The Effects of Hip-Hop and Rap on Young Women in Academia

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Sociology in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the rise of the cultures and music of hip-hop and rap in the West and its effects on its female listeners and fans, especially those in academia. The thesis consists of two parts. First I conducted a content analysis of 95 lyrics from the book, *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (Spence, 2003). The songs I analyzed were performed by male artists whose lyrics repeated misogynist and sexist messages. Second, I conducted a focus group with young female university students who self-identify as fans of hip-hop and/or rap music. In consultation with my former thesis supervisor, I selected women enrolled in interdisciplinary programmes focused on gender and race because they are equipped with an academic understanding of the potential damage or negative effects of anti-female or negative political messaging in popular music.

My study suggests that the impact of hip-hop and rap music on young women is both positive and negative, creating an overarching feeling of complexity for some young female listeners who enjoy music that is infused with some lyrical messages they revile.

The attraction to hip-hop and rap music and cultures by young women in academia seems to be largely contingent upon an appreciation of the aesthetics of the genre and music, including its rhythmic flow, melodic structure and the general appeal of the artists. Therefore, even when the messaging comes across as antagonizing or antithetical to the well-being of the young female academic listener, her enjoyment of the music remains intact.
By organizing a discussion group and candid dialogue between young academic women who are self-described hip-hop and/or rap fans, I was able to obtain an intimate understanding of their personal struggle between this appealing musical aesthetic and the sometimes-violent messages of hip-hop and rap. I also studied the writings of feminists, music historians and sociologists in order to better understand human attraction or acceptance of negative messages in order to feel connected to or a part of something the collective deems popular or “cool.”

In my studies I learned that the drive to feel accepted by a popular group – even when, as is sometimes the case with some of the messages of hip-hop and/or rap, the group seems to intentionally marginalize itself from popular culture – supersedes any political, ethical or moral opinions about messaging. However, messages that are better aligned with the opinions of the listener are ultimately favoured.
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Rap is what you do; hip hop is what you are. Rap is the act; hip-hop is the culture.

(Boyd, 2002: 48).

Our nation’s clothes, our language, our standards for entertainment, our sexuality, and our role models are just a few items that have been affected by hip hop’s existence.

(George, 1999: 211).

My passion lies in hip-hop but my struggle is trying to fit in hip-hop somewhere, and I think that for young women who are critically engaged, that’s the battle they face...Hip-hop music is mainstream and inescapable for young women.

(Remy Ma, Focus Group Participant).
Introduction: Setting the Stage

I became interested in hip-hop as well as rap music during my second year of high school, when I was searching to find my identity after learning that the two men in my immediate family were gay: My father and older brother. Suddenly consumed by a need to process this information, cope with a newly “broken” family, as well as deal with the fact that people I love were now a part of a marginalized and often misunderstood group, I looked for solace in popular culture. As I consumed television, magazines, movies and books in large quantities, I also came to find that music addressed my state of mind in ways no other medium could. It turned out that the angst and rage, as well as other aesthetic qualities of hip-hop best reflected my fifteen-year-old state of mind. I relied on the music of Salt-n-Pepa and Boyz II Men to soothe me and make me feel like I belonged.

My family members’ homosexuality, while unrelated to the research I present here, helped drive my present understanding as well as my desire for further knowledge about hip-hop and rap music, in terms of the populations it marginalizes (specifically women, although also gays, minorities and even at times, white men) and its subsequent effects. I am proud of my father and brother, no matter their sexuality, and I am proud of all of their many accomplishments and the unconditional love they give me. Through this thesis and through further teaching, I hope to encourage young people to examine popular culture through a critical lens and to thoroughly explore and interpret texts so that they may find and assert their personal values and individual identities in spite of “spoon-fed” messages. Perhaps, down the road, media itself will take ownership of its messages and present ones free of judgement, stereotype and, most of all, hate.

My goal in embarking on this thesis has always been to allow young women in academia a chance to apply new and scholarly ideas about their identities and values in relationship to hip-hop and rap music and cultures. This thesis seeks to make plain my interest in uncovering the ways these genres create a complex emotional reality for young women in academia due to some of the genres’ inherent marginalizing and misogyny, especially within the subgenre of gansta rap, which affects them directly. In chapter four, which deals with the results of the focus group I conducted, I look at the ensuing conversation to uncover why young women who are enrolled in
interdisciplinary programmes that emphasize critical race and gender studies take pleasure in and enjoy hip-hop and rap music, including gangsta rap and others of the more hard core genres within both categories of music. I point to the ways in which the conversation shows how the young women were able to succinctly construct, interpret, and (re)articulate their individualized identities on the basis of the investments that they make in these genres of music in terms of fashion, social behaviours and belief systems.

In chapter one, Literature Review, I look at some of the scholarly debates surrounding youth subcultures, including the need for youth to challenge the existing establishment; popular culture in general and specifically its influence on various members of society; and finally hip-hop and rap – their development and present day incarnation. All of these contain highly contested terrain, with multiple ideas and opinions all of which become increasingly complicated when challenged under a lens of academia and feminism within academia. The chapter begins with an examination of youth subculture, and popular culture, and their relationship to hip-hop and rap music. I trace the evolution of hip-hop music, starting with its emergence at principally New York City block parties in the 1970s where communities congregated to enjoy music, food and socializing. I glance at the 1920’s and the emergence of spoken word poetry that eventually led to rap music. I look further back at the ways in which the slave culture of pre-Civil War America, through the antebellum years, as well as the Civil Rights era, also impacted hip-hop and rap music. I explore how particularly gansta rap was the direct result of a subsequent anti-woman, homophobic and violent culture.

In chapter two, Methodology, I discuss how this thesis combines qualitative and quantitative methods. This combination is appropriate for an exploratory study that provides a balanced view. I apply quantitative methodology to my analysis of the text, *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (Spence, 2003). The text spans hip-hop and rap music over the past 20 plus years and is one of the only truly comprehensive texts available. It contains a detailed analysis of hip-hop and rap song lyrics along with the author’s researched commentary about the musicians, producers and labels. I conducted the analysis according to the name of the artist and the genre of only male hip-hop and rap artists.

I recruited four young women to take part in a focus group discussion. The women were of various social, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds. All of them were enrolled in critical,
interdisciplinary, undergraduate departments in Ontario. My main intention with the focus group was to examine if and how these young women, who are familiar with and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap, including male gangsta rap artists, take pleasure in and enjoy these musical genres and why. I used snowball sampling to recruit the participants (Dornyei, 2003).

In chapter three, Content Analysis, I use the text *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (Spence, 2003) to create five themes based on the lyrics found within the text. Those themes are: (a) glamourization of tobacco, alcohol, illegal substances, and weapons, (b) ostentatious display of wealth, (c) establishing territory, (d) sexual exploitation and disrespect for women, and (e) inclusion of derogatory and racially charged terminology.

The themes were chosen based on their fundamental capacity to alienate and delineate groups of people into “us” and “them” interpretations. This chapter presents the five themes in terms of their frequency of appearance, by counting the number of times they appeared in the lyrics. All figures were rounded up to the nearest decimal point.

In chapter four, Focus Group Discussion, I analyze the participants’ responses to the four questions that I asked per song. Those four questions are: (a) What do you think about what you heard and read? (b) How did it make you feel? (c) What is the main message? And (d) How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?

The focus group participants were four women of varying ethnicities (white Canadian, Caribbean Canadian, Iraqi-Filipino Canadian, and Chinese Canadian) who, as stated, all take pleasure in and enjoy hip-hop and rap music and specifically including male gangsta rap artists or male hip-hop and/or rap artists in general. The participants were interested in the contradictions in the messages disseminated by some of these artists. Many of the artists discuss in their lyrics a difficult life, extensive social victimization, powerlessness and disrespect from the mainstream, as well as ongoing hardships. They are simultaneously emphatically, arrogantly and unapologetically overconfident, all-powerful and in full control of both their own lives and the environments in which they live. The participants viewed this material as both empowering and/or disempowering depending on the context.

The second part of chapter four deals with the focus group follow-up discussion, which looks at the ways in which the discussion by the participants reveals complexities in their emotional
reaction to the music. The women struggle with their appreciation of the aesthetics of the sound and their discomfort with the lyrical messages.

Lastly, in the Conclusion, chapter five, I draw together all of my research about the ways in which these young women came to find themselves as both spectators and performers within a collective enterprise, that is, male-dominated hip-hop and rap cultures, particularly where it pertains to the more hardcore subgenre, gangsta rap. My intention is to uncover the ways in which these four women have been impacted by hip-hop and rap cultures. In addition, I reflect on whether a meaningful and critical dissemination of these genres is possible in light of the deafening silence of women within them. Further, I look at the ways in which these genres themselves serves as a way to maintain negative stereotypes and continue to service the image of the white man as “the ideal” to the detriment of minorities, homosexuals and women. My goal is to look at the ways in which young women understand themselves within a mainstream collective enterprise – the male-dominated hip-hop and rap cultures and industries.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review I examine the works of notable authors and respected scholars in the field to help me evaluate how both hip-hop and rap cultures has shaped contemporary youth culture, with a focus on its effects on young women. Some of the relevant studies on hip-hop and rap cultures include those by Decker (1993), Rose (1994; 2001; 2005), Kitwana (2002), Boyd (2004), Dyson (2004), and Watkins (2004; 2005). I also discuss how a hip-hop and rap influenced youth subculture evolved with its own specific norms, behaviours and beliefs. Further, I explore the cultures’ racial, gender and class distinctions, as well as their portrayal of women and their subsequent participation within them.

In particular, my study honed in on the subgenre of gangsta rap, traditionally seen as the most hard core of the rap genres featuring more extreme messages of misogyny, alpha-male ideologies, violence, drug abuse and criminal behaviour. I hope to demonstrate the potential negative effects of violence, sexuality, and the subordination on women and whether these effects have led to an increase or decrease in women’s participation within the cultures and the musical genres themselves. Here, the works of Collins (1991), Rose (1994; 2001; 2005), Emerson (2002) and Perry (2004) have been useful. The review also looks at the commercialization of hip-hop and its effect on youth. This aspect is examined by referring to studies by Rose (1994; 2001), Emerson (2002) and Blair (2004).

Finally, I turn to the work of Derrick P. Alridge in order to look at the ways in which the climate of pre-Civil War America and spanning the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s led to the inherent misogyny that is visible in some parts of hip-hop and rap cultures, especially gangsta rap. Drawing from studies including that of Rose (1994), I arrived at my thesis question that asks how young women in academia who are self-described fans of hip-hop and rap and particularly gangsta rap can be attracted to genres, or more specifically a subgenre, that by and large alienates, marginalizes and fundamentally disrespects them because of their gender, socio-economic position and intellect.
Understanding Youth Subculture

Youth subcultures are generally formed by groups of participants in an identity outside of the social norm. A relatively new construct, youth subcultures came into existence some time in the early-mid 20th century as sociologists attempted to explain youth behaviour to adults, many of whom were alarmed by rapidly changing cultures, attitudes and ideologies. Scholars at the University of Birmingham’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) theorized that authentic working-class youth subcultures in Britain emerged as a form of resistance to the various institutions that supported post-war Britain’s status quo (Torkelson, 2010, p. 259).

Demographically, members of youth subcultures are usually under 30 years of age. They often distinguish themselves from adult society and mainstream culture through fashion, slang, dialect and behaviour. Members typically centre themselves around a specific item, idea or music: An item, for example a scooter is associated with the British Mod movement of the 1960’s, an idea such as “free love” correlates to the American hippie movement, or, in the realm of music; punk rock, emo, goth or, for the purposes of this paper, hip-hop and rap, all carry with them associated youth subcultures.

Most youth subculture theories have been concerned historically with identity and belonging. Specific studies on youth subculture and identity building tend to focus on models of expression, style, and meaning. Brake argues in Comparative Youth Culture that subcultures develop in response to social problems and that these responses can lead to collective action. For example: “Identity is constructed from the nexus of social relations and meanings surrounding us, and from this, we learn to make sense of ourselves including our relation to the dominant culture” (Brake, 1985, p. 3).

The earliest studies of youth subcultures can be traced to the Chicago School of the early and mid-20th century (Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Blackman, 2005). The Chicago school, a body of sociological works that emerged primarily in the 1920’s and 30’s, studied, in part, urban youth considered deviant from the rest of mainstream society. The goal was to understand their behaviours and explore what might be their driving purpose. Particularly they were interested in understanding why some youth were predisposed to engaging in deviant behaviours. The word “deviant” provides a distinct position for subcultures (Beck, 1992) in that the groups themselves and society at large, both agreed with the identity, with society’s dissapproval lending credibility
to the subculture from the point of view of its members. Earlier studies on youth subculture (Brake 1985; Beck 1992) have defined youth itself as a social problem in that youth seek out pleasure and achieve happiness from behaviours that are seen as deviant by most adults. In exploring their identities, young people tend push against social norms and the prevailing establishments. However, a study by McCulloch, Stewart, and Lovegreen (2006) moves away from the earlier approaches by arguing that an affiliation to a youth subculture is largely an expression of class identity, and that subcultures are the direct result of cultural constructs, and biological and social groupings. Following McCulloch et al. (2006), I propose that youth subcultures are made up of group identities formed through social and cultural construction.

Bakari Kitwana coined the term “hip-hop generation.” Jeffrey Marsh explained in the Rochester Review: “Bakari Kitwana who as editor of the influential music magazine The Source first coined the phrase ’the hip-hop generation,’ The true power of hip-hop —its potential to unite young people to press for enduring political and social change.”

Kitwana described the hip-hop generation as “…young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and . . . share a specific set of values and attitudes…” (Kitwana, 2002, p. 4), indicating that the hip-hop generation is comprised of black youth while pointedly excluding non-blacks. Kitwana mentions six socio-political forces that have shaped the hip-hop and rap cultures in general: (1) visibility of black youth in popular culture in terms of fashion choices, behaviours and ideology; (2) globalization, or the far reach of the media leading to broader impact; (3) the persistent nature of segregation, or society’s own existing rules for it which inadvertently encourage the culture and allow it to thrive; (4) public policy surrounding the criminal justice system which creates a distinct sense of “us and them” fostering a powerful sense of belonging; (5) media representations of black youth propagating stereotypes, both positively and negatively, and (6) the general quality of life within the hip-hop and rap communities as direct influencers on the culture.

Kitwana further distinguishes this generation as one characterized by materialism, inequality between the sexes, childhoods within non-traditional family arrangements, and hyper-racial

awareness influenced by the representation of black culture in American society (Boyd, 2004). But as Taylor and Taylor (2004) explain, hip-hop and rap listeners by-and-large believe that there exists a visceral reaction to the music itself, that transcends the cultures and the desire to fit in within them, that attracts them to the subgenres of music umbrellaed by hip-hop and rap respectively.

Before hip-hop or rap gained commercial success, the songs of both genres focused on the community and the lives of the artists. Many rappers in the 70s and beyond discussed the perils of being black, poor and dealing with white control and power. For example, old-school rapper Grandmaster Flash raps in his song *New York, New York* (1983):

Rows of eyes, disguised as windows/Looking down on the poor and the needy/Miles of people, marching up the avenue/Doin' what they gotta do, just to get by/I'm living in the land of plenty and many/But I'm damn sure poor and I don't know why.

Common expresses similar sentiments in his song: *A Letter to the Law* (2007) where he raps:

In Cincinnati, another brother hung/Again he won't see the sun, with his family stung/They want us to hold justice, but you handin' me none.

But over time the lyrics of certain rap songs became increasingly violent. Pamela Collins argues, “With big money at stake, lyrics became increasingly violent and personal” (Collins, 2007, p. 25). Further they began to exhibit (in some cases) an infusion of anti-racist sentiments, as argued by Rachel E. Sullivan: “Thus, the struggle for rap artists [...] to gain respect has taken place in the context of pervasive, institutionalized White racism” (Sullivan, 2003, p.3). In other words, the challenges posed by the high instance of a white patriarchy in positions of control over black rappers, not to mention the extensive history of institutional racism in the U.S., might lend itself to the backlash of aggression and mistrust In 2001 Talib Kweli rapped:

It's in they job description to terminate the threat/So 41 shots to the body is what he can expect/The precedent is set, don't matter if he follow the law/I know I'll give my son pride and make him
Here we see rappers who have anger towards the police who they see as sanctioning violence against them.

Taylor and Taylor, 2007 point out that the reputation of rappers lies in their ability to be “real,” a common slang term within the genre purported to indicate a need to stay down to Earth, truthful and honest, which in terms of the culture can also mean tragic, and even overly powerful outside of the mainstream. As a result, there is often a cajoling of youth toward a fundamental distrust of “white” control and power. The subculture created by the music was not restricted solely to listening to the music, but also to adopting its style, slang and ideology. Marcella Runell Hall says, “Hip-Hop is a culture complete with agreed upon elements as well as shared language, dress, style, history, values, and unifying capabilities” (Runnell, 2011, p. 89).

Identity Formation in Hip-Hop and Rap Cultures

Socio-cultural studies of music show that musical forms often yield a strong relationship to social practices and social structure (Middleton, 1990; Toynbee, 2000). The lyrical messages, combined with the fashion and style choices of the artists, are often woven into the collective consciousness of their fan bases. Toynbee (2000) argues that some musical genres, including hip-hop and rap, are used to express a sense of community or alienation, depending on the social relationship. In the case of hip-hop and rap, artists tend to draw from their own life experiences, principally in urban environments. As Rose states: “Talk of subways, crews, and posses, urban noise, economic stagnation, static and crossed signals leap out of hip-hop lyrics, sounds and themes” (Rose, 1994, p. 114).

This musical genre, largely dominated by African-American men, could be viewed as a collective expression of black experiences in urban America, where great poverty and an exposure to violence are the norm. At the same time, even though the music is in large part performed by black men, the fan base goes beyond any social, racial or economic class. Yousman in Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, The Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy claims, “Whites are the biggest consumers of recordings by rap artists (2003,
He further cites Dunlevy (2000) who suggests, “More than 70% of rap buyers are White” (Pg. 367).

Toynbee (2000) argues that the relationship between a musical identity and social process is a political one because it is changeable based on the policies that control the system including the economy, government, healthcare, welfare, media and so on. This line of argument suggests that there is a strong correlation between music and identity formation, specifically for youth, and the identity thus created is powerful.

