media sites are popular among people who consider themselves technologically savvy.

The way music fans consume music has shifted dramatically over the past few years. Today, music fans, especially the participants in this study, mostly procure music from the artists they like through various streaming music sites and other websites like YouTube and blogs (Sanneh 2007). I received a high response from the social media postings, but very few from my college campus flyers. To recruit more participants, I used snowball sampling. Many of the participants knew and recommended others who fit the qualifications of the study. I contacted them via phone or email after being given their information and asked a couple of screening

questions before scheduling their interview to ensure they fit the inclusion criteria. Each participant consented to the interview and agreed to be audio recorded. I obtained both written and verbal consent using a form that was also approved by the University of Houston's Institutional Review Board. (See Appendix A.)

My interview guide contained questions about participants' favorite rap artists and favorite rap songs, how they obtained the music they listen to, and what they thought about the artists they consistently consume. (See Appendix B.) My open-ended questions guided the conversation, but did not limit the participants to only answering specific questions. As Kvale (2007) notes, qualitative interviews seek to "cover both a factual and meaning level" and "it is necessary to listen to the explicit descriptions and to the meanings expressed, as well as to what is 'said between the lines'" (p.11). I took notes throughout each interview and made sure to write down key topics each participant discussed so I could go back and get them to elaborate if needed. I found that most participants had much to say about rap music, as each of them listen to it for multiple hours every day. The concept of authenticity in rap music inductively surfaced. This group of avid rap music fans expressed extreme interest in the realness of the rap artists they listen to.

My social positionality may have had some effect on this study. I am a young black woman who considers herself an avid rap fan. Since I fit the inclusion criteria for this study, my participants may have been more open with me about their thoughts on rap music than they would have been with someone who did not fit the demographics of the study. I consider this an advantage as I am very knowledgeable about rap music. As a result, I was able to develop rapport with each participant. The participants felt very comfortable speaking with me as a peer and fellow avid rap fan. I made efforts to ensure participants clarified any terms I was not

familiar with or brought up something about a rapper I did not know. I aimed to understand meaning, so getting clarification was vital to the validity of this project.

Data Analysis

At the beginning of the data analysis process, I transcribed over half of the interviews myself. I then turned to a secure transcription service for the others. Once all of the interviews were transcribed, I loaded them into *ATLAS.ti* and began my coding process. To protect confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for each participant so they could not be identified in my project.

First, I listened to and read each interview to make sure I understood the participant's overall narrative. I then read through the notes I took during the interview. After that, I began coding the interviews. I started with in vivo codes as I was not sure what specifically I was looking for. These codes included favorite artists, songs, websites visited, listening locations, and other surface codes along those lines. After coding each interview, I then went through my code list and began grouping the codes into larger categories.

Sample Demographics

My sample consists of sixteen men and two women. The high number of men in my sample is not surprising as the rap music industry is dominated by male rap artists (on the role of gender in rap, see Rose (1994)). Moreover, a majority of rap music consumers are male (Prosper Insights & Analytics 2017). Their listening ranged from 30 minutes to 16 hours per day, with an overall average of about seven hours per day. All participants identified as black, as this was a criterion for participation. The average age was 26, ranging from 24 to 28. Four (22.2 percent) participants grew up in lower-income neighborhoods and all participants have some college

education; eleven (61.1 percent) hold bachelor's degrees and two (11.1 percent) have master's degrees. All participants are employed and six (33.3 percent) work in the music industry.

FINDINGS

How do avid rap fans determine authenticity in rap music? Participants have varying ideas about what is authentic and inauthentic in rap music, but my interviews uncovered three distinct ways avid rap fans make this determination. For a fan to identify authenticity in rap music, the rap artist must do one or more of the following: tell stories about their lived experiences, say things a fan can relate to, and/or show vulnerability in some way.

Determining Authenticity

Lived experiences. The first way fans determine authenticity is if an artist is telling stories about their lived experiences. Fans value these recounts and consider them real. Cameron (age 26, teacher) was one of the first participants to express this:

A nigga who talks about, like, 'yo, all I do is play video games and read physics books.' But, that beat slaps and niggas is going to listen to that shit. And he's a real nigga because that's what he actually does. You know what I'm saying?

Cameron feels rappers are "real" when they rap about things they actually do. Even though discussing these types of activities is very different from the historical view of authenticity, Cameron still understands this as real. He works very closely with students every weekday and knows these activities are common. He appreciates when a rapper is true to himself and does not try to talk about experiences he has not lived.