Historically there has been a particular view in U.S. popular culture of the black community as compliant and agreeable, even happy about their position within a white dominant culture. Images of African-Americans in white culture, from those created by abolitionist, Harriet Beecher Stowe in her 1852 book, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, tended toward simple-mindedness, complacency and fierce loyalty to a white patriarchy. Later, in films such as 1939’s Gone With the Wind, slaves were painted as either dimwitted (Butterfly McQueen as “Prissy”) or fiercely loyal (Hattie McDaniel as “Mammy”). In both cases, the characters as well as the actors themselves portrayed by popular media, were represented as contented with their roles as subordinates within white culture. A slang term that became popular overtime named African-Americans who worked “happily” within a white patriarchy, “Uncle Toms.”

Although Uncle Tom is one of Stowe’s book’s main protagonists, the term in its slang incarnation is pointedly derogatory. In modern usage the term “Magical Negro” popularized by African-American film director Spike Lee during a series of college interviews with film students came to signify a one-dimensional character whose sole purpose is to further the goals of the white protagonist. President Barak Obama has occasionally been tied to the term in popular culture through political satire on Comedy Central’s popular The Daily Show with comedian Jon Stewart, and on a Republican radio show hosted by Rush Limbaugh. Today the term “Uncle Tom” most often signifies a black person who “sells out” or doesn’t conform to being fully black by taking on white characteristics, or not taking on affectations associated with black communities. Meanwhile, through the evolution of hip-hop and rap cultures, the white-serving, docile Uncle Tom stereotype seems to have been traded for a violent “gangsta” image, popularized in the 1980s. Where an Uncle Tom worked within white culture whether or not it was to the detriment of an African-American community, a gangsta worked violently against
white culture, as well as against selling out to the white power. However, in both cases, black culture is alienated from the mainstream and is represented as floundering, desperate and in need of saving. Tricia Rose argues that the popularity of hip-hop and rap is propagated in part by white patriarchy in order to keep the black man down — by representing him as a criminal or as unable to succeed without the use of brute force or criminal behaviour. One description of a popular image from rap culture is as follows:

Generally speaking, rap music serves as an expressive artistic outlet for a marginalised and demonised urban social bloc that speaks with heavily black and Latino, predominantly masculine accents within a staunchly white and patriarchal social order (C.H. Smith, 1997, p. 345).

Thus, we understand that rap and hip-hop’s identity formations are predicated on race, colour, socio-economic class, and gender. Given the importance of identity-building within any youth subculture, but particularly in the hip-hop and rap cultures with their emphasis on gender delineation, a framework for how women who are exposed to or enmeshed within the cultures must be outlined in order to understand their impact on them.

The musical history of the African continent, although extensive and arguably far more diverse than styles from the European continent, continues to be studied, explained and then contested throughout scholarly circles. The rich oral history of many ancient African tribes is believed to be at the heart of what became a rich musical tradition in North America (Stone, 1998). Brought with the slave-trade to the new world, African music in the pre-Civil War American South was an integral part of slave life. Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, about slaves en route to the home of their master:

While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune (Douglass, 2001, p. 20).
Slave songs varied thematically but were often used to accompany labour, their rhythmic repetition aiding in physically gruelling occupation (Stone, 1998).

It is this exact emphasis on rhythm that some scholars believe directly led to the rhythm-and-blues genre, created in America’s black culture in the 1940’s, and thought to be a precursor to many modern musical genres, including salsa, jazz, soul, funk, gospel, contemporary R&B, and of course, rock-n-roll. Dilia Lo´pez-Gydosh and Joseph Hancock in American Men and Identity: Contemporary African-American and Latino Style argue: “Reflective of the peacock fancifulness of salsa, a new genre of music developed in the African-American communities. R&B was reflective in the massive musical giant of the time—Motown. The golden age of R&B dates from the late 1960s to the 1970s; however, the style is still prevalent in today’s music” (2009, p. 20). Stylistically the music of rhythm and blues contains rhythmic time often referred to as “groove.” In the 1990’s, analyses among scholars and musicologists suggested that groove uses rhythmic patterns that create some form of intuitive movement in its listeners (Hardy and Lainge, 1990).

The cultures of hip-hop and rap began to evolve in earnest in the 1970’s following the Dub movement of the 1960’s, which had its roots in the musical styles of Reggae (Sims, 1993, p. E3). Both genres began with DJ’s and did not initially incorporate vocals. Rap, a rhythmic lyrical style is often likened to the jazz poetry of the 1920’s. Ezra Pound, e.e. cummings, and Wallace Stevens are three examples of poets during the Jazz era who are thought to have been influenced by the music of their day (Feinstein,1997). Another African-American cultural practice is thought to have led to the rap style whereby rhymes are used to taunt or boast, also sometimes referred to as “playin’ the dozens,” which can be described as “playful insults” (Westbrook, 2002, p. 39). The call and response style of many African-American church ceremonies played a role in the further development of the modern rap as well as hip-hop genres.

Smith and Jackson in The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture (2005) quote Efrem Smith saying:

I was influenced by the black preaching style with its “whooping” rhythm and call-and-response interaction with those listening. I was drawn to how black preaching connected biblical stories with contemporary issues of growing up African American and urban (38).
The authors go on to say that, “hip-hop culture has biblical foundations” (36) which can be connected to “the influence and impact of, and maybe even its intimate connection with, hip-hop” (Smith and Jackson, 2005, pgs. 36-38).

The origins of hip-hop can be traced to James Brown and Blowfly, among others. They are often called the godfathers of hip-hop. Today music is only one part of what makes up this subculture, which maintains a powerful presence in popular culture. Kids and young adults who adhere to it are traditionally exposed to “performers wearing droopy pants, hats to the back, laceless sneakers, hoods, and loud radios” (Krohn & Suazo, 1995, p. 139). So, as Rose points out, “Hip-hop is a youth culture which comprises of graffiti, break dancing, and rap music” (Rose, 1994, p. 2). Of course, while it might be comprised of some of those things, many would argue that it is both more than that and less. Garofalo, for example, argues that rap music is one of the “cultural elements in a larger social movement called hip-hop” (Garofalo, 1990, p. 110). As a social movement, hip-hop and rap provide a specific (and similar) fashion code, dialect along with an extensive slang lexicon, as well as a collection of ideas, ideals as well as a social “rule-book.” Krohn & Suazo (1995) suggest that the identity creation of rap music and hip-hop culture is achieved through the words that emphasize race, class, and gender, but that it also dictates to this youth, for better or worse, how to behave.

According to Rose, rap music is:

…the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the home of innovative uses of style and language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chitlin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling. In short, it is black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural intellectual and spiritual vessel (Rose, 1994, p. 18).

Boyd argues that hip-hop music is used to present “mutually illuminating yet divergent categories of race, class, and gender in African American society” (Boyd, 2004, p. 373). According to Boyd, through the propagation of this musical style there has been an initiative to
spread the discourse of cultural politics (Boyd, 2004, p. 372). He points to what he refers to as “the first level of identity formation,” which in terms of hip-hop is “blackness based on race.” In other words, he looks at race as a skin colour or ethnic background, as a primary influence on the outlook of the individual. He also articulates how socio-economic backgrounds and classes can be formed at a “second level of identity formation” that within the context of hip-hop culture, means that class status (rather than race or ethnicity) makes an individual “black” (Boyd, 2004, p. 373). Thus, he states: “Along the same lines, the all-white group ‘Young Black Teenagers’ claim that blackness is a ‘state of mind’ – undoubtedly a ghetto mindset” (Boyd, 2004, p. 373).

By using the term “ghetto” to mean a community of lower socio-economic classes and the term “hood” to indicate a neighbourhood or geographic area, rappers create an identity for all members of the hip-hop culture that transcends common notions about races and ethnicities.

Attention to racial issues is often associated with hip-hop and rap music. In its current incarnation, as dominated by black performers as well as black-identity driven lyrics (Ibrahim, 2003; Boyd, 2004; Taylor & Taylor, 2004, 2007) hip-hop and rap generally stereotype both black communities as well as the mainstream, usually “white” community. Due to this, developing a working definition for racism at the beginning of this analysis will prove vital, since it will frame a primary part of the research in relationship to identity formation within hip-hop/rap music. For this, I borrow from Tatum:

Racism is defined as a “system of advantage based on race” which is a pervasive aspect of U.S. socialization. It is virtually impossible to live in U.S. contemporary society and not to be exposed to some aspects of the personal, cultural, and/or institutional manifestations of racism in our society (Tatum, 1992, p. 3).

Ibrahim (2003) believes that hip-hop and rap create a social identity among youth, in particular, black youth, through fashion choices, dialect and an extensive slang lexicon, as well as their behaviours and ideas. The process of identity creation here is embedded in the racially driven acts in which black youth sometimes engage. Cutler describes the hip-hop movement as a youth subculture involving the “consumption of rap music, baggy clothes and participation in activities like break dancing, writing graffiti and rapping” (Cutler, 1999, p. 428). These young people created a culture that represented the black _hood_, or _community_, and it was they that originally
resided in the urban *ghetto*, or *neighbourhood* usually made up of an economically subordinated class (Dyson, 2004; Kelley, 2004).

It’s also important to note that hip-hop and rap are two distinct musical styles. Michael Ralph argues: “When this subculture first surfaced in New York, the terms *hip-hop* and *rap music* were used interchangeably. Hip-hop emerged as a distinct cultural form” (2009, p.141). Rap music, unlike hip-hop, was later considered a genre noted for its focus on masculinity, crime, and violence (Guevara 1996:50; Kelley 1996:117; Keyes 2002:1; Krims 2000:12). It was considered, “a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular” (Kubrin, 2005: p 360). For the purposes of this paper, “rap” and “hip-hop” will be discussed as separate-if-similar cultures as well as separate-if-similar musical styles.

Hip-hop and rap cultures as propagated by the media, often glorify urban centres, along with their socio-economic desparity. For example, the popular phrase, “keepin’ it real” as defined by Alonzo Westbrook in *HipHoptionary* is defined as, “Living honestly” (Westbrook, 2002, p. 81). This may be seen to lend substance to and empower those who live in black urban neighbourhoods as having grit, strength and street sense. As a result of the challenges created by poverty, money symbolizes power no matter how it is obtained. This means that money or “power” within some segments of the hip-hop and rap communities, especially visible in many of the messages in gangsta rap lyrics can be obtained with some degree of social acceptability through crime including drug trade and theft. Violence as a means to obtaining respect, justice, money and power are also heavily featured thematically (Osumare, 2001). Krohn and Suazo (1995) believe that the negative implications of the lyrics of rap music, especially gangsta rap, have become as popular as the music itself. They explain that the subcultural norm is to attack racism through the use of racial slurs in the music. In other words, using a prominent racial divide, white racism toward blacks is countered by black racism toward whites. While by and large their point seems valid – there is a wide range of lyrical examples of anti-white sentiment in both hip-hop and rap music – since the audiences for and communities of hip-hop and rap are made up of all races, genders and socio-economic populations, suggesting that its popularity is based so broadly on hate seems unlikely. Of course, it may not be as clear-cut as that since anti-authority sentiments are just as widely shared.
Potter believes that all subcultures, in one way or another, attempt to critique the mainstream as a way of “intensifying old antagonisms” (Potter, 1995, p. 131). Potter shows that hip-hop and rap cultures largely offer both a critique and an alternative ideological ground of the dominant view, first by making the unsaid assumptions “evident” and then using these assumptions to portray a “counter-myth” (Potter, 1995, p. 132). It is no surprise that much of the hip-hop and rap music is produced by white-run record labels and that they maintain many of the racist ideals of the status quo. In order for some of the prevailing hip-hop and rap beliefs to be accepted, first there must, to some degree be an acceptance that the bulk of black America is poor, violent and “fighting the power.”

Potter implies that hip-hop culture and rap music take race seriously. He believes that the genre essentially recreates an already established black racial identity with modern twists. According to Potter, hip-hop takes a political form which has tried to establish Black Nationalism as a part of cultural formation constructed through the depiction of an urban black underclass. The hip-hop culture, as Potter describes it, is characterized by negativity and “anti-desire” or apathy. Tommie Shelby describes Black Nationalism in the following way:

Black Nationalists advocate such things as black self-determination, racial solidarity and group self-reliance, various forms of voluntary racial separation, pride in the historic achievements of those of African descent, a concerted effort to overcome racial self-hate and to instill black self-love, militant resistance to antiblack racism, the development and preservation of a distinctive black ethnocultural identity, and the recognition of Africa as the true homeland of those who are racially black (Shelby, 2003, p. 665).

Further, Black Nationalism, as propagated through hip-hop culture and rap music, has been supported by Decker (1993) who believes they not only spread the discourse of Black Nationalism but await the coming of a black nation. Potter believes that the hip-hop and rap cultures have adopted this discursive nationalism to rebel against the institutional structure of American racialism.
Dyson (2004) argues that hip-hop and rap represent class distinctions among the middle- and lower-class black communities in America. The symbol of identification of the hip-hop and rap youth cultures is the “ghetto,” a low-income neighbourhood or housing complex, which has come to represent a strong identification with this fundamental socio-economic and racial background (Dyson, 2004). The suggestion that hip-hop and rap promote a black identity which aims for Black Nationalism, does in some ways seem evident. Identity-formation within the subculture can in part be seen as influenced by racism and a violent struggle against it. Cheney (2005) argues Black Nationalism had its base in anti-whiteness and defying white male domination. But race makes up only one part of this identity. The emphasis on black masculinity is similarly undeniable. Cheney states that Black Nationalism is traditionally rooted in a masculine discourse which leads to feelings of empowerment, arguing that this sentiment was not only confined to men’s attitudes but applied also to women.

Within slave households, men were rarely present, often brought in to “stud” and then sent back out to work (Joyner, 1984). Some scholars argue that this formative social structure is present in today’s African-American households, of which, according to an April, 2011 study featured in the “Washington Post,” 75% continue to be headed by single-mothers. Moreover, the stereotype of the domineering female (as illustrated by the character “Madea” portrayed by black filmmaker Tyler Perry, as well as through a host of other African-American characters, or caricatures, generally mother figures) has become a ubiquitous representation in American media. Alternatively, the stereotypical black male as either henpecked, or hyper-masculine to the point of criminality and violence, are routinely reproduced in popular culture.

Author and historian Imani Perry argues that, “hip-hop is masculine music” (Perry, 2004, p. 118). She argues that masculinity in hip-hop asserts a black male authority by subjugating the female body. Perry suggests that the subjectivity of black masculinity is rooted in the class system, racialism, ghetto-life and prison trauma and describes the black male head-of-household as existing in a world dominated by the strong white male patriarchy. The absence of a father figure in many African-American households has led directly to the creation of a romanticised image: A man forced to leave his wife and kids by an unjust society that doesn’t offer him the same tools or opportunities as his white or female counterparts. The idea that human beings attach fondness to anything lost is common, including the tendency “to build an association with an idealized and romanticized notion of the past” (Brooks and Hebert, 2006, p. 311).
But there remains a gap in our understanding about the extent to which women have participated in this culture especially given the late entry of female artists into the genre and the fact that female artists remain underrepresented. Even as the ideology evolved and messages became even more misogynistic, women continued to align themselves with these subgenres of music.

**Gangsta Rap**

“Gangsta rap,” as defined by Alonzo Westbrook in *HipHoptionary: The Dictionary of Hip-hop Terminology*, is, “Rap songs of murder, money and mayhem. Describes sex, drugs, and violence in detail. Elements of danger, profanity, and black machismo” (Westbrook, 2002, p. 53). Two of the most well known gangsta rap artists were Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G.

The associative violence of inner-cities within the genre is likely rooted in the institutional discrimination against black Americans as often thematically alluded to lyrically in the music. The tendency is to depict themselves and the culture as a whole as a social threat to both physical and, to some degree, civil safety. By preaching violence, Rose argues that an antagonistic relationships toward white culture is cultivated. She further asserts that hip-hop and rap cultures and their music resist the dominance of a white society and point to the “white middle-class objection to urban black youths who do not aspire to (but are haunted by) white middle-class standards” (Rose, 1994, p. 126). Rose argues that the violence of rap music, whether or not it is played out in real-life circumstances, has the discursive force to turn a suspicious eye from mainstream society onto black communities, and hip-hop and rap cultures specifically: “[White culture] deliberately misconstrues black rage as juvenile rebellion and at the same time retains the necessary spectre of black violence, justifying the social repression of black music and black youth” (Rose, 1994, p. 139). I agree with Rose’s claim that the promotion of violence and anarchy by black youth, which if negatively received, could lead to a further promotion of violence and anarchy through music, and so forth.

**Gender Rap**

Hip-hop and rap cultures are sometimes acknowledged as the only social constructs that allow black youth to create a gender identity (Kitwana, 2002; S. C. Watkins, 2005). Therefore the existence of, some would argue, an obvious connection between hip-hop and rap and sexism, homophobia and violence forces anyone trying to analyze it to tread carefully. From a cultural
perspective, hip-hop culture and rap music make up complex cultures comprised of icons and symbols, driven by music, the productivity of urban youth, and a reflection of the social realities in the lives of black youth both positively and negatively (Kitwana, 2002; Keyes, 2004). Therefore, snap judgements that assume hip-hop and rap must affect gender identity only negatively will prove inevitably easy to counter. Hip-hop and rap cultures consistently produce complex cultural narratives of gender and sex, which can be interpreted through multiple lenses. However, understanding that the prevailing gender discourse is male-focused in terms of my study is important. Looking at these hip-hop and rap lyrics in particular can help detail any potential effects on young women to both their benefit and detriment. Look at any American classroom and the tendency to mimic the fashion of hip-hop and/or rap artists appears nearly epidemic, not to mention the prevalence of its slang and the dialects associated with hip-hop and rap cultures. That it does impact its listeners and consumers seems fairly obvious. What is less obvious is how.

Amal Saleeby Malek argues that:

The link between rap lyrics and violence seems overrated. The claim that violent language causes violent behaviour is neither convincing nor conclusive. Hip hop and rap are distinct forms of art like other types of music. The violent lyrics in the songs reflect the violence found in many American cities, rather than create it. It is not only unfair but also naïve to blame rap music for social violence (Malek, 2008, p. 113).

It can also be argued, as Eliana Tropeano does in her article, “Does Rap or Rock Music Provoke Violent Behaviour?” that:

It seems very obvious that there is a significant relationship between listening to violent music (rap music) and watching aggressive and violent music videos and one getting into more fights, using inappropriate language, inappropriate gestures, and a tendency to think less of women (Tropeano, 2006, p. 32).
Both arguments are limited in that neither embraces the possibility that the music or culture might influence some and not others, or that it might exacerbate certain incidents of violence. Malek seems to take the stance that the music is simply reflecting a certain reality. Meanwhile, Tropeano sees the media of the culture as an incendiary force. But whether or not the negative messages of hip-hop and rap mirrors reality or provokes it, the likelihood is that there is a mutual relationship between the music and the culture and the realities in which it is produced, performed and consumed.

On the other hand, the appeal of the all-powerful alpha-male cannot be denied. Images of piles of money, endless beautiful women, and limitless power and control that are rampant in music videos, lyrical narrative and even in hip-hop and rap films are not only appealing, they are also compelling. They can even be noted in the mainstream as drawn, for example, in the Academy Award nominated Martin Scorsese film *Casino* (1995).

Craig Watkins suggests, “Many […] black men feel under siege in their own communities and live in conditions not unlike a war zone. So the ‘psychic armour’ that many adopt simply to survive often manifests into a culture of violence. Problems arise when the ‘psychic armour’ transforms into a definition of what it is to be ‘cool’” (Watkins, 2005, p. 2). Further, it seems logical to me that the longer and more integrated into society those ideas fester, the more entrenched they become in any popular thinking.

From the point of view of female members of the culture, how much they buy into the narrative misogyny likely depends on their backgrounds and personal sense of worth. If society perceives power, violent or otherwise, as sexy, women, even those with strong feminist leanings, will often perceive power the same way. In terms of rap music, male artists often appear to identify with alpha and hyper-male imagery, which begs the question: What kind of role model do women have within a culture that has a tendency to both ideologically and lyrically silence women?

**Female Artists in Hip-Hop and/or Rap**

Hip-hop and rap cultures have the potential to influence political environments (Kitwana, 2002; 2004). Cultural scholars who have studied hip-hop culture and rap music provide a political analysis of how race, sex, the economy and community conditions affect how people perceive
society and how they find enjoyment and/or displeasure in hip-hop and rap. They also analyze the prevailing attitudes about internal violence within black communities.

One popular belief asserts that even the most negative messages within hip-hop culture and rap music have a radical and liberating potential, which should be tapped by the feminist movement, the younger feminists, and especially of those who are black. Pough (2004) coins the term “hip-hop feminists” to describe this group. To counter the bullying of the alpha-male, an aggressively vital female protagonist can occasionally be seen to outwit or outplay him. A great example of an aggressive female protagonist can be seen in Lil’ Kim’s hit song, How Many Licks. Steven Shaviro analyzes this song in Supa Dupa Fly: Black Women as Cyborgs in Hip-hop Videos:

She boasts of her sexual mystique and her power over men. She is in control because she can use her sexuality to manipulate men, to make them pay her and support her. Her boasts about big money and expensive cars, combining the manners of a thug with the privileges of a millionaire, parallel similar claims made by mainstream male hip-hop artists. But what sets Lil' Kim apart is what she has to do, as a woman, in order to "get paid." In presenting her persona, Kim makes no distinction between her sexual performances, and the skill with words that makes her a successful MC. Whereas male rappers get women because they are rich and famous, Lil' Kim implies rather that she is rich and famous because she gets men. (Shaviro, 2005, p. 175)

In that song, the male is portrayed as impressed and charmed by the woman’s savvy.

The archetype of the strong female is not out of the ordinary in hip-hop and rap cultures. She might even be considered the central character in the narrative love story and that the “hos,” “bitches,” and “emasculating mothers” are in fact supporting players. In the Bubba Sparxx song, She Tried, the protagonist is impressed by the way his woman comes through for him in the lyric, “But I ain’t never ask and I ain’t never tell/But Betty had the cash every time I went to jail.”

In Drake’s song, Best I Ever Had, he praises his strong lover by rapping:
She hold me down every time I hit her up.
When I get right I promise that we gon live it up.
She make me beg for it till she give it up.

There are also many female rappers and hip-hop artists who have gained popularity over the years. Yet, a few undeniable facts regarding the culture exist: (1) Men dominate the hip-hop/rap scene both artistically as well at a corporate level. (2) A (hyper)masculine thread is clearly identifiable within hip-hop and rap cultures and their lyrics. (3) Even though men and women participate in the culture, the representation of women was and remains as many scholars have argued (for example Hooks, Perry) seemingly more oppressive for women.

Feminist messaging from female hip-hop and rap artists challenges the sexism of their male counterparts, despite being underrepresented. They also provide a strong counterpoint to hyper-masculine/misogynist messages.

**Black Nationalism and Women**

In the 1920’s and 30’s, Marcus Garvey argued for racial separatism but maintained that all humans are equal (Levine 1993). In the 1960’s Malcolm X strongly focused on self-determination and leadership among black communities. For the most part, the ideologies behind Black Nationalism have sought to wage a fundamental war against white supremacy.

Black Nationalists, according to Cheney, have consistently alluded to a nation where black individuals have power, their voices are heard and where blacks are in control, while whites are secondary. In terms of sexual politics, there is an underlying emphasis on the rule of male domination, as well as the subjugation of the “feminine” (Cheney, 2005, p. 281), Cheney argues that Black Nationalist identity circles around a political agenda of masculinity. He argues further that the masculinity of Black Nationalism is based on the mandates of sexual politics, which valorises heteronormativity. By “heteronormativity” he means that Black Nationalism follows a staunch Judeo-Christian ideology that puts women subordinate to men and paints homosexuality as sinful. To the latter point he further states that the subordination in Black Nationalism is not only of women but also of “effeminate” men and to some extent, beta-males.
To prove their manhood, heterosexual black male nationalists strictly patrolled the borders of
their masculine domain, a fact manifest in the heteronormativity. This was displayed by 19th
century theorists like Henry Highland Garnet, who demanded both freedom and franchise in
terms of patriarchal privilege, and was confirmed by the explicit homophobia exhibited in the
mid-20th century by Black Power advocates who deemed homosexuality "counterrevolutionary”
(Cheney, 2005, p. 281).

Cheney believes that hip-hop and rap cultures and music are rooted in male dominance, the
subjugation of women, and homophobia. Cheney states that the discourse of masculinity in the
1980s was focused not only on black men but also on women. He explains that rap was a musical
form that was, “sometimes radical, always subversive, thinking and/or activism that characterizes
the politics of dominated and exploited peoples” (Cheney, 2005, p. 285).

According to Phillips, Reddick-Morgan, & Stephens (2005) women rappers make up only a tiny
percentage of artists within the genre. Many are thought to maintain a “dually oppositional
stance” (p. 255, see also Rose, 1994, 2001). What this means is that women rappers, on the one
hand, critique the sexism of rap lyrics sung by their male counterparts but on the other, express
their solidarity with them in a critique of American racism, classism and raced sexism (Phillips,
Reddick-Morgan, & Stephens, 2005). Rose (2001) holds up the lyrics of Queen Latifah as
capable of expressing the close bond between Black Nationalism and patriarchy. She believes
that black women rappers have reshaped Black Nationalism and given it a new meaning (Rose,
2001). In the lyrics of her song **U-N-I-T-Y**, Queen Latifah illustrates a proud, confident alpha-
female, who doesn’t need violence to find power by rapping:

> You put your hands on me again I'll put your ass in handcuffs/I
guess I fell so deep in love I grew dependency/I was too blind to
see just how it was affecting me/All I knew was you, you was all
the man I had/And I was scared to let you go, even though you
treated me bad/But I don't want my kids to see me getting beat
down/By daddy smacking mommy all around/You say I’m nothing
without ya, but I’m nothing with ya/A man don't really love you if
he hits ya.
The messages of feminist female rappers like Queen Latifah work within Black Nationalism since they empower communities to rise up against tyranny, even as it exists within the culture. However, the lyrics also give credence to the hypermasculine messages by generalizing them. In other words, it spreads the idea that (using *U-N-I-T-Y* as the example) domestic violence happens to everyone, regardless of race or class including a celebrity like Queen Latifah. So even though it empowers women to fight back, or walk out, it also puts this type of anti-female violence at the centre of the culture and the community at large.

**The Representation of Women in Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music**

In the roles of girlfriends or sexual-partners within hip-hop and rap cultures women are expected to work for men. As a stereotype, a woman raises his children with few expectations of him, takes care of him financially while he purposefully rails against an oppressive white bias. She is also expected to look beautiful and be sexual, with an emphasis on revealing clothing and sexualized behaviours. In many rap videos both past and present (from The Notorious B.I.G to 50 Cent) we see “scantily clad women surrounding men” (Perry, 2004, p. 1). Women are also “…commodified, they appear in the videos quite explicitly as property...(the men) are able to buy (these women) due to their wealth” (Perry, 2004, p. 75).

Women-as-Mother are alternatively represented as heads-of-households, stereotyped as fiercely loyal, protective mama bears who are also in full control. These women are strong, loud, opinionated and in charge of family life. Respected and feared, this caricature is the potential result of the disproportionate number of single-parent households, generally led by women in North American black communities. Queen Latifah has been characterized within the rap community “as a queen mother of rap” despite the fact that she doesn’t have children of her own (Keyes, 2004, p. 309). Her lyrics convey a maternal sensibility using language that indicates she will teach and shape those who are out of line. In the song *Latifah’s Had it Up to Here* (1991) she raps:

I here to make these fools out of liars
You must learn step and respect the sire
Face the fire.
Coincidentally, in the 2002 musical film *Chicago*, Queen Latifah even played a character appropriately named Matron Mama Morgan.

Generally speaking, the rest of the female population can be grouped into “Hos” or “Bitches,” with the former traditionally serving to fulfil any and all sexual needs of the alpha male and his posse, and the latter refusing to do so. As a result, the “Bitches” category will traditionally find itself alienated from the culture, denied welcome or position. They can be punished for their refusal or even shunned. An example put forth by Mark Anthony Neal in *That’s The Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* states: “We can discern how N.W.A. gleefully acknowledge participation in their self-promotion as [those] who condemn women by limiting their self-realization to the status of ‘bitches’ and ‘hoes’” (Neal, 2004, p. 570).

The representation and depiction of women in hip-hop culture and rap music are constructed through and are firmly grounded in dominant ideologies surrounding womanhood in American society. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) describes them as discursive ideologies being used to control a subordinated group (in this case, women), rooted in the desire to maintain hegemonic power, and further justifying and legitimizing the marginalization of black women. Media and popular culture becomes the common vehicle for the dissemination of the discursive construction of black womanhood. Music videos, film, television and magazine images objectifying women, irrespective of their colour, race, and ethnicity are ubiquitous across cultures (Boruszkowski 1987; Kaplan 1987; Stockbridge 1987; R. D. Vincent 1989; Collins 1991; Frith, Goodwin, & Grossberg 1993; Hurley 1994; Dines & Humez 1995; and Aufderheide 2006). Collins (2000) discussed a number of stereotypical pictures/images pervasive in hip-hop and rap cultures, namely the hypersexualized female, the asexual “mammy,” the emasculating, aggressive female, and young, unwed mothers. Perry (2004) further argues that most black female identity-building through hip-hop music freely uses objectification of the female body:

> It seemed to happen suddenly. Every time one turned on BET (Black Entertainment Television) or MTV (Music Television), one encountered a disturbing music video: Black men rapped surrounded by dozens of black and Latina women dressed in bathing suits, or scantily clad in some other fashion. Video after
video proved the same, each one more objectifying than the former (Perry, 2004, p. 175).

This is a clear commodification of women — music videos depict women as property, no less blatantly than a luxury car or fancy weapon. They are presented as seductive creatures devoid of any emotion other than the physical expression of sexual desire. This depiction of women by some male rappers’ defines the boundaries of the sexual pornography that has become heavily associated with hip-hop/rap today (Perry, 2004). Perry believes that the messages communicated through these videos are clear: A woman must be sexy and sexual in order to catch the attention of and seduce the male (2004). Like other forms of mainstream images of women, these videos likely add to the impossible body image standard prevalent among young women (Perry, 2004).

Perry’s argument is supported by Stephens and Few (2007) who studied the effects of the prevailing images within the genre. Through their study, they indentified eight sexual images depicting women in hip-hop and/or rap videos: (1) The Diva, a woman who requires an extravagant lifestyle, often depicted as scantily clad but glittering with gold and jewels. (2) The Gold Digger, one who seeks the lifestyle of a Diva, and is also sexually dressed, but less embellished. (3) The Freak, a woman who is sexually deviant and hypersexual, often caricatured as nymphomaniac or otherwise hyper-aroused. (4) The Dyke, a masculine female who needs to be feminized. (5) The Gangsta Bitch, a girl who is part of the group, often seen as practically equal. (6) The Sister Saviour, represented as a woman who is kind and care-taking, whose familial loyalty gives her worth. (7) The Earth Mother, or a loyal protector and caregiver, she offers nurturing. And (8) The Baby Mama who is left with the burden of the offspring.

Stephens and Few (2007) believe that these sexual images both inform and add to the development of a black female sense of physical identity and attractiveness, especially among young girls. Their study contends that the depiction of women in rap videos likely creates a sense of racial and gendered consciousness among young women. The researchers believe that hip-hop culture and rap videos are tools toward the creation of the female “ideal,” which particularly for adolescent girls can frame their understanding of physical attractiveness as well as present and future sexual relationships. This study is particularly important for this thesis in that it maps a direct cause/effect relationship between the self-image of young women in hip-hop and/or rap culture and the images and prevailing misogynistic ideologies characteristic of the genre.
Emerson (2002) studied the representation of black womanhood in hip-hop and rap cultures and as depicted in their music videos by identifying female artists who, through their performances, have made attempts to break out of these stereotypes. Examples are many and include such artists as Missy Elliot and Queen Latifah and some may argue (though Emerson has not yet) that Nicki Minaj is also trying to break out of these stereotypes. However, it can also be argued that Nicki Minaj is still reproducing a hypersexual image in order to sell records by dressing in provocative costumes and conforming to sexually explicit dance styles.

Similarly, Rose (1994; 2001) has studied the images and lyrics of female rappers and argues that rap music and hip-hop culture, rather than oppressing black women, actually enables them to assert their social, economic, and sexual independence. She writes that:

Salt-n-Pepa are carving out a female-dominated space in which Black women’s sexuality is openly expressed. Black women rappers sport hip-hop clothing and jewellery as well as distinctively Black hairstyles. They affirm a Black, female, working-class cultural aesthetic that is rarely depicted in American popular culture. Black women rappers resist patterns of sexual objectification and cultural invisibility, and they also resist academic reification and mainstream, hegemonic, white feminist discourse (Rose, 2001, p. 126).

Rose’s work was based on systematic content analysis of music videos that led her to conclude that black women are able to assert their social, economic and sexual independence in hip-hop culture. Meanwhile, Robert’s work (1991; 1994) is based on textual analysis and is limited to the study of a few groups, impeding the applicability of the research. Roberts (1991; 1994) tried to demonstrate that black female rappers often express feminist sensibility through the medium of music videos. She showed that black female rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte among others present an assertive rhetoric, aggressive sexuality, and a stance of defiance, which illustrate a firm feminist conscience and add to their allure.
Women Rappers and Black Female Stereotypes

The music of hip-hop and rap provides a point of view, which, however uncommon, may none-the-less circulate feminist and womanist ideas (King, 1999). E. Francis White, a black feminist author argues that a “good woman/bad woman dichotomy” is a response to the historical subjugation of black women from slavery, colonialism, Western science, and religion (White, 2001, p. 36). The “good woman,” is often illustrated as loyal, dependable and nurturing, whereas the “bad woman” is viewed as sluttish and overbearing. Katrina Bell McDonald presents a historical review of the significance of black woman as a force for resistance in her book Embracing Sisterhood (2007). She argues that black female artists use performance as a means of changing these stereotypes in order to gain respectability in attitudes across racial lines (McDonald, 2007, pp. 48-52). In some cases the media has flipped the "bad woman" stereotype to the other extreme. For example, the ratings topper The Cosby Show of the 1980s offered Claire Huxtable, a mother of five, grandmother, full time lawyer, organized housewife and overall voice of reason in her home, foil to her husband's zany antics. This ties into an interesting point made by Mike Budd and Clay Steinman in their article, “White Racism and the Cosby Show” where they explain:

[In one episode, the] opening scene following the first group of commercials has Cosby and Rashad, who plays the family lawyer-mother-wife [Claire Huxtable], making fun of others' sexism, exchanging sex role barbs, and speaking normal sitcom banter with other cast members. Then Rashad's character walks out toward the set's side door, saying "It's time for me to prepare dinner now," as if there were no connection between the earlier discussion of sexism and the person who routinely does the housework. The show's scripts minimize the conflicts of working mothers (Budd and Steinman, 1992, p. 9).

The stereotyping of black women often incorporates a black female character as a seductress, promiscuous and sexually available to men of all races. Alternatively, to illustrate the problems this stereotype has created for women of colour, Collins point out that, “According to the cult of true womanhood, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness,
and domesticity” (Collins, 2000, p. 71). These Victorian ideals, typically associated with white middle-class womanhood, are clearly in direct opposition to this prevailing image of black womanhood.

Embracing and further exacerbating this stereotype has been the image of black women as portrayed in hip-hop and/or rap music videos. She is often depicted, as was the case in the video for *Candy Shop* by 50 Cent, wearing little more than a thong, gyrating suggestively, with an intense sexuality that adds little or no additional depth to her “character” within the video narrative. As a result, black women sometimes profess the need to mimic white femininity in order to gain protection from the mainstream, white patriarchy. This has led to an increasing need to establish a discourse to contest these stereotypes and to establish alternative images in the culture, lyrics and videos of both hip-hop and rap.