Another participant, Devin (age 27, radio host and rap artist), voices similar sentiments about one of his favorite rappers, Nipsey Hussle, a successful rapper from Los Angeles,

California. However, he supports the claims of past researchers and hip hop enthusiasts by mentioning race:

See, he talks about... Like, he really talks about himself and his past, but just about, like, growth and being smarter. Like, black ownership and just ownership period. Like, being the boss of your own thing and how to be a businessman your way. And he also talks about, like, gang shit because he's a crip. And so he talks about crip and like, he's proud of what he used to do, but he talks about getting better with it though.

Devin admires the authenticity of Nipsey. Nipsey talks about bettering himself but still brings in experiences of his troubled past. Being from Los Angeles, it is not surprising to Devin that Nipsey is affiliated with a gang. So when Nipsey brings this into his music, he identifies it as authentic. He goes on to say:

And if you listen to the story, he's really saying what he did. Like, he had started rapping and created like three, four, five businesses off of it. He had his own company. It's live. He raps about it and he tells people about it. He definitely gives a lot of game. I love it. It's meaningful music. I love it.

Devin acknowledges that what Nipsey Huddle discusses in his songs is that which he has actually experienced and done. He also believes J. Cole's content is authentic, as he does the same thing in his music:

J. Cole talks about his past a lot and, you know, he has very humble beginnings. He just talks about a story of him and it's truthful. He talks about growing up in the hood and not being, like, a hood nigga per se or a street nigga, you know what I'm saying? But, still being poor and trying to make it out and having a single mom that he lived with.

These are experiences Devin believes J. Cole has actually gone through. As one of Devin's favorite rappers, J. Cole's content falls into this same authentic category as Nipsey. Devin is an artist and radio host who works very hard to establish himself as an entertainer. He is pulling from his cultural tool kit here when discussing these two artists because he values the effort it takes to go from one place in life to the next. It is very similar to his own experiences.

Other fans in this study touch on the relevance of rappers' lived experiences. Patrick (28, sales agent) says this is why he sometimes gravitates toward a certain type of rap music:

That's another reason why I kind of like the ratchet music, because the dudes that are spitting usually come from like, I don't want to say low places, but like they had to work for everything that they did, so I understand. The fact that they are where they are now ... means that you've hustled your way up there.

When rappers come from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, they may bring that aspect of their history into their lyrics. Patrick understands some rappers have to work to get to where they are. As a sales agent, Patrick must also "hustle" to continue to live the lifestyle he desires.

Jamal (22, fitness trainer), a recent college graduate, feels that rappers' lyrics about their past experiences are authentic. He believes these recounts are more authentic than a rapper's current experiences with newly found fame. Rappers discussing "bitches, and hoes, and getting high" are not as authentic to him as "somebody telling a life story, talking about how they grew up, talking about where they grew up, talking about whether I had this on the table or not."

When asked to provide an example of an artist that does this, Jamal names 21 Savage. 21 Savage is a relatively new rapper in the game known to have lyrics about women and using drugs, but Jamal identifies more authenticity in the stories 21 Savage tells about his past and how he grew up. Jamal pulls from his cultural tool kit and decides which aspects of rap music have more value. He believes, based on his own knowledge and understanding of rap music, that although 21 Savage talks about things that he may place in the inauthentic category, how he understands his life story is enough for him to consider some of his material authentic. He is able to overlook the degrading material that is present because he really only cares about past experiences.

Fans also feel that rap artists are authentic when they talk about their relationship experiences. This can be intimate relationships with a significant other or friendships and family

ties. Chad (age 27, teacher) appreciates the way Drake, one of the highest selling rappers of all time, describes his connections and relationships. Drake talks about “more so personal interaction and relationships, not just like boyfriend/girlfriend but just like relationships with human beings throughout your life. And then the way he describes those are so authentic.” He also feels the same way about Future as “he’s painting stories of his upcoming, what he did before music, and it gives me that same vibe where the way he tells a story allows me to know that there’s truth behind it.” To Chad, both of these artists bring real situations into their music and hold top spots on his list of favorite rap artists.

Relating to lyrics and artists. Fans also determine authenticity based on the extent to which they can relate to what rappers talk about in their songs. This is connected to the first strategy of determining authenticity; fans find direct similarities with the experiences brought up in the rappers’ songs. When asked how he knows if an artist is telling a true story, Charles (age 26, salesman) responds, “I mean if you, yourself, have gone through certain experiences, then, you know just from listening to a person’s music.” It is simply experiencing what the rapper discusses in their music that allows him to understand it as authentic. Charles “just knows” because he has gone through what some of the rappers have gone through. This is how he judges authenticity and not all rappers will share his experiences. He gravitates toward rappers who have gone through similar situations. Charles draws from his own experiences and even acknowledges that some people may not identify with the same aspects of a rapper’s content as he does:

There are certain things that you can point out. If you’ve gone through the same thing then you can relate to them, but you can’t really explain that to people that haven’t gone through those things because they wouldn’t really be able to tell if that was real or authentic.

Charles posits the understanding of authenticity is different for everybody. For him, fans who have gone through the same experience as a rap artist will identify this artist as authentic because they cannot relate to things that are not real to them. In turn, they are drawn to this artist more than they would be if they did not relate. Charles began listening to Wiz Khalifa and Curren\$y at the same time and they both shared top spots on his list of favorites. Now that Wiz Khalifa has entered into the mainstream market, Charles feels the rapper has changed his lyrics to appeal to a larger audience. Consequently, he no longer relates to the experiences of Wiz Khalifa and does not listen to him as much as he once did. In this case, a rapper's authenticity is the key to continued support from a fan.

Tyler (27, rap artist) elaborates on this idea. He is a big fan of J. Cole and Nipsey Hussle. Both are very successful rappers, but he can relate more to the experiences of Nipsey than J. Cole. He "adores" both artists, but feels that he "can't relate" to both artists in the same way. Nipsey raps about situations that Tyler has experienced and to which he can directly relate:

You gotta learn survival tactics. It's either that or die. That's what they going through out there. He got people around the corner really trying to kill him. And I got the same shit, so... Not to his serious extent, it just could be my day, you know what I'm saying?

Tyler has experienced people being out to get him. Though not as "serious" as when Nipsey Hussle describes it in his music, the situation is still something he can say he has been through and identifies as real.

Tyler is also a big fan of Tupac. Tupac is one of his favorite rappers and his fandom is primarily based on how he relates directly to Tupac's experiences:

I just feel like we got so much in common because he was born in the jailhouse with a mother that was doing crack, drugs. And I was born in a halfway house with a mother that was doing crack. So, I was a crack baby as well as he was, you know what I'm saying?

Fans are drawn more to these types of artists than ones whose experiences are different.

To some fans, authenticity centers around a rapper's ability to talk about various experiences they can connect to versus only discussing a single experience. Edward (age 28, coach) spends about "half of his day" listening to rap music. He mentions Drake as one of his favorite artists. When I asked why Drake was so high on the list, he says it is because "he has a song for every situation in somebody's life or a period and a time you went through, as far as either relationship wise or either just living." For Edward, it is not possible to relate to lyrics that are not real. He voices that he cannot listen to "fantasized music" or someone "talking about nothing." Drake raps about a variety of life situations Edward feels are real. As such, this makes Drake more authentic because people experience different things throughout their lives. Edward is able to find a range of experience in Drake's lyrics that directly resonate with his own life experiences. He also feels that since Drake has such a wide variety of music, almost any fan can find something to relate to.

Vulnerability. The final way fans determine authenticity is when the rapper talks about things that many people would not feel comfortable discussing with others in their day to day lives. Cameron believes "all rappers are not honest," but "honest rappers who are vulnerable enough to tell what actually happened in their life and can convey it in a way that is relatable to people, I think they make the best music because you can be truthful in your music." This truthfulness is, for Cameron, found in a rapper's lyrical content when they rap about sensitive topics.

Brittany (age 24, software developer), a big fan of Jay-Z and Lil Wayne and one of the two female participants, describes both artists as "raw." To her, being raw is being "vulnerable and straightforward." She especially feels that Jay-Z is raw because he discusses sensitive topics like his infidelity toward his wife Beyoncé. Often times, having more than one sexual partner is

glorified in rap music. When Jay-Z discusses infidelity, he seems apologetic about being involved with women other than his wife. He presents his unfaithfulness in a very straightforward way on his latest album, 4:44, and Brittany knows or, at the very least, believes it is real. She is a big fan of Jay-Z because he discusses topics that many rappers may not be comfortable talking about.