Many of hip-hop and rap’s female artists have repeatedly attempted to dismantle gender stereotypes by portraying themselves as better-than or other-than men through their songs and performances. Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley argues that women rappers have tried to produce a counter discourse that contests the popular one purveyed in the music and culture (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). She argues, however, that the ideology is in fact reaffirmed every time they rail against it, since the discourse itself is dependent on “politics of respectability” (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p. 255). By attacking black men they are in fact propogating a stereotype of the emasculating woman – a caracature who belittles her man in order to be right. She further states that this creates a dialectical difference among black women, based on their socioeconomic class:

As stereotypes circulate and are disseminated beyond the confines of the black community, the dialectical representation of “good” vs. “bad” black women by black women is productive in providing a rhetorical strategy to combat the circulation of negative images. However, as we celebrate this strategy of resistance, we must simultaneously be suspicious of the subject positions that this discourse makes available to black women. If black women may choose only between the subjectivity of the “black queen” or the whore, they will find themselves trapped in an identity that
depends upon the negation of other black women (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p. 256).

Reid-Brinkley implies that black women, in trying to accept white feminist norms, are actually trapping themselves into vilifying each other and condemning one another as “bad.” In other words, an over-emphasis on “good” black woman in songs by female rappers creates an expectation that the rest of the women must live up to within the culture, the music industry and society itself.

Rose (2001) believes that women rappers’ lyrics are just as likely as their male counterparts to present anti-feminist notions of sexuality, heterosexual courtship, and body images. However, she also asserts that music videos and performances for female artists create opportunities to express sexual freedom, independence and in some cases explicit domination of men (2001). She maintains that in order to spread a discourse of womanism, black female rappers have started to, “form a dialogue with working class black women and men, offering young black women small but potent culturally reflexive public space” (Rose, 2001, p. 238).

Rose points to the notion that much female rap is distinctively oppositional in nature to the traditional hip-hop and rap discourses, as illustrated by a discussion of the portrayal of women in these musical genres within her book. Rose states that like all other popular music, rap depicts women in two ways: Good and bad. The former, according to Rose, is very rare while the latter is the more common, sometimes going so far as to accuse the stereotype of being no more than an “unpaid prostitute” who, rather than accepting payment outright, instead manipulates men for money. To that end, she must also be highly sexual and inexhaustibly desirous.

Rose (2001) identifies a profound fear among young male rappers who express that women use sexuality to empower themselves and ultimately subjugate men. Their lyrics also convey experiencing manipulation, loss of control, and betrayal. To reassert dominance, young male rappers might fight back with violence and sexual assault, justified by this perceived loss of control. Ludacris exemplified this in his song You’re a Ho (2000) where he responds to the female protagonist when she says: “I wasn’t a ho last night” and he replies, “Ho, bring yo ass,” and she answers, “Ok hold on.”
Ultimately, Rose asserts that black female rappers’ openly sexualize their bodies and assert sexual freedom in order to challenge the pre-existing “ideal” of what makes a woman female, even if male hip-hop and rap music responds with violence or the threat thereof. Rose (2001) states that black female rappers have successfully attracted a huge male fan following and are able to encourage a dialogue between young men and women to challenge a few of the sexist ideas of the male rappers. In her view, the male dominated hip-hop and rap cultures provide very little public space to promote female and feminist driven ideas, especially when they seek to openly challenge the male point of view.

Bakari Kitwana, in his book The Hip-Hop Generation, asks the question:

> What do we mean by politicizing the hip-hop generation?” Is our goal to run hip-hop generationers for office, to turn out votes for Democrats and Republicans, to form a third party, or to provide our generation with a concrete political education (Kitwana, 2002, p. 206)?

According to Kitwana, more and more hip-hop and rap artists are analyzing and critiquing the social, political, and economic structures that govern their lives. This goal might not sit well for some in light of the prolific allusions to violent retribution, anti-gay sentiment and lifestyles of excess ascribed to many of the lyrics dominating mainstream gangsta rap music. But the misogynist rhetoric, at least from the point of view of some scholars, proves similarly worrisome.

The definition that Rose has provided in Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America comments on one aspect of the feminist viewpoint at least with regard to female rap artists:

> I would say that feminists [in hip-hop and rap] believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward that change. Either wrote, spoke, or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations (organizations) that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women
are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality (Rose, 1994, p. 176).

Once Rose establishes a working definition for feminism, she continues, “Once feminism was understood as a mode of analysis rather than a label for a group of women associated with a particular social movement, MC Lyte [a pioneering and popular female rapper of the 1980s and early ‘90s] was much more comfortable discussing the importance of black women’s independence…”(Rose, 1994, p. 176).

The current socio-political agenda of the feminist movement within the hip-hop and rap subcultures critically analyzes the dominant or alpha-masculine versus alpha-feminine constructs in order to promote the incorporation of feminism into lyrics, videos and the overall culture. This has been termed by Pough as a “public pedagogy,” the bringing together of hip-hop and feminism (Pough, 2003). She argues that: “[r]ap is the contemporary art form that gives voice to a part of the population that would not have a voice otherwise….I think rap has political potential — potential that should be honed by the feminist movement in general and by third-wave hip-hop feminists in particular” (Pough, 2003, p. 237).

According to Pough, the main aim of the feminist hip-hop movement is to disseminate a feminist message lyrically through the music and in the end “give young women the tools necessary to critique the messages they are getting” (Pough, 2003, p. 241). I find that feminist rap not only critiques mainstream rap music, which historically has disseminated negative images and stereotypes to the arguable detriment of women, but also works toward a change in the portrayal and stereotyping of women in a way that promotes positivity, individuality and freedom of expression.

Previous studies of hip-hop and rap feminism (Keyes, 1993; Rose, 1994) identify those female rappers who made attempts at responding to the male domination of the culture, the insidious misogyny therein, and the cultural practices of hip-hop and rap that chose against concealment of these attitudes. Missy Elliot is one of the most known examples. These female artists responded lyrically in the form of a dialogue, keeping communication lines open to their male counterparts, rather than opposing or chastising them outright, as what Rose referred to as a “part of a dialogic process with male rappers (and others), rather than [a stance] in complete opposition to them” (Rose, 1994, p. 147).
Perry suggests that female rappers of the 1980s and early 1990s did not objectify themselves sexually as exemplified by MC Lyte’s style. Although her look at the time was attractive and even at times sexy, she never relied on a complete sexualisation of her body. Instead, she remained comparatively classy (by today’s standards) in appearance, wearing feminine suits and dresses. But, Perry observes that after the turn of the 21st century increased attention was paid to female artists who used their bodies and sexuality in order to maintain popularity and sell records. She writes: “sexuality, sexual objectification, and beautification constituted fundamental parts of the marketing of the female MC, thus collapsing distinctions between the video ‘ho’ and the female artist” (Perry, 2004, p. 156). Therefore it seems that most female rappers on today’s media stage must accept the objectification of their own as well as other women’s bodies in order to build up their mainstream and commercial success.

All genres of hip-hop and rap contain messages fraught with one prevailing masculine stereotype in particular – the “badman.” Within this construct, a black male is seen as criminal, violent and abusive. Female rappers, in order to meet the demands of their fan base, initially embraced the stereotype of the “badman,” a violent trickster out for control, in order to gain mainstream acceptance as an artist (Perry, 2004). Using language of “violence, power, and subversive tricksterism” they established their legitimacy (Perry, 2004, p. 156). This acceptance of violence as a means to power has four potential effects on their female fan base in particular: It suggests that violence is the key to community building and preservation, at any cost; It gives women living under a yoke of abuse the option to retaliate against victimization with violence (at least psychologically); Acting out the “badman” allows female artists to use violence as a tool to get back at the oppressive male; and violent imagery and roles illustrate the construct of rebellion against traditional and stereotypical roles for black women, namely as caretakers, pillars of the black community, sluts, or emasculator (Perry, 2004). In this way there continues to be built a strong group of popular female rappers who are breaking down the stereotypical depiction of women by way of music videos and carving out space for themselves within a world in which they are otherwise silenced.

Rose argues that while black female rappers bear a responsibility to be the voices of black womanhood, they must also adhere to the standards of popular hip-hop and rap cultures as developed by their male counterparts (Rose, 1994). To adhere to these cultural aesthetics, they
must represent more than an educated elite (the demographic I chose to study for my research), but they must appeal to a black working class women’s ideology.

Rose further contends that creators of rap music, and especially female rappers, have established an identity among young women regarding their sexuality, race, culture, class, and nation that can prove fundamentally empowering. Rap creates a political and cultural arena for the struggle among youth for a better world, especially among black youth.

**The Commercialization of Hip-Hop and Rap in Popular Culture**

Stuart Hall describes popular culture as “a displacement and a hegemonic shift in the definition of culture – a movement from high culture to American mainstream popular culture and its mass-cultural, image-mediated, technological form” (Hall, 2005, p. 286). He states that black popular culture in particular is embedded in racial, social, class, and gender distinctions. This is reflected in the examples within hip-hop and rap music where the message is particularly antagonistic, racial, and gendered.

Hip-hop and rap cultures and music were not always considered part of the popular discourse because of their specific racial and cultural sensibilities. However, in the late 20th century both rap and hip-hop became a defining part of the American pop movement (Watkins, 2005). Watkins (2005) observes that popular music was identified by the following characteristics: “Sweet melodies, stylistic conservatism, and amicable lyrics.” In the post-Soundscan era, a technology by which what the population at large was listening to could be better tracked and compiled, the whole definition of popular music underwent a change. Untraditional genres including hip-hop and rap found their way onto what had once been a very different looking Top 40 chart (Watkins, 2005, p. 39).

Watkins observes that gangsta rap evolved stylistically throughout the decade and became the uncensored voice of young black men living in poor, and in some cases marginalized neighbourhoods (Watkins, 2005). But he also considered gangsta rap as “meticulous prose, a shrewd, market-driven performance that craftily exploited America’s fear of poor, ghetto youths” (Watkins, 2005, p. 45). Watkins believes that the gangsta rappers took advantage of this fear to achieve a specific goal. If they were to be alienated within society, it would be a self-determined
alienation. They would no longer be hated, which weakened them, but rather, they would be feared:

Following their ambitions and commercial instincts, gangsta rappers created their own world and, in the process, emerged as an unlikely group of music makers…who turned the blighted conditions of ghetto poverty into an oasis of adolescent fantasy and popular entertainment (Watkins, 2005, p. 46).

Thus, Watkins infers that the anti-institutional sentiments and violence, not to mention the glorification of wealth, power and hyper-sexuality pervasive in much hip-hop and rap music is actually a means to attract an adolescent mind searching for identity and meaning, as a means of popularizing the genre. Hip-hop and rap became popular by romanticising a life of poverty, and ennobling crime as a socially acceptable means to an end and thus, a compelling narrative is drawn (Watkins, 2005), the subgenre of gangsta rap in particular did so. Hip-hop and rap both moved away from themes of one world and social equality and as they became increasingly popular, embraced stronger themes surrounding power and violence (Hall, 2005).

**Hip-Hop and Rap Capitalism**

The hip-hop and rap cultures and music are more than a political and social movement, they are also a part of many major industries that spans fashion, cars and automotive accessories, restaurants and specific food choices, as well as music, television, technology, games, magazines and film (Lusane, 2004). Many believe that rap has jumped on a bandwagon aiming to sell the “American Dream” (Negus, 2004), even if the dream from the ghetto doesn’t include a white picket fence. While they may not be selling a secure job and a nuclear family of four, what they are selling is the compelling lifestyle of excess.

In the hip-hop industry, profits tend to be large with the cost of production kept relatively low and a high rate of consumption with the 15-24 year-old demographic spending around $100 million a year (Lusane, 2004).

The commercialization of the hip-hop and rap genres, according to M. Elizabeth Blair (Blair, 2004) has totally removed the hip-hop and rap subcultures from their original contexts and
ideologies in order to become competitive on a capitalist stage. Blair believes this will eventually bring about the demise of these subcultures (Blair, 2004) and could lead to the emergence of a new subculture that has the potential to be bigger, better and less profane.

Hip-hop and rap are actively marketed to youth across all races (Swedenburg, 2004). Part of what makes up their successful appeal is their adversarial nature: “The marketing revolution [regarding hip-hop and rap] is that no other popular musical genres are so overtly oppositional. What is remarkable is how well (political) rap sells” (Swedenburg, 2004, p. 584). The genre has been further commercialized through the “electronic dissemination of hip-hop” and the Internet, which allows for easy spread of the ideas, style choices, as well as the music of its artists. Watkins argues that the invention of Internet and electronic media has aided in the popularization of hip-hop music while spreading its message:

[Hip-hop] has established the conditions for mobilizing a youth culture that is rapidly becoming global in scope as it connects youth from desperate conditions and places. For example, it would be impossible to make reference to the “hip-hop nation” without the broadcasting capabilities of the media technology…The communications media enable new forms of access to and association among communities that transcend geographical boundaries. The growth of and spread of hip-hop culture are an illustrative example (Watkins, 2004, p. 568).

The genres themselves boast popular artists from the Far East to the Arab world, some of whom are said to have assisted in major political revolutions, including 2011’s Arab Spring. NBC featured the story of Boge, a Libyan rapper they called “a would be Jay-Z” in September, 2011. One of the rhymes he shared with the reporter was, “Our families are dying but yeah we're still tough/Gadhafi is trying to assassinate us.”

Nevertheless, there are numerous rappers who still do not believe in utilizing the electronic media and try to keep their music constricted to the traditional form of dissemination (Watkins, 2004). As argued by Lusane (2004), “For many rappers, Hip-hop nationalism promises both riches and national integrity” (Lusane, 2004, p. 353). He believes that the commercialization of rap has enabled the emergence of numerous entrepreneurs expanding markets ranging from
clothing, to accessories, to movies, and so forth, all based on hip-hop (Lusane, 2004). Lusane particularly points to the number of black entrepreneurs for whom doors have opened. The multi-billion dollar corporations of Sean Combs, Dr. Dre and Kanye West are only three of hip-hop’s cash kings. But as the genres are increasingly exploited for financial gain, the impact on their consumers might prove detrimental in the long run. On top of the financial calamities inherent in a spendthrift lifestyle, Lusane argues that the suggestive lyrics of some rappers make alcohol, drugs and crime a desirable commodity at an age when people are young and susceptible to poor choice making (Lusane, 2004).

Watts calls rap music, especially gangsta rap, an “overdose of commercialized reality” which sells violence, crime, poverty and overt-sexuality to mass markets (Watts, 2004, p. 602). Watts believes that “consumerism is in the midst of symbolically reproducing the street code, commodifying it in the form of an easy-to-open package of hip” (Watts, 2004, p. 602). Perry argues that many rappers remain local while the highly commercialized ones go global and attain mainstream success (Perry, 2004). She states, “Consumerism touches on the pleasure derived from the beauty of things, from the adornment of the self. Hip-hop consumerism is in part about the use of luxury to express black style” (Perry, 2004, p. 197).

The argument is that luxury goods are shown in music videos to enhance the status of the artists, rather than as a satire of white privilege (2004). Perry believes that the over-consumerist approach actually degrades the poor blacks of the ghetto. Rose, meanwhile argues that the commercialization of hip-hop and rap cultures and music has undermined the genres as authentic African-American oral tradition (Rose, 2005). She argues that the commoditization of hip-hop and rap is not a new phenomenon, since neither genre is new to industry. Apart from this, she states that hip-hop products like clothing, music, and brands have always been part of the commercial saleability of the genre. Rose (2005) further argues against the popular cultural theory’s view that hip-hop in its earlier stages was not motivated by profit, but by pleasure. She suggests:

The problem was not that they were uniformly uninterested in profit, rather, many of the earliest practitioners were unaware that they could profit from their pleasure. Once the link was made, hip-hop artists began marketing themselves wholeheartedly. Just as
graffiti writers hitched a ride on the subways and used its power to distribute their tags, rappers ‘hijacked’ the market for their own purposes, riding the currents that are already out there, not just for wealth but for empowerment (Rose, 2005, p. 411).

Like many scholars (for example, Neal 2004; Perry 2004; Watts 2004) I believe that the commercialization of hip-hop was in part successful due to the antagonistic messages attached to it. The oppositional nature that regularly appears in the genre also led to its extreme marketability using the compelling narrative of excess, power and anti-institutional sentiments. The commercialized sexuality seen in many popular music videos further increased the mass appeal and its commercial value (at times to the detriment of what could have been a much more positive and socially transformative message).

**Theoretical Framework**

In setting up the theoretical framework, I want to divide what I learned during my reading into two main points:

A) Hip-hop and rap share complexities in terms of gendering and sexuality but also in terms of an anti-racist resistance to white domination, nationalism and commercialism, and;

B) Women are positioned within hip-hop and rap in ambivalent ways, as performers and as audience members. These two roles are not mutually exclusive and the roles vary in terms of agency and positioning.

In this thesis I look at some of the negative messages in hip-hop and rap cultures potentially impacting young female fans who both enjoy much of the music but loath some of its messages. Rose (1994) suggests an enjoyment of hip-hop and/or rap music impacts its listeners by pointing out that: “young, white listeners [are] affected by dominant racial discourses regarding African Americans and cultural difference in the United States” (Rose, 1994, p. 5). In other words, in order to accept many of the prevailing ideas about race in America, first white and black youth must accept certain stereotypes about African-American social structure that have been long fought in the ring of civil rights. Rose argues that young people try to emulate the artists on the basis of the “cultural, social, and linguistic” images and ideas disseminated by and associated
with them (Rose, 1994, p. 19). Applying Rose’s concept of emulation and association, I propose that the enjoyment of hip-hop and rap not only encourages young men and women to buy the music, but also to engage in their respective cultures, as well as propagate their messages whether they are positive or negative. This is especially true for those who take part in these genres as artists themselves. The focus group participants in this study engaged in hip-hop and rap cultures by buying the music and consuming the music, but also by wearing the clothing, hairstyles and makeup of, and engaging in the lifestyles associated with the cultures.

Being what is arguably one of the most popular youth subcultures, hip-hop and rap are important drivers for major consumerist activities. Much scholarship on the more aggressive messages in hip-hop and rap lyrics about women, suggest they have historically been and continue to belittle, silence and marginalize them, a practice which is broadly accepted by the powers that be within the industry and the culture at large – particularly in terms of the popular subgenre, gangsta rap. There is extensive research on hip-hop and rap cultures including studies on social identity formation as well as studies of race, class, socioeconomic background, sexuality, and gender.