Sometimes a rapper's life is not glamorous. They may have gone through sickness, lost a family member or close friend, or dealt with mental illness. This is not something common in rap music, so when these topics are covered, fans tend to view the rapper behind these lyrics as authentic. A big fan of Kid Cudi, Nathan (age 25, sales agent) admires how Kid Cudi talks about dealing with depression, insecurity, and feeling like he does not belong. Mental health, especially within the black community, is a difficult issue to discuss. In his mind, Nathan knows that what Kid Cudi is speaking about is real:

The reason why I fuck with him so much is because I really used to struggle with my weight. During that time period, I always felt insecure about everything. Insecure about my ability to be wanted by people, like, I feel like I was not loved by society. My freshman year of college I was literally on suicide notice. I wasn't nowhere close to acting on it, but I was like, 'man, what the fuck are we doing in this world? No one really gives a fuck about you. You only give a fuck about yourselves.' And when you listen to Kid Cudi when he first came out, he was going through that exact same shit. It wasn't about weight or anything, but it was about like... He grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and he was an artsy ass nigga in a black neighborhood. And if you know anything about black culture, you know they think artsy ass niggas are weird/gay or just different and it throws them off ... He was into theatre and shit so people used to make fun of him.

Nathan has experienced situations in his life that are sometimes hard to communicate to others immediately around him. Having an artist like Kid Cudi speak about these issues in his music leads Nathan to believe that these are real experiences. Kid Cudi raps about how he grew up and how he grappled with who he wanted to be and who society wanted him to be. This resonates

with Nathan, especially his experiences of not being “loved” by society. Kid Cudi’s lyrics helped him deal with a difficult time in his life because he was going through the “exact same” situation.

Inauthenticity

Conversely, fans express they feel an artist is producing inauthentic material when they tell untruthful stories. They make this determination when the artist exaggerates in their lyrics and shows that the story is not plausible. This is also amplified when the stories are redundant throughout the artist’s discography. Although rap music is art to all of these fans, if the rapper takes it too far, they tend to think those lyrics are not real. Cody (age 28, social worker), a rapper himself from Houston, Texas, describes it this way:

Like, a lot of people talk about being in the trap and selling this and selling that. When, like, in all reality that’s not a large variety of people. Like, not everybody is out here seeing kilos of drugs and selling drugs and shooting people and killing people. Like, that’s just not something you run across every day. Even in the worst parts of the neighborhoods, you don’t see that kind of shit. So, I think people glorify a certain street life that they don’t necessarily live.

Rappers can certainly sell drugs and murder their opponents, but when they exaggerate it does not come off as something that could have really taken place. Cody will not listen to rappers who overstate what they have experienced. He prefers to listen to rappers like Meek Mill and Chance the Rapper who, to him, never talk about that which they have not gone through and certainly do not amplify them. Alex (age 27), also a local rapper, expresses similar sentiments:

How many people you killed in this song? Like are you all really killing day to day like that? You all selling that much dope on all these songs, and you all ain’t going to jail and shit? Like, people be lying all the time.

Darius (27, salesman) too touches on this idea when asked what would qualify as making something in a rapper’s lyrical content real. Although he was not able to say what actually makes a song “real,” he was able to speak to what would make it inauthentic. He determines authenticity based on “what they talk about and what they say. Like, if he’s talking about man, I

done killed five people yesterday and got away with it... There's no way." Eric (age 28, rap artist) feels the same way:

But if a nigga only shot one person in his life, he's going to talk about shooting people for as long as he's rapping. Even though he only ever shot that one [person]. You gotta think about the shit sometimes, like, man, these niggas be having a thousand songs. Like, how many shootings did you really do, bro? Like, you're not a serial killer.

A rapper can only talk about violence and selling drugs so many times before the recounts start to sound implausible. This is also shown when rappers talk about using various drugs in their lyrics. As Edward describes it:

You have guys who affect the youth and have them doing all these different crazy drugs that they talk about in their music, and you got kids trying it, or people actually trying these drugs and it's not working for them how they think that it's working for this artist that may have talked about it over a song.

I asked Edward if he felt rap artists really did drugs or if they were just talking about them. He responds, "they just talking about it, and that's just the art of the music, the art of hip hop. It's putting a story together and putting something on wax." To Edward, rap music is art. The line between real life and art is often blurred and he feels that sometimes fans are not able to make this determination. Ultimately, Edward feels like this description of extreme drug use is inauthentic and artists should not do this. Though it does not take away from how much he enjoys these types of songs, these recounts of heavy drug consumption are still implausible in his eyes and should only be understood as the artistic expression of the artist.

Assessing Inauthenticity

In my conversations with participants I also asked them how they were able to determine if a rap artist was being untruthful in their lyrics. Sometimes, they were better able to describe how they determine fabrication in rap music than explaining explicitly what makes an artist's lyrics real. Nevertheless, my interviews point to two ways fans determine if an artist is lying in

their songs. The first involves merely trusting the artist. The other is looking at their social media postings and videos to get an inside look into an artist's life.

Trusting the artist. One of the main ways fans make determinations about inauthenticity is by simply trusting the artist. Patrick says that he would just “like to think that [an artist] is authentic.” It is a combination of their own experiences and who they know the rapper to be. Eric feels “you can tell in the instance of the artist. Like, when you listen to Gucci and Young Jeezy, you know they was doing the shit that they’re talking about.” He feels as though he knows what to expect from artists like Gucci Mane and Young Jeezy, both southern rappers that talk about how they grew up and made it out of their old ways of living. He has come to expect this from them and simply believes them.

Another artist, Meek Mill, has been to jail for numerous crimes and often talks about these experiences in his music. Because of this, Devin automatically believes what Meek Mill is saying in his music is true. “Meek Mill is that guy. I just believe him. He’s believable and I feel him. I just feel everything about... Like, when he delivers I don’t think it’s fake or he’s trying to sugar coat anything.” Other fans feel the same way. They believe they know who an artist is and therefore believe what the artist is saying in their lyrics. Caleb (age 26, social worker and music producer) finds sincerity in Joey Badass’ lyrics based on the message he conveys:

He just grabs my attention because he don’t sound like nobody, and you can tell that he puts a lot of time into what he's saying, and you can hear that he’s intelligent. You can start to get a vibe for people before you even ... Like if you sound sincere with the stuff you're saying.

When I asked him to elaborate on how he is able to trust an artist, he says:

I can only say I appreciate when someone can deliver a message. I feel like rapping is an art form, so when someone can use their words to carry a song and ... I don’t know. You know the difference between when somebody’s rapping or just ... I don’t know. It’s weird. It’s hard to put in words.

It is difficult for Caleb to pinpoint exactly why he is able to trust certain artists. It is just something he feels he can determine at his own will. Fans are often not able to tell if a rapper is being authentic or not if they are not familiar with them. Because of this, they gravitate toward artists to which they are accustomed to listening.

Evaluations using social media. Almost every rap artist has a social media page of some sort. Whether it is Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter, rap fans are able to access their favorite artists on these sites and “fact check” them in some way. If they are in doubt about the authenticity of a rapper’s lyrics, they are able to compare their claims to what they see the artist displaying on their personal pages. If the lyrical content does not match what they see, they are then able to make the determination about truthfulness in their rhymes and decide if they want to listen to that artist. Samuel (age 26, DJ), was one the first participants to address using social media as a tool for evaluating a rapper’s lyrical content:

We know celebrities’ businesses. We know what they’re doing. We know the people they’re hanging around with. We know where they’re doing it. We know how they live. And so, that’s really all it is. There’s a lot of people out there rapping and when I look at their lives and look at their rapping, it doesn’t add up.

Rappers can expose themselves through their social media. So if this presentation does not match what they rap about, for some fans it is evidence that a rapper’s lyrics are not real. Cameron feels the same way. He is conscious of how things are different today than they used to be. Rap fans were not always able to have an inside look at a rapper’s life:

I also think that we live in a world now where we’re able to have more access towards these stars and these stars are giving us a more in-depth look in their life. So, stars who have Snapchat or Instagram or Twitter and they’re able to directly tell us how they’re feeling or what they’re doing, those movements can also tell you what’s going on.

He knows he can look into the lives of almost any celebrity he wants. When I spoke with Eric I asked him if social media play a part in how he is able to “fact check” rap artists. He responds:

Hell yeah! As soon as some shit pop off, they're going to upload your whole high school, middle school yearbook pictures, all of that shit. So, people are going to see everything about you. That's why I was saying, it's best not to even lie because somebody knows your ass. Somebody know you. So, you might as well just tell it yourself.