Some research has concentrated on a rising feminist public pedagogy that is trying to forge a dialogue between these male dominated subcultures and the women who consider themselves a part of them, challenging the stereotypical representations of women. It also seeks to challenge the misogyny that is so blatant particularly in gangsta rap music. However, throughout this social discourse on race, class, sexuality, gender and commercialization, little attention has been paid to the effects on young women being the silent, underrepresented and often marginalized gender in a culture they continue to embrace. My thesis aims to contribute to this area via a focus group discussion.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

When choosing the right methodology, it is important to carefully consider and research similar methods that past researchers have used regarding a specific topic, or even the more general topic area (Rose, 1994; Anderson, 2003; Hayes, 2006). For the purposes of this thesis, I have decided to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with a focus on qualitative data through the focus group. My goal is to examine and come to a fundamental understanding of hip-hop and rap as subcultures, looking at how their music is consumed and (re)produced, with perceived racialized, gendered, and sexualized ideologies. My interest has evolved into a focus on a quantitative study of lyrics of popular hip-hop and rap music, and an analysis of a focus group discussion among young women who are enrolled in interdisciplinary programmes that emphasise critical race and gender studies about their pleasure and enjoyment of hip-hop and rap music, even when the lyrical messages of the music are particularly offensive.

My research question is as follows: How are young women in academia affected by the culture and music of hip-hop and rap? In terms of my quantitative document analysis, I asked: How many times does the lyrical language appear to reflect negative attitudes about women and race relations, and/or appear to reflect positive views about violence, drug use, and criminal behaviour?

In particular I was interested in women who described themselves as fans of hip-hop and rap, but who also enjoyed the most classically hardcore genre, gangsta rap in spite of the fact that by-and-large it alienates, marginalizes and fundamentally disrespects them because of their gender, socio-economic position and intellect. In the framing of these questions, I included my own personal interest in how these young women construct, interpret, and (re)articulate their individualized identities on the basis of the investments that they are making and have made in the hip-hop and rap cultures and music.

The focus group research included four women of various ethnicities (white Canadian, Caribbean Canadian, Iraqi-Filipino Canadian, and Chinese Canadian), all of whom claim to take
pleasure in and enjoy the hip-hop and rap music of (for the case of this study, specifically) male artists from the gangsta rap subgenre. I anticipated that the dialogue between the women would at times embrace gangsta rap despite its being so rich in misogynistic undertones. I further believed that the compelling narratives of hip-hop and rap, with their profound ability to tap into the animal and base urges of all genders, might prove more influential than a feminist modality that they were studying. However, I anticipated that my research would also reveal the desires and frustrations bound up with these young women’s belief systems toward the most offensive lyrics in the subgenre. Another goal was to help young women come to understand their individualized identities in various ways within a mainstream, collective, male-dominated hip-hop/rap culture and industry.

**Hip-Hop and Rap Lyrics**

I based my analysis of lyrics on the text *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (Spence, 2003). The text spans hip-hop and rap music over the past 20-plus years and includes the lyrics of 175 songs that cover all the subgenres of hip-hop and rap, including gangsta rap, new school, pop rap, and old school hip-hop. I chose this text because of its comprehensive breakdown of every artist and group by four specific subgenres. For the purposes of this study, I considered the songs on a spectrum from most to least thematically misogynist – with old school hip-hop ranking very low with only 1% seeming anti-female, if not entirely feminist in nature to new school at 22%, then pop rap at 28% and finally gangsta rap at 42% ranking very high, where the sexualisation and marginalization of women is rampant. Organizing the songs in this way revealed that, by and large, most hip-hop and rap music, regardless of subgenre, ranks high on the spectrum of misogyny with only a few songs in the old school hip-hop subgenre ranking comparatively low.

It is important to state that the songs were ultimately chosen by the editor of the book based on a wide sampling of songs under each sub-genre deemed central to the culture by a wide audience of both fans and critics of hip-hop and rap. Spence (2003) divides rap music into four major subgenres:

- **Gangsta Rap and Old School Hip-Hop** which emerged in the 1970s with N.W.A. [acronym for Niggaz With Attitudes] one of the first popular groups that changed the face of rap, by exposing a new,
incendiary, in-your-face brand of rap, which was quickly labelled “Gangsta.” Guns, drugs, and anti-police rhetoric became the flavour of the day, a stylistic viewpoint that still persists to this day (p. v-vi).

Some of the most famous old school rap artists were Sugarhill Gang, Run-DMC, and Grandmaster Flash (Dyson, 2004, p.61). New school hip-hop and pop rap emerged from old school hip-hop, and the former categories overlap. Spence’s text not only clearly identifies which artist falls into which category, it also traces the evolution of hip-hop, not just as a type or brand of music but as culture in itself.

I decided to only include the lyrics of male artists in the content analysis for my study. I was less interested in using the lyrics of female rappers (although they are discussed in terms of how they differ from their male counterpart) in large part because the emotional impact of the language used by men to talk about women was much more evocative in terms of my study.

The Five Themes

A number of those who study hip-hop and rap, including Hooks (1994), Blair (2004), Watkins (2005), and Hayes (2006) argue that, since hip-hop and rap have moved into the mainstream, record labels act as corporations and agents who “reinforce a position and agenda” (Blair, 2004, p.499). The goal of my content analysis was to measure the frequency of the appearance of five themes in the lyrics of male hip-hop and rap music. Each of these themes, which I describe in detail in the ensuing paragraphs, are generally viewed as negative by and large within popular culture. They are glaring in their frequency within the hip-hop and rap genres. I developed the following five themes on the basis of both Spence’s work and additional secondary research:

- Sexual exploitation and disrespect towards women,
- Ostentatious display of wealth,
- Glamourization of tobacco, alcohol, illegal substances, and weapons,
- Territory establishment,
- Inclusion of derogatory and racially charged terminology.
Rationale for the Creation of Five Themes

I found many thematic similarities across all narratives in the four subgenres of rap. Some recurring themes featured the use of narcotics, firearms, and the blatant objectification of women (Rose, 1994; Aziz, 1995; Keyes, 2004). Other themes centred around the maintenance of an alpha identity (Walcott, 1996; Dei, 2004) and credibility (Rose, 1994) or in other words, domination of territory, others and society at large are central to positive identity formation within the culture. An attitude identified by Milner (2004) pertaining to the genre suggests that “your identity becomes defined by the objects you display” (Milner, p.157) or that what you own indicates your monetary worth.

In today’s society, women hold more senior positions in the workplace than ever before. On the home front, contrary to some of the popular beliefs of the 1950’s and 1960’s, women and men are expected to share in the familial responsibilities and domestic chores. Still themes within popular culture pertaining to alpha-male behaviour remain. The idea of territorial domination continues to be the ideal. Perhaps to some it seems antiquated at a time when any self-help book or pop song will tell you that money “can’t buy you love.” It seems that some of the messages in hip-hop and rap music not only differ from much of the mainstream “white” societal values, but actually stand in opposition to it. Stephens and Wright put it:

    Middle class backgrounds, different ethnicities, races, nationalities and communities combined politically conscious poetry with collages of musical beats that spoke, simultaneously, in opposition to the macro societal structure of the United States (Stephens and Wright, 2000, p. 24)

They do so as much to delineate themselves from it as they do to simultaneously shock and rally their audience. Eminem, for example, is a great example of the shock value that rap posses with Germain (2001) writing about “the public outcry of [Eminem]” (84) who has built his reputation out of shocking his audience.

The first theme, sexual exploitation and disrespect towards women, refers to how women are positioned within the lyrics created by principally male hip-hop and rap artists and the narrative and ideology of the cultures. This theme is striking due to a repetition in derogatory imagery
pertaining to women. Referenced as “bitches” and “ho’s” among a series of other negative terms, to call women marginalized in the genre is an understatement (Kitwana, 2004; Morgan, 2004). In hip-hop and rap music videos and lyrics, women are no more than their sexualized bodies (Emerson, 2002; Motapanyane, 2006) to be owned, ordered and finally disposed of at the will of men.

The second theme, ostentatious display of wealth, refers to the connection between image formation through objects and material possessions and how they indicate power. This theme is compelling on many levels for the audience, as it appeals to a primal desire for ownership and wild greed. The possession of money in huge quantities as well as ownership of expensive items, principally cars, women and jewels are commonplace lyrically across subgenres as well as in the personal narrative of many hip-hop and rap artists. The more important and prestigious they are deemed by their friends and cohorts, the hip-hop community and the listening community at large, the more power they have, and ultimately, the more stuff they will get to own. Numerous scholars note that material possessions are often coveted, giving their owner increased status and power in his community. The possession of wealth is of paramount importance for a rapper to have credibility in the “hood” (Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002; Dyson, 2007).

The third theme, glamourization of tobacco, alcohol, and illegal substances and weapons, focuses on the frequent tendency of male hip-hop and rap artists to glorify violence, alcohol, and drugs within their videos and songs. The illegalities most typically glorified tend to take place within and against their own community. It is used as a way to shun the unwanted, or to teach a broader lesson and create fear among those who would attempt to challenge the power of a community alpha (including black women). This theme is arguably the most disturbing in that it tends to express an outright disregard for human life. Within it, murder and physical harm are often viewed as socially acceptable ways to work out differences, no matter what those differences are – minor and major infractions alike. Drugs are considered cool principally because of their inherent danger. The stronger you are, the more you can overcome, self-inflicted or otherwise. Of course, narcotics, alcohol and weapons are a part of other popular culture movements as well. In fact, some even include extreme examples of misogyny. Popular country music, for example, has an endless number of songs that lyrically illustrate the alpha-male predisposition toward women-hating and gun loving. Often the protagonists drink heavily and glorify revenge. One example is the song, Whips and Things by country singer, David Allan
Cowe where he sings: “I would beat her black and blue when she called me names/chained her to the basement wall where she went insane/and I was in to whips'n'things she was into pain.”

An even more gruesome example by legendary country singer, Dwight Yoakum in the song She Wore Red Dresses sings:

I searched ’til I found them, and I cursed at the sight
Of their sleeping shadows, in the cold neon light,
In the dark morning silence, I placed the gun to her head.
She wore red dresses, but now she lay dead.

However, gangsta rap artists in particular stand out because these behaviours do not merely exist, they are boasted about, held up as an example of how to be. An ability to smoke weed without getting hurt or caught is seen as almost Darwinian in skill level. Similarly beating, and other means of inflicting bodily harm on others, is looked upon with reverence. The more dead bodies you’ve created, the more power you have. As predated by the stereotypes of the Italian mobster, strength is often directly proportional to how widely you are feared. For example:

The biggest problem in the gangsta rap culture is that the violence implied in the music has come to life and is literally devastating the ranks of its performers. Encouraged by the boastful thuggishness of some stars, glorified by some in the media, and embraced in music videos, the violence has also spilled into the community of fans and hangers-on. (Geier, 1997, p.32).

A glorified and continuous display of alcohol and drug abuse in the music videos of gangsta rap songs make the user seem laid back, in control and dominating death. It is viewed as a way to push the envelope. Someone who is high has no fear and therefore, has the most power. This portrayal of illegal substances and weapons is compelling to an audience looking for strength and identity. Further, it separates the genre from the rest of society where the favoured cultural ideal is to “Just Say No.” By creating and cementing this alternative ideology, simplistic though it may be, there is an inevitable cohesion and sense of belonging for group members. The idea that one
must engage in these activities (drinking, smoking, and using violence) in order to gain prestige, is one that members of the culture might be tempted follow.

The fourth theme, *establishing territory*, alludes to the idea that creating a territorial identity within the hip-hop or rap communities is vital for an artist (or member) to be respected and to succeed both professionally and in life. Turf wars are commonplace among the narratives of hip-hop and rap artists who lay claim to actual neighbourhoods as well as online communities, ideologies and even movements. As described by numerous academics (Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002; Watkins, 2005; Dyson, 2007), many male hip-hop and rap artists talk about their struggles to be the “king” of their own domain, i.e., of their “ghetto” or “hood.” Watkins (2005) refers to the artist’s struggle in hip-hop/rap music as one that completes a journey from “ghetto reality” (p.2) to the mainstream entertainment industry. Rose (1994) and Boyd (2002) examine the idea of the “ghetto” in hip-hop/rap culture as a space of toughness. Once the artist emerges from the “ghetto,” he will always be identified by that symbolism and representation.

The fifth theme is *inclusion of derogatory and racially charged language*. Hip-hop and rap lyrics often rely heavily on the inclusion of racially charged words, often taken out of racist white vernacular and re-imagined as black empowerment slang. For example the word “nigger,” mostly pronounced “nigga” but for the purposes of this paper, to limit distraction, will be solely referred to as the “n-word” has largely been embraced as a way to reclaim identity (Davis, 1992; Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002) as well as to identify and alienate those who have wronged the artist. Another rationale for the creation of this category emerges from the research conducted by Boyd (2002) and Wynter (2002). The latter researcher indicated that though, in the 1980s, white youth in the hip-hop culture refrained from calling each other the n-word, whereas, today they appear comfortable using it with regards to each other, as well as with their African-American counterparts. In contrast, Boyd (2002) considers the n-word a term that is socially unacceptable for white youth, or any white person, or non-black for that matter, to use. He states that white youth are “prohibited from using a word that black people now control” (Boyd, 2002, p.40). But both Boyd (2002) and Wynter (2002) agree that the use and inclusion of the n-word in hip-hop and rap has not impacted racism in the West for the better. In addition, the use of the n-word by white male hip-hop and rap artists such as Eminem (Johnson, 2003; Kitwana, 2005) leads to consideration of issues about appropriation. Where the gay community attempted a similar reclamation with the word “queer” throughout the 1990’s, and concedes that while homophobia
did not decrease as a result, personal pride among the community at large, did measurably increase. Robin Brontsema in the article, “A Queer Revolution: Reconceptualizing The Debate over Linguistic Reclamation” argues the following:

[The word] queer experienced a rebirth in the early 1990s due to several factors: the limitations of gay and lesbian as universal categories and homosexuality itself as their foundation; the AIDS crisis and its behaviour-based prevention education and identity-transcendent activism; and Queer Nation’s coalitional politics of difference and its impact on the reconceptualization of sexual identity (Brontsema, 2004, p. 4).

Quantitative Methodology

The index of the Spence text is organized according to artist and genre; the content analysis is structured by artist, since its focus is to review the lyrics of hip-hop and rap artists. Spence lists 97 artists in total, of whom 11 are female and 86 are male. Some of the artists are part of a larger band or group. Others have more than one song in the text. Only the first song of every male artist (including those who are part of a band or group) was used. If any artist has four or more songs in the book, (of which nine do), only the first and third songs are included.

I analyzed 95 songs in the content analysis. I created a five-step process for those 95. As the first step, I created a grid, and, on the left hand side, I listed each song accompanied by the name of the artist(s) and the page numbers where the song appears in the Spence text. On the right hand side at the top of the grid, I placed the five themes expressed as letters, A, B, C, D, and E. I also provided the themes under the legend at the end of Table 1, Content Analysis Worksheet. The rationale for the use of the grid was the need to create a way to tabulate the results in a clear and concise form. [See Table 1.]

The second step was to tabulate the results through a point system (one point for yes, zero points for no). If one of the themes appeared at any point within the lyrics, the song would receive one point. It was important to provide only one point even if the song touched on the theme numerous times, since the main objective was to see if the song does address each theme.
In the third step, I wanted to discover if there was a difference within the music in terms of the number of times a theme was addressed, and in the fourth step I wrote notes about the lyrics as I read them. These notes were based on 35 songs out of the total of 95 analyzed. These songs required further analysis for a number of reasons, including the clear messaging by the artist and the use of specific words and concepts. I categorized these 35 songs as “controversial” in the sense that I was interested in examining further the specific ways in which these male hip-hop and rap artists project their images. For example, there were those who took aim at gays and lesbians, while others made violent references to the vagina, for example, in one instance, as something to “cut up” and “beat.” Some artists talked about drug pushing and murdering other black rappers and community members. In short, a song was deemed “controversial” if it contained excessive violence, racism or excessive prejudice, or criminal acts.

The content of the fifth and final step was subdivided into two separate tables. These tables, [see Table 2 and Table 3] graph the points and provide accompanying percentages. This information is also discussed in chapter three, Content Analysis where I conclude that many of the lyrics in hip-hop and rap negatively impact women in academia when critically analyzed.

The Focus Group

I was interested in how young female university students who are familiar with and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap music would respond to songs by male rappers. The study relied on a conversation surrounding specific hip-hop and rap songs and centred on questions about feminist, racial and personal identity, as well as general emotional responses. I felt that four participants was a good number for an in-depth discussion, so that I could really extrapolate and understand each participant’s specific opinions and thoughts. I focused on using a qualitative approach. A larger group would be more difficult to manage as a qualitative study. Four women of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds were chosen for the study. Many more volunteered but I only wanted to include four voices because my supervisor (at the time) suggested that four would be a good size for the scope of the project. All shared an interest in sociology and the impact of popular culture on the individual. I hoped that all four of my subjects had a solid belief in the importance of feminism (they did) and that each of them similarly claimed to have an affinity, respect and liking for male hip-hop and rap performers including hardcore gangsta rap artists and their music (they did).
I did make use of music by female artists to make certain points during the discussion. However, none was included in my analysis because scholars such as Rose (1994), Kitwana (2002), and Neal (2004) argue that as hip-hop and rap become more mainstream, the genres increase their emphases on women as passive, sexually compliant participants within a male hip-hop/rap culture including lyrics, music videos and other entertainment narrative like print and film. Female artists were represented in my analysis in order to gain an understanding of how their voices are differently received from their male counterparts. However, I did consider the arguments laid out by authors Rose (1994), Kitwana (2002), and Neal (2004) which suggest that, as hip-hop/rap becomes more mainstream, the genre increases its emphasis on women as passive, sexually compliant participants within male hip-hop/rap culture including, lyrics, music videos and other entertainment narrative including print and film. I was interested in whether or not the female voice would serve as a counter-balance to that of the male. It is important to note that I did not choose songs by female artists to discuss with the participants (the participants themselves brought them in as examples of songs they liked). I later felt not using female hip hop-rap artists in the discussion group might have ultimately been to some minor detriment of my analysis as a whole. However, as I later report, the women chose music by both male and female artists. Their choice of music by female artists subsequently proved advantageous in that it gave me a chance to understand their response to the messages of female artists as compared to those of their male counterparts.

The four young female subjects who took part in the study are from a variety of social backgrounds and ethnicities. All are currently enrolled in critical, interdisciplinary, undergraduate departments in Ontario universities. I believed the latter point, due to a crucial understanding of critical thinking would help all of us to examine how, and why young women who are familiar with and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap by male artists take pleasure in and enjoy the music. [For further information, please see Table 7: Ethical Review Protocol Form.]