For Eric, artists should be wary of rapping about experiences they have not in fact gone through because social media sites could potentially expose these lyrics as disingenuous. Plies was once a very popular rapper. He often rapped about his criminal past, but was eventually exposed as a fraud when information surfaced on social media that revealed he was telling the stories of a family member. As a result, Plies lost the respect of many of his fans and his sales plummeted.

The Relevance of Authenticity

What is the role of authenticity in fans' consumption of rap music? While the avid rap fans I interviewed were eager to discuss authenticity, they also expressed that they often ignore the presence of authenticity in rap music. Sometimes they enjoy rap because of the way it sounds. Authenticity does not always matter, as long as the music is pleasing to their ears. In other words, rap music can be pleasing to the fans' ears despite them not identifying the lyrics as real. Authenticity comes into play only sometimes with certain types of rap music and artists and only at certain times. Though some fans are very conscious about what they are consuming and weed out that which they feel is fake, often they still enjoy music from artists who do not fit their understandings of authenticity.

For example, Eric says he listens to rap music for its sound. He does not always have to feel what the rapper is saying; this is simply a bonus:

I listen to it just for the quality. To see if it's going to be pleasing to my ears first, and then if I do relate to it after I hear the song, then that's just a plus for me. I don't always have to relate to it.

Edward feels the same way: "If it's catchable. If it's a catchy song, a catchy beat to it, it's gonna gravitate and it's gonna become popular. That's a part of the culture of rap and hip hop."

Brittany places Lil Wayne alongside Jay-Z at the top of her favorite rapper list. Though she feels Lil Wayne often tells real stories in his music, sometimes she feels he does not. When asked what Lil Wayne talks about in his music, she laughs and says:

It can go from a lot of nothing to something real deep. Like, he can be rhyming, you know, 'bed and head' or he might be talking about his upbringing and how he was selling drugs and all this different kind of stuff like that.

Brittany values the authenticity in some of Lil Wayne's music, but all of his songs do not fall into this category and, for her, they don't have to. I asked what she considered "nothing." She responds, "like he's rhyming, but there's like no message. He's on the beat. It sounds good, you know? You can jam it in the car." For her, in certain situations, the authentic material is not always relevant because his music is sonically pleasing and suitable for the situation she is in.

When Samuel listens to some of his favorite artists, like Kendrick Lamar, he is not always searching for good lyrics. Instead, "when I listen to music, I just like good sounds. I listen to sounds more than I listen to words, honestly." He "likes rap music a lot," but he finds himself primarily listening for the beat and melody, disregarding the presence of any authentic recounts.

Grace (age 26, behavior analyst), one of the two female participants, voices that she analyzes and values lyrical content, but also just "enjoys the music itself ... like, the beat." Alex, says that he listens for lyrics, but he also listens for the sound. It just "depends on who he is listening to." Rap music fans know that some artists are not going to always give them authentic material. Instead, they see rap music as an art form that consists of both lyrics and instrumentation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows how avid rap fans determine and value authenticity in rap music. Fans draw from their “cultural tool kits” to determine if an artist’s music and the artist him or herself are authentic. They draw on their own accounts of their lives to say when rap music lyrics are real. Avid rap fans draw on several strategies to determine authenticity in rap music. The first involves a rapper’s lived experiences. Fans maintain that they know when an artist is discussing things they have actually been through and, in their view, only real life experiences are authentic. Second, authenticity is contingent upon whether a fan can relate to a rapper’s experiences. In this way, rap music can be seen as a “(re)affirmation of one’s identity” (Sullivan 2003:66). It is confirmation that they are sharing the same experiences as others. When a fan relates to what they are hearing, they tend to consider that material authentic. When these experiences directly match with those of the fan, it also helps to validate authenticity. Lastly, fans consider a rap artist authentic when the artist communicates sensitive topics that the fan deems vulnerable. Since this is uncommon for many rappers, fans value vulnerability and see it as something real.

Fans also use tools to understand what is not real in rap music. When evidence of exaggeration or implausibility come into play, they are able to discount the artist and his or her works. Fans view stories of violence and drug selling as untrue when rappers talk about it continuously in their music. These are common themes in rap music and can be viewed as authentic recounts by some, but when they are repeatedly brought up, fans begin to doubt their authenticity.

The way fans make determinations of authenticity cannot be objectively measured. Instead, these findings suggest that fans draw from their own experiences and knowledge to make decisions about what is real or not in rap, thereby supporting a social constructionist

viewpoint of authenticity (Peterson 2005; Williams 2007). Fans rely on their trust of the artist and also use social media to make determinations about the authenticity of an artist's materials. This matters for the fan because often when they are actively listening, they want to hear lyrics that are real. They want to hear authentic lyrics to help them decide how to navigate through different situations they may be going through. Authentic rap music in part allows fans to make sense of their everyday lives, to make decisions about life's challenges, and to know they are not alone in their experiences.

Avid rap fans appreciate authenticity in rap music, but in certain settings and times contingent upon their mood, authenticity does not always matter. As avid rap fans, these listeners understand rap music to be art and, as such, the sounds alone are of main interest. Though they enjoy lyrics that are authentic, the absence of these lyrics does not always deter them from listening. If a fan is in a certain mood or at a certain location, authenticity is sometimes never considered.

In sum, fans draw from their "cultural tool kits" to make determinations about rap music. Although this research locates themes illustrating three ways participants assess authenticity and two ways they understand inauthentic material, participants grounded these strategies in their life experiences and social location. Sometimes a fan considers an experience real because he or she grew up in a similar circumstance a rapper grew up. For another fan, he or she may find comfort in knowing a rapper has dealt with particularly sensitive issues and gotten through them.

This study highlights the importance of investing future effort toward understanding rap music fans. Researchers have concluded the way black listeners value rap music is different from that of their white counterparts (Jeffries 2011). Thus, while this study speaks to how young black avid fans understand authenticity in rap music, it would be useful to explore how avid fans of

other racial and ethnic backgrounds understand this concept. Additionally, women comprise a small but important portion of the rap music artist and fan base (Rose 2008). This study only includes the insight of two female participants and a female rap artist was only mentioned once (by a female participant). Future research efforts should endeavor to uncover how women view authenticity in rap music, the role it plays in their consumption, and how female rappers fit into these understandings. Moreover, this study looks into consumers' understandings of rap music artists and their lyrics specifically. Music videos are another component of rap music and it would be insightful to look into how visuals may influence a fan's understanding of what is real in the music.

Authenticity is socially constructed. Avid rap fans take what they know about rap music, as well as their own life experiences, to decide if the material is real or not. They pull from their own tools to understand authenticity. They believe their favorite artists mostly produce authentic material and this is what makes the artist high on their lists. Still, when authenticity is not present, only sometimes does it take away from a fan's experience. Avid rap fans help keep rap artists popular. Rap music fans are active meaning makers with agency, not cultural dupes who have little or no say in how they interpret cultural artifacts. If critics want to understand why consumers follow certain rap artists and help keep them on the top of the charts, they must turn to consumers as savvy cultural negotiators.

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Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Title of research study: Meaning Making in Rap Music Among Avid Fans

You are being invited to take part in a research project conducted by **Erian Aquil**, Master's candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Houston. This research is a part of the MA thesis and being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Samantha Kwan, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Houston.

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We invite you to take part in a research study because the investigator is interested in exploring how young African American adults, ages 18 to 30, who consider themselves avid rap music fans make sense of rap music.

What should I know about a research study?

Someone will explain this research study to you.

Whether or not you take part is up to you.

You can choose not to take part.

You can agree to take part and later change your mind.

Your decision will not be held against you.

You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

Why is this research being done?

This research is being done to shine light on various rap music fans. The investigator is interested in showcasing the many ways rap music is understood by its primary fan base.

How long will the research last?

I expect that you will be in this research study for about one hour.

How many people will be studied?

I expect to enroll about 20 people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

If you agree to be in this research, you will be asked questions about rap music. We will discuss your favorite rap music artists, your consumption levels, and how you feel about rap music in

general. The interview will take about an hour and it will be recorded using an audio recording device. The interview will take place at a public location of your choice.

- ☐ I agree to be audio recorded during the research study and that the audio recording can be used in publications/presentations.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio recorded during the research study.*

*If you do not agree to be audio recorded, you may not participate in this study.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you are a student, a decision to take part or not, or to withdraw from the research will have no effect on your grades or standing with the University of Houston.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

If you stop being in the research, already collected data will be removed from the study record.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no foreseeable risks related to the procedures conducted as part of this study. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please inform your study team.