Focus groups are defined as “group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues” (Pugsley, 1996, p.117). Though it can be argued that a focus group does not reflect an entire populace, the group can function as a “self contained means of data collection and as a shared component for social research” (Pugsley, 1996, p.117). According to Pugsley, the use of a focus group can be seen as a method to “explore sensitive topics.” Another reason I chose to use a
focus group was to allow me to position the participants as knowledgeable informants who, in the group setting, could elaborate and challenge each other’s knowledge. I wanted an open, inviting atmosphere for the discussion. For this, a focus group seemed to allow the most opportunities for the sharing and discussion of opinions and ideas.

The primary method that I used to select the first participant for the focus group was snowball sampling. Dornyei (2003) defines snowball sampling as the following:

[A] “chain reaction” whereby the researcher identifies a few people who meet the criteria of the particular study and then asks these participants to identify further members of the population. This technique is useful when studying groups whose membership is not readily identifiable (e.g., teenage gang members) (Dornyei, 2003, p.72).

Snowball sampling is appropriate for use primarily in two contexts: First of all, it is an informal method that may be used to reach a target population that, as Dornyei stated, may not be “readily identifiable.” Secondly, snowball sampling is most frequently used to conduct qualitative research, primarily through interviews.

I had a contact in a Women’s Studies department at a university in Ontario who helped me to find my first research participant. The specific young woman had just graduated with her B.A. in Sociology and was entering a graduate programme in a related discipline. We had a productive introductory telephone conversation and, after explaining the purpose and intended structure of the focus group, I sent to her, via email attachment, the Call for Participants Form, and the Consent For Voluntary Participation Form. At this point I also created a file folder for all communication via email, and I labelled it: Hip-Hop/Rap Dissertation Emails. I did not include any of the emails between myself and the participants in the Table because of the private nature of the communication (i.e., personal information about the participants and the names of

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2 Please see all these ethics-related materials under Table 4: Call for Participants Form, and Table 5: The Consent for Voluntary Participation Form.
individuals to contact). My role as researcher is to collect all the necessary information and, at the same time, avert any risks to privacy and confidentiality.

Further conversations with the first participant indicated that it was too difficult for her to find another suitable participant for the focus group. I then decided to contact specific individuals in interdisciplinary programmes focused on gender and race at Ontario universities. I found their contact information mainly via school websites and sent them an introductory email that stated the purpose of my research and my background in order to engage interest. I also included the Call for Participants form, in which I asked the contact people to post on their websites and in their departments. I also requested distribution of the form to professors, who might announce the project in class and any other effort they might make to disseminate the information.

I received an overwhelming response from women who were interested in my research and were quite helpful in finding prospective research participants. Many offered to post the call in their departments and to submit a copy to each professor to announce and distribute in class, and some went as far as to contact individuals who they thought would be interested in the project. Through these efforts, I found my second research participant, who is an undergraduate student in a sociology department at a university in Ontario. She too received all the pertinent information via email attachment after our introductory phone conversation. She seemed excited about potentially participating in the project and was determined to send me her song choices immediately.

Rationale for Excluding Some Potential Participants

During the time between identification of the second and third participants, I fielded over 25 emails from prospective participants. I had five telephone conversations with eager students, but I did not choose any of them because they appeared to have firm positions on the issues surrounding hip-hop and rap and the prevailing anti-female messaging and position. I was more interested in working with students who were approaching the discussion with an open mind. I did not want to include students who already had their minds made up and were not willing to budge on matters related to their opinions and feelings.

Word of my impending focus group spread to my home university, where, as a sessional instructor, I taught a course in sociological theory. Two students approached me on separate
occasions from my class who were interested in the subject and were also eager to participate in the focus group. I was uncertain about the appropriateness of including students I was teaching. However, they wanted to be in the focus group so much that they approached other professors in the department to convince me that they would be a perfect fit. Since at the time of the focus group they were no longer my students, I was no longer in a potential power position over them, and therefore felt there was no conflict of interest in their participation.

Structure of The Focus Group

In the Consent for Voluntary Participation Form [Table 5], the participants were asked to specify the two songs that they had chosen (one song they take pleasure in and enjoy, and the other one that they do not like for whatever reasons.) When all four participants had mailed their song choices to me, I completed the downloading of all the songs to be used for the focus group. The four women chose two songs each and I added one of my own choosing. The eight songs chosen by the participants spanned all four major subgenres of hip-hop and rap including gangsta rap, pop rap, new school, and old school hip-hop. They were commercially successful upon release, and some of them even remain relatively popular to this day.

The reasons each chose her specific songs was not important before, during, or after the focus group. For the choice of songs, I provided no specific criteria, except that the songs had to fit into the category of hip-hop or rap. I provided participants with the opportunity to choose songs from any sub-genre (Gangsta Rap, Old School Hip-Hop/Rap, New School, and Pop Rap), from any artist or artists (male or female – or a mix), from any year, past or present, and from any geographic region.

The rationale for asking them to choose only one hip-hop or rap song was that these genres were the main focus of my thesis. Free rein was provided regarding song choices in order to see what songs would be chosen. By keeping the requirements for the song choices simple (one song you like, one song you don’t like) I hoped to limit my influence on how the participant made her choice. If she didn’t like a song because of rhythm or aesthetics over lyrical content, I felt this was an important consideration. If, on the other hand, she chose a song with fairly aggressive anti-female sentiments because she enjoyed its overall sound, I wanted that to be an honest decision on her part. I kept in mind the fact that the women who were recruited for the focus group were individuals who took pleasure in and enjoyed hip-hop and rap music. But I was also
aware that they were an educated and socially minded group. I did understand that inevitably their choices would reflect this overarching reality of their backgrounds. My intention was to see what songs the women would choose and how they would come to understand and make sense of what they heard and read.

The first confirmed participant mailed her song choices to me via Canada Post along with her signature and the date on the consent form. I signed the form and prepared a photocopy to give to her at the focus group. I then began a focus group folder on my iTunes and downloaded her two songs. Once I received all eight songs – two from each participant - I created an iTunes playlist and created a shuffle of songs that would be randomly played on the day of the focus group. As I went into the focus group, I too had no idea in what sequence the songs would be played. The rationale for using the iTunes shuffle was to ensure uncertainty on the day of the focus group, so that the women would not necessarily identify with her song choice, or feel self-conscious about a song within flow of conversation. The nine songs chosen for the focus group by the young women, with a final choice I added as the focus group leader, were:

- *Changes*, by Tupac Shakur (2Pac)
- *My Humps*, by The Black Eyed Peas
- *Get Ur Freak On*, by Missy Elliott
- *Candy Shop*, by 50 Cent
- *A Hard Knock Life*, by Jay-Z
- *Ass N Da Aurr*, by Chingy
- *Beautiful Struggle*, by Kalib Kweli
- *There It Go (The Whistle Song)*, by Juelz Santana
- *The Ho Song*, by Ludacris

I selected *The Ho Song* by Ludacris, as my contribution to the focus group because I wanted to see the participant’s reaction to the song’s aggressively anti-female lyrics. Ludacris raps about women being “hos,” a derogatory term for promiscuous women. I wanted to see what the young women thought about the song, which remains popular even though it has been years since it was released on his *Back for the First Time* album in 2000. This signifies its popularity despite its
anti-feminist message, which, in the context of this thesis is particularly important, as it may even indicate that its longevity is related to it’s anti-feminist message.

How I structured the focus group helped to inform the way I ultimately structured my discussion with and between the participants. I structured the focus group as an open-ended discussion based on four questions: (a) What do you think about what you heard and what you read? (b) How does it make you feel? (c) What is the main message? and (d) How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?

These four questions were asked in sequence after every song we listened to as a group. After listening to and considering all nine songs, I asked the women additional follow-up questions, which are further described and analyzed in latter sections of chapter four.

The focus group was held in a location that was convenient for all four participants. The location was quiet, relaxed, and comfortable in order to ensure free-flowing, undisturbed conversation. I sat at the head of a rectangular table that had been configured for five individuals, including myself. On the table, in front of each chair, was a nametag that could be worn or placed in front of each participant with a pseudonym, designed specifically to make the participants feel like a connected part of a collective hip-hop and rap culture. In order to make both the individual and her fellow participants comfortable with the pseudonyms, I opted to make sure they remained plainly visible throughout the focus group discussion. The pseudonyms were Rah Digga, Trina, Foxy Brown, and Remy Ma. These pseudonyms, chosen by me and then adopted by the participants, are the real names of popular female rappers. They were designed to help authenticate a sense of belonging to the hip-hop and rap community as a whole (even though they already claimed to be fans of the genre).

In the case of any lyric sung by a single artist, it is worth noting that the “you” of the song is often (necessarily) missing from the dialogue. Barring duets or songs that don’t refer to other characters, there is only one voice presented because there is only one voice singing. In the case of hip-hop and rap, since much of the music is from a male perspective, there is no female voice, or a limited one, often represented by the female rap artist. In leading my focus group I hoped that the conversation would in part “play” the female voice so often missing from the lyrical narrative of the male artist. I am not entirely sure I succeeded, as I discuss in chapter four, I believe other surprises did arise, similarly discussed in upcoming chapters.
In addition to facilitating discussion, my role as the researcher within this focus group was to limit the physical, psychological/emotional, and social risks that might arise. Fortunately, for the most part the participants maintained decorum and respect throughout, so no particularly explosive conditions arose. I had worried that one participant would take command of the conversation and not allow for others to speak their minds, but this did not happen. All of the participants took equal talking and attentive listening time. I took on the primary role of introducing the participants using their pseudonyms (none of them were acquainted prior to the focus group) and then called the group to order. I began by asking the participants to fill out their demographic information [see Table 7]. The form’s purpose was to gather background information and gauge their basic level of commitment to hip-hop and rap music and cultures. After they filled out the demographic form, I gave them another copy of the Human Research Participants Cover Letter (as previously noted, I also mailed them one before they arrived) and spoke to them about the group, laying out the rules – which in summary included: maintaining respect, polite listening, avoiding domination over the conversation, etc. I also explained the organization of the focus group including how the question and answer would be structured. I specified their right to refuse any request made during and after the focus group and their right to contact my supervisor and/or myself if they wanted any clarification, further information, and/or wanted to exit the research process.

The next document presented to them was a Detailed Timeline/Structure of Focus Group Form [see Table 6], which would serve as their outline for the entire session. It was a document that detailed minute-by-minute what song was going to be played, how long each song was, and when the discussion was going to ensue. Each participant also had a sheet in front of her with the four open-ended questions [see Table 7] that would be asked after every song that was heard. Thus, there were no surprises for the participants. They had in front of them all the information needed in order to express their opinions freely. Each participant also had pads of paper and pens to take notes during the focus group. There were plenty of snacks and refreshments, which were provided to help maintain the comfort of the participants.

After I made sure everyone felt ready to begin, I began recording our session on an audiotape. I thanked them for their participation in this research project and further outlined how the focus group would be conducted. I played the first song and began the conversation.
When the focus group was over, I gave the audio recording to a typist who transcribed it. The three-hour group was held on Friday, October 13, 2006; it generated eight tapes that in turn produced 41 pages of text and a CD-ROM. I also took notes during the discussion. The spirited participation of group members yielded insightful discussion and debate.

There are risks in any discussion group where participants may influence the answers of others. In this case, the conversation is subjective, however, a participant making a claim with an attitude of confidence, might sway other participants without anyone being conscious of it. Furthermore, taking a difficult or controversial stance might prove difficult for a participant, depending on her personality, especially if the peers with whom she is speaking convey even the slightest attitudes of judgement or distrust. This risk holds especially true given the young ages of the participants in this group.

**Conclusion**

In the process of developing a methodology for this thesis, I looked at the lyrics of 95 songs by 86 male artists who represented all four subgenres of hip-hop and rap. In my analysis of those lyrics, I developed five themes that are examined in detail in chapter three. The first theme, *Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women*, arises from the ways women are represented in the songs’ lyrics. Terms such as “bitch” and “ho” are frequently used to describe or name women. Theme two: *Ostentatious Display of Wealth*, refers to the connections among wealth, objects, and, image. Frequent references to gluttony and greed are evident in the lyrics as emblems of prestige and power. The third theme, *Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol and Illegal Substances and Weapons*, reveals the tendency of hip-hop and rap artists to rap about the use of weapons and their consumption of illegal narcotics and substances as actions that enhance their images and separate them from the mainstream. The fourth theme, *Establishing Territory*, shows how artists use the word and the idea of a ghetto or “hood” as an element in their everyday lyrics, to imply daily struggle both against each other and the world at large. It is an important representation of the artist as the alpha or other establishment of social hierarchy. Consideration of the final theme, *Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology* includes an examination of the ways the n-word is used by artists. All of these themes directly affect the role and rights of women within the culture and basically impede or create obstacles toward an honest dialogue about hip-hop and rap among women in academia.
I brought together four young women with various socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, but who are all enrolled in critical, interdisciplinary, undergraduate departments in Ontario in a focus group. My main research task as I went into the focus group was to examine how these young women, who have a critical race and gender perspective, who are familiar with the music, and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap by male artists including the most hardcore of the subgenres, gangsta rap, continue to enjoy and even identify with it despite its marginalizing of and disrespectful messages about women.
Chapter 3: Content Analysis

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the need for a thorough examination of past and current hip-hop and rap songs in terms of their lyrical and aesthetic appeal. In order to bring about a cohesive understanding of the prevailing negative messages within hip-hop and rap, I analyzed the 95 songs by male artists in the text of Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs (Spence, 2003). Spence’s text allowed me to examine a wide range of critically vetted hip-hop and rap songs while feeling confident that my choices devised a fair sampling.

Building on this, I created a five-step process for analysis using the five themes previously detailed in chapter two whose results are presented in the content analysis as presented in Table 2. By counting up the number of times five themes appeared within each subgenre of hip-hop and rap, I created a numeric result, which I then displayed with each individual theme. A copy of the Table for purposes of clarification is as follows:

TABLE 2:

Hip-Hop and Rap Lyrics (95 Songs) – Category/Theme (Percentage) Calculations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Genre</th>
<th>Gangsta Rap</th>
<th>New School</th>
<th>Pop Rap</th>
<th>Old School Hip-Hop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women</td>
<td>29 / 69 42%</td>
<td>15 / 69 22%</td>
<td>19 / 69 28%</td>
<td>6 / 69 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostentatious Display of Wealth</td>
<td>29 / 74 39%</td>
<td>20 / 74 27%</td>
<td>19 / 74 26%</td>
<td>6 / 74 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substance and Weapons</td>
<td>31 / 75 41%</td>
<td>22 / 75 29%</td>
<td>17 / 75 23%</td>
<td>5 / 75 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Territory</td>
<td>27 / 74 37%</td>
<td>23 / 74 31%</td>
<td>21 / 74 28%</td>
<td>3 / 74 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology

Notation: The frequency of the five themes found within the sub-genres of hip-hop and rap.

Results tabulated as a number and as a corresponding percentage. All numbers were rounded to the nearest decimal point.

Table 2 shows the rank and order of each of the five themes as a number and a corresponding percentage. The total points were calculated according to the number of times the five themes appeared in each subgenre. All percentages were rounded up to the nearest decimal point.

Essentially ranking was based upon the number of times each theme appeared in the song lyric. For example, with the first theme, 75 total points were awarded for appearing in the lyrics of the songs 75 times, which resulted in an overall appearance percentage of 79%. The Table is copied as follows for clarification purposes:

Table 3: Overall Rank/Order of the Five Themes Accompanied by Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank/Order</th>
<th>Five Themes</th>
<th>Total Points</th>
<th>Total Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances and Weapons</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Ostentatious Display of Wealth</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Establishing Territory</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Inclusion of Derogatory</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The theme *glamourization of tobacco, alcohol, illegal substances and weapons*, totalled 75 points or, in other words, references appeared in 78% of the 95 songs used for the analysis, ranking it in first place. This large proportion of male hip-hop and rap artists mostly glorified their use of alcohol, drugs and weapons in their songs, although some criticized it and still others spoke of it matter-of-fact without specific judgement in either direction.

Tied for second place were the themes *ostentatious display of wealth* and *establishing territory*. Both of these themes yielded 74 points or appeared in 78% of the songs. I placed *ostentatious display of wealth* in second place and *establishing territory* in third because within the additional notes I had taken on a total of 35 songs, I found that many male hip-hop and rap artists brag about their possessions and also boast about how much the possessions cost. For example, one of the songs analyzed in the Spence text was titled *Got Your Money* by Ol’ Dirty Bastard where he raps: “You’re lookin’ at my wrist sayin’ it’s so nice!/The price fits the diamonds shining in disco lights (149).” It is because the former theme is mostly glamourized when mentioned that it tipped the scales in terms of ranked placement and importance within the study.

The theme *sexual exploitation and disrespect towards women* yielded 69 points or appeared in 73% of the songs and ranked fourth in the overall analysis. As another relatively high number, it points out the male hip-hop and rap artists’ habit of including lyrics that exploit and/or disrespect women.

Finally, the theme *Inclusion of derogatory and racially charged terminology* yielded 51 points or 54%.

I wanted to see if those artists, especially rappers in the gangsta rap genre (also known as “gangsta rappers”) who comprise the majority of those who use the n-word, were black themselves. Of the 27 artists/groups in the gangsta rap category who use the n-word, only one
group, Cypress Hill, is made up of mostly white rappers. In the New School category, which includes 14 artists/groups, there is only one artist, Fat Joe, who is hispanic rather than black who liberally uses the n-word. Of the eight artists/groups in the pop rap category, there is only one who is white, Eminem. He uses the n-word in his lyrics to represent his struggles growing up in the tough neighbourhood of Eight Mile in Detroit, Michigan. It could be argued that Eminem is appropriating black culture and identity by rapping about being black because he has had what might be thought of as the black experience, without having the racial or ethnic background to legitimate it (Johnson, 2003).

It is interesting to see that this theme is included in over 50% of the music by male hip-hop and rap artists. Overall, four of the five themes all score higher than 70%, and the top three themes all scored very close to 80%. Thus, it is apparent that all of these themes are frequently mentioned in male hip-hop and rap lyrics.