Will I get anything for being in this study?

There is no reward for participating in this study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

There are no known benefits to you from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits to others include an expanded knowledge of how avid rap music fans understand rap music.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information. Each subject's name will be paired with a pseudonym, which will appear on all written study materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the assigned code number will be kept separate from these materials. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization, as well as collaborating institutions and federal agencies that oversee human subjects research.

We may publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, you may contact Erian Aquil at 713-743-3944 or eaquil@central.uh.edu . You may also contact Dr. Samantha Kwan, faculty sponsor, at 713-743-3948 or sskwan@uh.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

You cannot reach the research team.

You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

You have questions about your rights as a research subject.

You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

“Before we begin, I want to inform you of what to expect during this interview. My name is Erian Aquil and I am conducting this interview for my master’s thesis in the sociology department of University of Houston. We will be discussing rap music and your interest in it. We will also discuss what rap music means to you and how you understand it. Please feel free to talk with me as a friend and peer. I am aiming to understand meaning, so do not censor any of your language or ideas. If there is anything I need you to clarify, I will ask you to do so. If at any time you wish to discontinue the interview, please let me know and we will stop. If there is any question I ask that you do not feel comfortable answering, that is fine as well. Just let me know, and we can move on. This interview will be audio-recorded and I will also be taking notes throughout our conversation. I have already given you the consent form containing all the information about this study. If you agree to participate, please state your name and say, ‘yes, I consent’, and we will begin.”

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
 - a. Age, education level, occupation, relationship status
2. On average, how many hours a day do you spend listening to rap music?
3. Tell me about your favorite rap artist.
 - a. Who is it?
 - b. When did you begin listening to them?
 - c. How did you find out about them?
 - d. How would you describe the music they create?

- e. More specifically, how would you describe the lyrics?
 - i. What do they rap about?
- 4. Do you have a favorite rap song?
 - a. Describe the song in as much detail as possible.
 - b. What is the song's significance?
- 5. Tell me how you feel when you listen to your favorite rap song.
- 6. Tell me about the last rap music concert you attended.
- 7. Tell me about any music blogs, social media sites, etc. you use to obtain new information about rap music and artists.
 - a. How often to visit these sites?
 - b. What type of information do they share?
- 8. Where do you listen to rap music?
- 9. We discussed your favorite artist, who are some other artists you enjoy?
 - a. Asked for each artist listed:
 - i. How would you describe the music they create?
 - ii. What do they rap about?
 - iii. Is there any other reason you are into this artist?
- 10. Do you have friends who may consider themselves avid rap music fans as well?
 - a. How are your tastes similar/different?
 - b. Why do you think this is?
- 11. Do you feel you relate to the rap artists you listen to?
 - a. Why/why not?
- 12. Do you think rap artists tell stories about their lived experiences?

- a. Can you give me an example of why you think yes or no?
13. Do you think rap artists exaggerate or understate their life experiences?
- a. Tell me more about this.
14. Do you think of rap music as an art form?
- a. If yes, how so?
 - b. If not, why not?
15. Do you think rap music reflects society in any way?
- a. Why/why not?
16. Are there different forms of rap music?
- a. If yes, how would you describe the different forms?
 - i. Which form do you prefer?
 - 1. Why?
 - b. Is there any form you dislike?
 - i. Why/why not?
17. When you listen to rap music, how do you feel?
18. Does your choice of rap music differ based on your mood?
19. Overall, why do you listen to rap music?
20. Does your location determine whether or not you listen to rap music?
- a. More specifically, does your location determine what “type” of rap music you listen to?
 - i. Tell me more about this.
21. How have you seen/heard rap music discussed in the media (outside of rappers themselves)? (This can be online, television, magazines, newspapers, etc.)

- a. Do you agree with what you have seen/heard?
 - i. Why/why not?
22. How do you think rap music is perceived by those who do not listen to it at all or do not listen as avidly as you do?
- a. Why do you think it is perceived this way?
 - b. Do you understand this perception?
 - c. Do you agree/disagree with it?
 - i. Explain.
 - d. Does it have any impact on why/when/where you listen to rap music? Explain.
23. Do you rap?
- a. If yes, what do you rap about?
 - b. How does it is similar/different compared to your favorite artists?
24. Is there anything you want to share/discuss that I have not asked about or mentioned?