In particular, gangsta rap stood out as the subgenre that most readily incorporated negative attitudes toward women and positive attitudes towards violence, drug use, alpha-male attitudes and profanity. By focusing on music and artists from the gangsta rap subgenre, it was easier to illustrate the prevalence of these five themes.

All These Calculations – Now What?

As follows is a breakdown of each of the five themes and how the number of times they generally appear in rap and hip-hop music breaks down:

Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women

The theme, Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women appeared most frequently in the subgenre of gangsta rap. It was present in 29 out of 69 songs or 42%, followed by pop rap (19 out of 69 songs or 28%) and new school (15 out of 69 songs or 22%). The remaining subgenre was old school hip-hop (6 out of 69 songs or less than 1%).

In the songs, women were commonly referred to as “sluts,” in, for example How High, a popular song from 2001 by Method Man and Redman. Women were also referred to as “money hungry bitches” by Jay-Z in Big Pimpin’ where they are not only referred to as “bitches” and “hos,” but
the implication throughout the song is that women are primarily interested in taking money from men and possessing material objects. Other artists, such as Mase, Trick Daddy, and Snoop Dogg also repeatedly refer to women as “bitches.”

In many hip-hop and rap songs and videos, a woman must continuously be hypersexual (Rose, 1994; Neal, 2004). She is perceived to be always ready and willing to have sex, and, in addition, she must always dress provocatively for her man. Alternatively, the idealized woman is traditionally labelled the “virgin.” The virgin is a “good girl,” who although she might have had sex before, her sexual experience should be limited and generally monogamist in nature. By using this image as opposed to the image of the promiscuous “bad girl” (also referred to as a whore or, using the shortened slang version, “ho”) the protagonist in the song can desire more than sex with the object of his desire. The language itself, “virgin/whore,” “good girl/bad girl” relates directly to a Freudian psychological dichotomy referred to as the “Madonna/whore complex” (Rose, 2004; Dyson, 2007).

In Ja Rule’s rap *Livin’ It Up*, he refers to, “prissy bitches” and “hos that do porno” (p.254). In this way, he ostensibly delineates women into two basic roles, neither of which is glorified in any way. Thus, he takes the Madonna/whore complex one step further and, rather than idolizing the Madonna and vilifying the whore, he simply writes off women entirely, naming one a bitch and the other a ho.

This flagrant marginalizing of women is represented well in this repetitive theme. According to a study in 2010 and published by various outlets including The Associated Press indicated that 70-72% of all black women in America are single.³ Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has to do in part with the diminishing number of “marriageable” black men as compared to “marriageable” black women. In other words, as black women gain higher education in larger numbers than ever before, have better paying jobs and more stability, black men continue to fall in similar numbers. Some studies indicate that cultures in which the number of marriageable women outnumber men (China and other Asian nations), the family units are actually stronger than normal and have a

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tendency to remain intact longer. But in cultures, like the African-American one, where the numbers are the opposite, men become more promiscuous and less likely to settle into marriage. Kate Bolick in the article entitled “All The Single Ladies” printed in The Atlantic journal argued, “When confronted with a surplus of women, men become promiscuous and unwilling to commit to a monogamous relationship” (Bolick, 2011, p. 3).

There are, of course glaring similarities between the misogyny in hip-hop and rap and that in pop and country music, where women are sometimes positioned as similarly sexually available and hypersexual. Huq (2006) argues, “There is a sense of a double standard in the criticism of rap music for violence and sexism when these sentiments have not been subject to the same degree of condemnation in other more mainstream White popular cultural forms” (p.117). Huq is referring to artists in other genres, who are getting away with thematic violence and sexism without being subjected to as much negative criticism as hip-hop and rap artists have received. I would argue that the common language of hip-hop and rap, incorporating swear words, slang and racially charged slurs often render the music shocking in both its aggressive nature and projective negative messaging. I would even go so far as to suggest that it does so intentionally, to further distance itself from mainstream ideology and behaviour.

In hip-hop and rap for example, not only are women casually called “bitches,” but they are accused of liking the title, as in the Mobb Deep song, Hey Love which suggests a woman is lucky to be the “queen bitch.” Meanwhile, Ludacris, Notorious BIG, Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Paperboy, E-40, Philly’s Most Wanted, P. Diddy, NAS, Sporty Thievz, Trick Daddy, and 2Pac, just to name a few, refer to women as “hos’” repeatedly in their lyrics. The ho reference in fact, occurs so often in all genres of hip-hop and rap music that it becomes commonplace, and a listener is desensitized to it very quickly.

Within the focus group, the discussion of the word “ho” accounted for most of the conversation. In fact, of the 180 minutes, more than an hour focused on the use of the word. This might in part be due to that fact that one of the nine songs analyzed, and the only one I personally submitted to the group was titled, Ho by Ludacris. In fact, in the time I spent listening to all 95 of the songs analyzed, I lost count of how many times the word was mentioned and instead created a 100+ total to avoid ending up with numbers in the thousands.
The word ho, a slang form of the word “whore” as noted by the author of *HipHoptionary: The Dictionary of Hip-Hop Terminology* (Westbrook, 2002, p.70) is generally posited by male hip-hop and rap artists as “easy” and “open” for them to access sexually at any time, and also easily discarded. Male hip-hop and rap artists also tend to delineate between a “mom,” or “mamma,” and a “ho” or “skeeza”. A “mom” or “momma” is generally a term reserved for women with whom a man has a baby. This is not necessarily nor is it normally a monogamist state in the hip-hop and rap communities. In fact, despite this relationship it is common for a man to have a ho, also known as a “skeeza” or “skeeze,” or “skeezer” at the same time. A mom or momma can also be considered a ho or skeeza if she goes out of the good graces of her man. In other words, the same rules do not apply for men and women, in terms of the principal messaging in some aspects of the hip-hop culture. A man is expected, both by himself and other men, to have more than one woman. It indicates power, alpha-male status and importance within the community. However, in the eyes of men, a woman who has more than one man is not afforded the same sexual opportunities as men. In fact, skeeza, another term defined specifically as, “A woman who is known for sleeping with a lot men; and an easy lay” (Westbrook, 2002, p.70), appears in the lyrics of many male artists, and most notably in Pras Michel’s song *Ghetto Supastar (That Is What You Are).*

The assumption in these songs is that the majority of women are hos, bitches, and skeezas, and that these women as characters within the narrative, have little additional depth beyond the fact that they are there to provide sexual services for their man and anyone else he wants them to service. These terms seem to apply principally to women of colour, since they are the women depicted in the vast majority of the music videos. This is not to say that white women are not labelled and objectified in hip-hop culture. The implication by the male hip-hop or rap artist is that woman of other races are sometimes presented as exotic.

There are numerous examples of artists who regularly incorporate references to violence against women in their lyrics, including DMX, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Mystikal, and Eminem. It would be very difficult to provide a percentage that represents the exact number of times a male rap artists raps about violence against women, because it is talked about so frequently, both explicitly and implicitly. Even LL Cool J who is often credited with a reputation for socially conscience lyrics, raps about promoting violence against women in at least one song. In *I’m That Type of Guy* he remarks, “Goddamn it, I’m-a kill her” (Spence, 2003, p.213).
The gangsta rap artists who have been identified by the media are not the only ones who talk about treating women as objects of attainment, desire, and pleasure, rather than social equals, or even to some degree, worthy adversaries. The attitude, as seen so frequently in the lyrical and political messages of hip-hop and rap is further evidenced by songs produced and recorded by mainstream artists like LL Cool J, who represent the old school subgenre. LL Cool J (besides being seen as a socially conscience rapper) also raps about male adultery being acceptable and, in fact, behaviour to be encouraged. Adultery and polyamory – or engaging in intimate relationships with multiple partners – are often talked about and encouraged especially in gangsta rap but in all the subgenres of hip-hop and rap. There is some suggestion that it is because the artists must project “ghettoized” identities (Watkins, 2005; Dyson, 2007). In other words, they must present themselves as powerful by appearing desirable to the opposite sex.

While there are some feminist hip-hop and rap artists who oppose these attitudes, or mimic them in a retaliatory response, one noteworthy development in the genre is the emergence of female hip-hop and pop rap artists who seem to freely accept and even encourage the idea of the dominant male. For example, Fergie, who sang the song, *My Humps* by The Black Eyed Peas that was analyzed in the focus group, presents herself as a women who relishes being dominated and controlled by men. In the case of this song, she seems to embrace the message that women are fundamentally inferior to men. [See chapter four for further analysis.] In the song *My Humps* Fergie sings: “They say they love my ass ‘n; Seven Jeans, True Religion’s/I say no, but they keep givin’/So I keep on takin’.” The message that women are easily bought seems implicit. In another song, Fergie sings, *Big Girls Don’t Cry* she implies that women should be treated like children, dependent on their man for everything (love, support, attention). She sings the following two separate verses that really hammer home this theme: “And I’m gonna miss you like a child misses their blanket,” and, “I must take the baby steps ’til I’m full grown, full grown.”

Sexual assault and rape are also common themes in hip-hop and rap music, most notably, once again, as portrayed in gangsta rap. However, yet again, gangsta rap is not the only subgenre that encourages sexual assault and rape. A very well known 1980s pop rapper, Tone Loc, raps the following in his 1989 hit single that made it to #3 on the Billboard Hot 100, *Funky Cold Medina*:
The brother told me a secret/on how to get more chicks:/Put a little
Medina in your glass/And the girls’ll come real real quick./It’s
better than any alcohol… (Spence, 2003, p.113).

The song’s protagonist seems to make an argument for why a woman should be drugged or otherwise chemically subdued in order to get them ready for sexual activities, whether or not they are willing.

The Junior M.A.F.I.A. song, *Get Money*, which reached #1 on Billboards Hot Rap Singles in 1996 says: “The bitch said I raped her. Damn, why she wanna stick me for my paper?” (Spence, 2003, p.120). Here, the violence and criminal nature of the act is overlooked for the subsequent inconvenience to the song's protagonist. Further, there is a flagrant assumption that "the bitch" might be making a false allegation in order to gain notoriety and/or obtain money from the artist in addition to causing him aggravation.

Eminem, whose songs have repeatedly been criticized for promoting harmful acts against women, usually referring to his ongoing contentious relationship with his ex-wife or mother. In his song, *Just Don’t Give a Fuck*, he boasts about when he was in eighth grade, he drank alcohol, and “raped the women’s swim team. Don’t take me for a joke, I’m no comedian” (Spence, 2003, p.239). By appearing cocky to the point of taking pride in such an act, Eminem seems to be establishing his power and strength as a means of appearing masculine to his fans as well as the hip-hop and rap communities at large. While there is no actual criminal report that he ever in fact did such a thing, the talk of committing this felonious and violent act gives him a semblance of control and alpha-male dominance.

This is similar to Motopanyane’s (2006) argument, “[there is a] hypermasculine black artistry that continues to be raced and gendered as specifically black and masculine” (Motopanyane, 2006, p.33). Rappers in the hip-hop/rap community must maintain their prescribed ghetto identities, i.e., being not only “black” but also “hypermasculine,” in order to compete in the hip-hop and rap cultures. Ol’ Dirty Bastard in *Got Your Money* raps: “I don’t have no problem with you fuckin’ me, But I have a little problem with you not fuckin’ me” (Spence, 2003, p.148). The implied threat is yet another example of the prevailing misogynistic ideology of the music and community.
Another aspect of the theme of violence against women, is the flagrant use of derogatory terminology pertaining to female genitalia. Breast are often referred to as “tits” or “titties,” and the vagina is typically referred to as a “pussy.” In the 69 songs that touch on this theme, the vaginal area is also referred to as a “bush,” or the public hair surrounding the vagina. In the song, *Big Poppa*, the Notorious B.I.G. uses the term liberally (Spence, 2003, p.21).

The messaging often goes a step further and invokes these body parts separately from the entity of a woman. In other words, at times, the act of engaging in intercourse will refer to “fucking a pussy” without necessarily acknowledging the woman to whom it is attached. More troubling is the treatment of the vagina as a disposable object, as rapped by the Sporty Thievz in their song *No Pigeonz* (Spence, 2003, p.283) where the song’s protagonist is singing to a series of women, using derogatory name calling and propagating a general attitude of disrespect toward any of them. This is hardly a “love song” by most contemporary standards where a lyric sings to one specific love interest.

Meanwhile, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg in *Nuthin’ But a G Thang* (Spence, 2003, p. 294) sing, “Ain’t no pussy good enough to get burnt while I’m up in it”. In this way, they are acknowledging that they have to be discerning when it comes to sex partners. But the argument is framed to imply that promiscuous women are inevitably dirty, while they are singing about being promiscuous themselves, but as desirable partners.

The Fu-Schnickens even imply that their microphone is a female sex organ (Spence, 2003, p. 450). They rap, “Oh, where has my mic gone? Tell me, have you seen her?/I stretch like a condom and gets plump like a wiener.” It is seen as a tangible object that can be used and then discarded. The assumption that universally accepted throughout the genre is that the male hip-hop/rap artist can control, monitor, and violate the vagina (through violent activity). The rapper Ja Rule in *HollaHolla* raps: “(Bitches, bitches) pop da pussy and bounce like (hit it, hit it).” Later in the song he boasts about how great it is to “fuck plenty bitches” (Spence, 2003, p.167). He seems to almost encourage the taking on of multiple sexual partners without concern about practicing safe sex in many of his lyrics.

Lyrically one of the most disturbing items related to this topic was found in the work of the gangsta rapper Mystikal, who says in the song *Danger (Been So Long)* that he is “The pussy
cutter – did I stutter?” (Spence, 2003, p.71). This song promotes violence against women in what seems to go beyond shock value.

Using the image of a woman’s mouth as a means for performing oral sex is also common in gangsta rap music. For example, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg in *Fuck Wit Dre Day (And Everybody’s Celebratin)* raps the following: “Dick in yo’ mouth, bitch,” and “Gap teeth in ya mouth so my dick’s got to fit” (Spence, 2003, p.105-106). Oral sex is used in all subgenres of hip-hop and rap as a way to exert male domination and power over women. Edward G. Armstrong in his research paper, “Gangsta Misogyny: A Content Analysis of the Portrayals of Violence Against Women in Rap Music, 1987-1993,” argues that a great example can be found in Too Much Trouble’s song entitled *Fugitives on the Run* (1993) where they rap that that after oral sex, they "leave some stretch marks" on a woman's jaw. Another example is In *She Swallowed It*, by N.W.A (1991) they recommend specific procedures for attacking a fourteen-year-old: “Punch the bitch in the eye/then the ho will fall to the ground/Then you open up her mouth/put your dick, move the shit around” (2001). It is not just violence against women, but violence against young women that marginalizes them as a gender and blatantly offends.

The idea that the male hip-hop or rap artist has to uphold his hypermasculinity is a message repeated throughout the genre. For example, in E-40’s track *Rapper’s Ball*, a sort of “boys will be boys” ideology is propagated through for example the lyric repeated in the chorus, “Say that you got it all/Love the way you players ball” (Spence, 2003, p.332). Men can “play” women and have more than one woman at a time, without anyone knowing that they are enjoying the “playa” lifestyle.

As interpreted by scholars (Rose, 1994; Neal, 2004; Motopanyane, 2006; Dyson, 2007), hip-hop and rap music arguably do little to deviate from a hypermasculine heterosexual identity. Anyone who does not meet these criterion, be they homosexual, disabled, beta-male in character-type, is open to public ridicule and humiliation. Eminem has been often criticized for his characterized attacks on the gay and lesbian community. In his single *The Real Slim Shady*, Eminem raps that a “Man and another man can’t elope,” and he exclaims “Eeww!” to further condemn the notion. Eminem’s lyrics imply that same sex relationships and marriages are somehow evil and/or disgusting.
In *HollaHolla* Ja Rule also adds to this rhetoric of hate when he raps, “Show no love to them homo thugs” (Spence, 2003, p.168). In *HipHoptionary: The Dictionary of Hip-Hop Terminology*, a thug is defined as a “petty criminal whose lawless acts primarily are to survive” (Westbrook, 2002, p.140). Ja Rule might not be suggesting that gays in general are all “thugs,” but he is more than likely talking about male hookers who sell their bodies as sexual objects for money – and he is definitely using the term “homo” in a derogatory way. He goes on to talk about how he is proud to be homophobic. Such sentiments are not at all unusual within the hip-hop and rap communities and have also been attributed to such mainstream and cross-genre artists as Eminem, Jay-Z., Tyler, The Creator, Chris Brown among so many others.

*Ostentatious Display of Wealth*

The second theme, *Ostentatious Display of Wealth*, appeared most frequently in the subgenre of gangsta rap (29 out of 74 songs or 39%) followed by new school (20 out of 74 songs or 27%). The figure for pop rap is 19 out of 74 songs or 26%, and, for old school hip-hop, 6 out of 74 songs or less than 1%.

For our purposes we will define “bling” as expensive, purchasable goods, principally jewels, and so-named to invoke the sparkle of a diamond. This term gives meaning to how bling is consumed and promoted in hip-hop and rap cultures. Within hip-hop and rap messaging there is an overarching use of bling providing an image of wealth, power, prestige, and control (Boyd, 2002). The results of the promotion of bling within the hip-hop and rap industries differs in various circumstances. Overall, it seems to present another route to power and dominance. One might view the promotion of “bling” as an overdue assertion of individual identity that signals an emergence from the ghetto, which might be seen as empowering. Another observer might view the glorification of bling as a reflection of excess in living, popular throughout the genre—similar to promiscuity in sex, extravagant drug use and exaggerated violence. The idea of fearlessness characterized by the alpha-male is further enhanced by an overabundance of wealth and expensive goods.

Dyson (2007) argues, “We can’t hypocritically condemn the younger generation for their bling and their materialism, especially since those are staples of American culture” (Dyson, 2007, p.82). While some critical scholars argue that identity should not be formed through the use of “bling” as a sign of emancipation and power (Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002), the pervasive messaging
from the hip-hop and rap communities seems to imply otherwise. Hip-hop and rap artists are seen to be encouraged to obtain and proudly display “bling” in order to maintain and enhance their powerful images. This show of wealth, power, prestige, and success appears to be necessary in order to remain credible within the competitive hip-hop/rap community. Hip-hop and rap music and the industry that sells it create symbols of status that adolescents try to acquire and use (Milner, 2004, p.25).

Hip-hop and rap artists appear to continually project images related to wealth and success in their lyrics and videos. Countless numbers of hip-hop and rap artists talk about owning or acquiring “bling.” In E-40’s Rapper’s Ball, noted earlier for its boys-will-be-boys connotation, spends almost three fourths of the song talking about how to amass wealth and also how to spend it. Diddy (known at various stages of his career as P. Diddy, Puff Daddy and Sean Combs) continuously references “diamonds” and “cars” as objects to obtain. He also discusses his worth in terms of both monetary and material items as a way to rank himself socially and set himself apart. In other words, that he can afford massive quantities of high-end goods where others cannot sets him above the rest. This is detailed in his single It’s All About the Benjamins, which while not among the specific 95 songs vetted for analysis, is important thematically. It also won a Viewer’s Choice Award at the 1998 MTV Video Music Awards making it a big hit among rap audiences.

Diddy raps, “Five carats on my hand wit’ the cuts” (Spence, 2003, p. 226) and “Know you wanna fill the room ’cause it’s platinum-coated” (Spence, 2003, p. 228). These lyrics further evidence the fact that material possessions, i.e., the acquisition and ownership of bling, are very important to an artist’s image in the hip-hop and rap cultures.

The commodifying of the industry does not stop with adult marketing. For example, Lil’ Romeo in his song My Baby raps, “I gotta Bugs Bunny chain wit’ a matchin’ watch” (Spence, 2003, p. 279). This is an interesting comment on how the use of bling within hip-hop/rap collective culture is even intended to seduce children. Some might argue that, if hip-hop and rap messaging includes an association with childhood artefacts and toys, a very young audience can be reached. As a marketing tool, anecdotal evidence suggests this approach could prove incredibly lucrative to corporate interests.
Though Gangsta rap artists frequently talk about the need for bling and the personal use thereof, another thematic aspect prevails as well. For example, Black Rob in *Whoa!* raps the following:

Bought the bitch diamonds and pearls; I mean whoa!
Shoulda seen them shits shinin’ on her wrist; whoa!
Now money ain’t a problem; see my dough is like, whoa!
Pulled out my bankroll on y’all niggaz like, whoa!…
(Spence, 2003, p.456).

This lyric and others like it indicate that material possessions are not enough for gangsta rap male artists. Black Rob implies that he then uses these possessions as a means to seduce and dominate women.

Taking this idea to the next extreme, there is some indication that hip-hop and rap artists use women as yet another commodity. In fact, I believe there is enough evidence to suggest that women are often viewed as bling. For example, in a 2009 release by J-Zone, *County Check Pimpin’* (not one of the 95 songs analyzed in the study, but thematically important nonetheless), the protagonist raps about dating wealthy women, including Oprah Winfrey in order to get rich. As he names a series of rich and successful women, including Christina Aguilera, he chants repeatedly, “I own the bitch.” While this message is plain, thousands of other lyrics imply the same message over and over.

In mainstream hip-hop and rap music videos, the lead artist can be quickly identified by his appearance. Generally he is shown from the neck up, draped in jewellery and high-end labels. This image is repeated throughout the genre. Pharrell Williams, for example, often wears jewellery that looks to be worth thousands if not millions of dollars including a large diamond stud in his ear. As an example, Pharrell, who is part of the group N.E.R.D., has one popular image in which he is wearing a necklace created by Jacob the Jeweller (an iconic figure himself within the rap community) containing thousands of diamonds (total worth not published). He is also reported to carry around an 18 carat gold Blackberry.

Pharrell’s reported Blackberry is one example of ways in which hip-hop and rap have become major marketers and promoters of corporate goods. The prevalence of visible labels and
companies named in lyrics is nearly ubiquitous in songs and among the artists themselves. When an artist announces a product or designer usually an argument for cross-promotion can be made. Corporations lend them or give them products in exchange for publicity. A number of high profile celebrities (non rappers) have been in trouble for not returning some of these expensive items. For example, a “New York Times” article dated February 8, 2011 describes how actress and tabloid It-girl, Lindsay Lohan, stole a necklace, which eventually landed her in jail (New York Times, February 8, 2011).

Evidence is substantial that these references lead to a windfall for the companies themselves. Chrysler, in an attempt to improve their image as a purveyor of wealth and prosperity with the release of the Chrysler 300, featured Eminem in a 2010 Superbowl commercial. With references made by male rappers to specific clothing companies, such as Dolce and Gabbana, Prada, Gucci, and Fendi among others as well as mentions of major car manufacturers, including Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Ferrari, Lamborghini, and Escalade, hip-hop and rap, it would be safe to assume that as a marketing force, they are helping manufacturers earn millions, if not billions of dollars every year in free (or paid) advertising.

There are also frequent references to jewellers themselves, for example, Jacob the Jeweller, who evidently has made such a name for himself that he is listed in the HipHoptionary Dictionary (Westbrook, 2002, p.78), has done so on the coattails of hip-hop and rap artists. In fact, it has become so pervasive in today’s competitive hip-hop/rap music market, that if an artist chooses not to promote or glorify the material ownership of goods, he may not have commercial success and most importantly, command respect in the community. Of course, from time to time, messages about bling are replaced or compounded by messages of excess in another direction: Alcohol, drugs and illegal substances are another way for hip-hop and rap artists to prove themselves to be fearless alpha-males.

*Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances, and Weapons*

The third theme, *Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances, and Weapons*, like its predecessors appears most frequently in the subgenre of gangsta rap (31 out of 75 songs or 41%), followed by new school (22 out of 75 songs or 29%). The figure for pop rap was 17 out of 75 songs or 23%, and, for old school hip-hop, it was five out of 75 songs or less than 1%.
In today’s hip-hop and rap mainstream markets, rapping about having access to and drinking alcohol and taking drugs is as common as driving an expensive vehicle or buying property. The word “juice” in the context of hip-hop and rap music has multiple meanings including “gun,” “steroid” or other controlled substance, and “alcoholic beverage” (Westbrook, 2002, p.80). As hip-hop and rap music have become increasingly mainstream, the use of illegal substances, excessive alcohol consumption and weapon ownership has been glorified to the point of commonality within the culture. In Chen’s book, *Music, Substance Use, and Aggression* it is argued that, “Listening to rap music was significantly and positively associated with alcohol use, problematic alcohol use, illicit-drug use, and aggressive behaviours” (Chen, 1995, p.373). In fact, it has become so commonly accepted and widely used within the subgenre of gangsta rap and possibly other subgenres as well that it has become the norm rather than the exception.

In mainstream hip-hop and rap cultures, the use of illegal substances (e.g., marijuana and cocaine) is often included in the lyrics in ways that suggest that they are conveniently accessible anytime, anywhere. Male hip-hop and rap artists such as Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Fat Joe, 50 Cent, and Eminem, among others, simulate smoking marijuana within their videos (or are in fact smoking it). It appears to be treated as something that is used casually every day.

The glamourized use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, controlled substances, and weapons in videos and songs seems to imbue the artist with a level of respectability. The idea, repetitively promoted, eventually leads to a “gangsta” image often indicated as someone who comes of age on the streets and as such, is inherently fearless and strong. “Crunk Juice,” which is defined as something which makes a social landscape feel “crowded, hyped, exciting, fun” (Westbrook, 2002, p.32), occurs for example, in the lyrics and videos of Lil’ Jon, who implies constant personal alcohol consumption. Lil’ Jon drinks from a jewel-encrusted goblet that he carries with him to every media interview. He also holds it and drinks from it during any live or taped performance. The message is that Lil’ Jon doesn’t go anywhere without his “Crunk Juice” because it is part of his image.

The promotion and glamourization of alcohol and tobacco is found in the music of countless male hip-hop and rap artists, including Tupac Shakur, in whose song, *How Do U Want It*, raps, “Champagne or Hennessy, A favourite of my homies” (Spence, 2003, p.174). Excessive alcohol consumption is a popular theme throughout hip-hop and rap music. KRS-One represent the old
school hip-hop subgenre through the sentiments in their song, *5 Boroughs*. Along with artists Vigilante, Buckshot, Keith Murray, Cam’ron, Killah Priest, Prodigy, Redman and Reverend Run, they talk about the substances they use (and in some cases abuse): “Comin’ out to fuck with the best, put it in your chest, inhale it and hold that, blow it out when I say let go” (Spence, 2003, p.88). In this lyric, there are two separate yet similar ideas. One is the promotion of illegal substances, assuming the inhaled substance is marijuana, crack or some other inhaled drug, and the other is the threat, “blow it out when I say let go.”

Other artists, such as Method Man and Redman in *How High*, rap “Puff a meth bone, now I’m off to the red zone…Rollin’ blunts, an all-day habit” (Spence, 2003, p.179). These lyrics point to the artist’s promotion of meth amphetamine or crystal meth. A stimulant, the drug can be easily manufactured through a recipe of fairly easy-to-get ingredients and is a popular and inexpensive street drug (Westbrook, 2002, p.32). “Rollin’ blunts” as an “all-day habit” points to a pot habit/lifestyle whereby the user smokes it all day every day. In videos, marijuana is seen constantly in the hands and mouths of many hip-hop and rap artists.

Eminem has frequently discussed the positive aspects of illegal drug use in his lyrics. In his song *Purple Pills* (not part of the 95 lyrics used for analysis), he talks about using antidepressants (a controlled substance) as a cure for all of life’s problems. In another statement within the song, he raps, “These ’shrooms make me hallucinate, Then I sweat ’til I start losing weight…”(Spence, 2003, p. 322-3). Eminem makes the seductive argument that perhaps eating hallucinogenic (and illegal) mushrooms might encourage weight loss.

The promotion of violence through the use of weapons is equally commonplace in hip-hop and rap imagery. Onyx raps in the single *Slam*, “Think about the pay offer/So left with an automatic rifle” (Spence, 2003, p.388). In terms of a power play, it is best to have a gun. Artists look stronger and convey images of power when they have weapons at the ready. In Jay-Z’s song, *Big Pimpin’* he raps, “But when shit get hot/Then the glock start poppin’ like ozone” (Spence, 2003, p.20). What is deemed vitally important in maintaining a guise of hypermasculinity in the male-dominated hip-hop and rap communities is the appearance of toughness and roughness (Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002). The assumption in male hip-hop and rap videos is that one must also act tough and rough by proudly displaying weapons, violent tendencies, or at least by rapping about them. Fabolous in his song *Young’n* says, “Blockahhhhh put holes through beaters”
This rap implies, and even mimics the sound, “Blockahhhhh,” of a gunshot through anyone who tries to cross the artist.

Owning and/or rapping about weapons is common for male hip-hop and rap artists, not just gangsta rap artists, because protection from other artists and the community at large is very important to maintain a particular “gangsta” image. The most commonly shown weapons in hip-hop and rap music videos are guns of different brands and sizes. A gun is placed strategically or held in a way that warns viewers that they should not mess with the artist. In real life, many rappers have been charged with carrying illegal guns, concealing weapons, and similar offences.

The analysis of the songs in Spence’s text makes it clear that glamourizing and promoting violence is common in male hip-hop and rap music videos and lyrics. I have developed two subthemes related to the glorification of violence in hip-hop/rap music videos and songs: (a) Glorifying Violence and Murder and (b) Glorifying Violence Against Women.

Within the subtheme of Glorifying Violence and Murder there is an indication that mainstream hip-hop and rap artists such as Fat Joe, Craig Mack, Redman, Method Man, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dogg (to name a few) use weapons and violence to promote legitimacy within their circles and the whole hip-hop and rap communities at large. Tension and aggression are evident in the lyrics of many gangsta rap artists who quite frequently reference the inevitable deaths those who have or would cross them or those closest to them (members of their posse, for example). Gaining respect is a key requirement for hip-hop and/or rap artists when they are just entering the scene, and maintaining the respect of other artists is paramount to their success and long term survival.

These violent behaviours and images are commonplace for a reason: Gaining respect as a new artist and maintaining that respect can create success (financial and otherwise) and ensure longevity in a business that is constantly evolving. Eric B. and Rakim in lyrics of Fury rap, “Haven’t you ever heard of a’ MC-murderer?/This is the death penalty/And I’m servin’ a death

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4 The list of rappers’ offences is very long. A recent example is the case of Rapper T.I. (real name Clifford Harris). “T.I. was arrested in a federal sting after his bodyguard-turned-informant delivered three machine guns and two silencers to the hip-hop star. The weapons were not registered and most problematic of all, he had felony convictions against him for weapons and drug charges.”
wish./So come on, step to this hysterical idea for a lyrical professionist!” (Spence, 2003, p.260). Throughout their song, they self-reference as MCs who enjoy “murdering” others. Glorifying murder is also a pervasive theme in How High by Method Man and Redman, which includes the line, “(Fuckin’ with us) is a straight suicide” (Spence, 2003, p.177). That murder may occur if a line is crossed, is implied by the language, where that line is to begin with is much less clear. However, the threat is all that is needed to indicate strength and power. By failing to set the line exactly, the artist never actually has to follow through with the threat. While mainstream news stories of hip-hop and rap artists acting out criminal behaviours appear almost daily, (for example: Lil Jon’ was recently brought up on weapons charges) a threat is sometimes as useful a way to legitimize street credibility for artists less inclined to actually follow through.

Scrutiny of the subtheme Glorifying Violence Against Women makes it apparent that many male hip-hop or rap artists not only glorify violence against women, but also promote it as behaviour that is “natural” and socially accepted within the hip-hop and rap communities. In the song Hellbound by Eminem (not one of the 95 analyzed for the study) he raps:

My pen 'bout as sharp as a dagger, walk with a swagger
Tie your wife to the back of a black Jag and I drag her
Ten blocks, untie the bitch and I still bag her
Give her a smack in the ass and a six pack of lager

The song glorifies the heinous act of dragging a (probable) live subject – the protagonist’s professed adversary’s wife – and then, after she is untied, she is then “bagged” or in other words, subjected to intercourse in exchange for a six pack, the referencing of which makes the whole act come across as nearly comical.

When LL Cool J\(^5\) raps in I’m That Type of Guy, “Goddamn it, I’m-a kill her” (Spence, 2003, p.213), the message, while more of an off handed reference to violence than the Eminem lyric conveys by its specificity, the indication still exists that frustration with a women can lead to threats of violence, and the potential for them to be acted upon. Armstrong (2004) writes,

\(^5\) LL Cool J (which stands for Ladies Love Cool James) is a rapper who can be placed within the subgenre of old school hip-hop. At one point, he was considered a socially conscious rapper. He has now become more mainstream and is accepted as part of the gangsta rap scene.
“[Eminem’s] heightened misogyny further proves that he is an authentic gangsta, even more vicious than his predecessors. Understated, this criterion of authenticity means showing irreverence and crudeness” (Armstrong, 2004, p.336).
In the song, *Bitch Suck Dick* by Tyler the Creator (not one of the 95 songs analyzed for the study), Jasper Dolphin of the group Odd Future raps:

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Punch your bitch in her mouth just for talkin' shit
You lurkin' bitch? Well, I see that shit
Once again I gotta punch a bitch in her shit
I'm icy bitch, don't look at my wrist
Because if you do, I might blind you bitch.
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The brazen misogyny might be shocking to anyone not affiliated with the gangsta rap movement. However, within the culture, lyrically, this song gives the protagonist power both in the way he instructs the listener in how to deal with a woman who is “talkin’ shit” and also by verbally illustrating how he handles his own woman and what behaviours specifically ignite his wrath. Kitwana (2002) argues, “There seems to be a resurgence among many young Black men of outdated ways of thinking like keeping women in their place by any means necessary” (Kitwana, 2002, p.91).

*Establishing Territory*

Tupac Shakur, an iconic figure who represented the East Coast (typically New York City) within the society of gangsta rap and the Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie Smalls and/or Christopher Wallace), who was a gangsta rap artist from Brooklyn and also an East Coast representative, made headlines over their ongoing turf war. When both were involved in multiple shoot-outs (George, 1999; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Kitwana, 2004), and their feud escalated, they began making headlines. The situation was resolved only when each was murdered “gangland-style” (Kitwana, 2004, p. 347) in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Tupac was shot and killed in his car from gunshots fired out of an adjacent car. Similarly, Notorious B.I.G. was shot and killed in his stopped truck from gunshots fired out of a nearby Chevy Impala. Their feud, seemingly over territory, was one of the largest terrain dispute in the history of hip-hop. Mark Anthony Neal in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader* refers to Tupac and the
Notorious B.I.G’s feud as something that is “commonly referred to as Hip-hop civil war – pitting East Coast against the West Coast” (Neal, 2004, p.65).

At the core of the East Cost versus West Coast conflict was a fundamental belief that the experiences of those on one coast marked them as more authentic – more gangsta, more ghetto, more hardcore – than those on the other. In other words, one ‘hood’ was deemed more authentically hip-hop, and by extension, more authentically black, than the other” (Neal, 2004, p.65). Today, feuds among hip-hop and rap artists from various areas of the U.S. as well as around the world, continue and have grown increasingly commonplace within the culture.

This fourth theme, Establishing Territory, similarly appears most frequently in the subgenre of gangsta rap (27 out of 74 songs or 37%), followed by new school (23 out of 74 songs or 31%). The figures for pop rap were 21 out of 74 songs or 28%, and, for old school hip-hop, three out of 74 songs or less than 1%.

Commonly found in the lyrics and images of hip-hop and rap. shout-outs to specific people and locations are frequent and recurring. By naming individuals and places, the rapper’s position of authority is heightened in the sense that the rapper amasses a group also called a crew or posse. This group lends itself to the image of the artist and increases his position of power and strength almost like an army standing behind him. This is exemplified by 50 Cent and his G-Unit crew, which is made up of a group of rappers who identify and name 50 Cent as their leader. Another example is Eminem and D-12, his posse, all of whom collectively back and support him.

KRS-One rap in the song 5 Boroughs about “the Bronx, Brooklyn…New York…Long Island” (Spence, 2003, p.89). By expressing their love for specific locations, they appear to intend to mark them, claim them or at the very least associate with them. Similarly, artists such as Ludacris in Pimpin’ All Over the World and Black Rob in Whoa! seem to rap about locations in order to emphasize the places under their control. Sometimes they express disdain for competitors’ locations. For example in Whoa! Black Rob’s name calls the following, “Ballers in Detroit, Niggaz in New Orleans, Boston and New Jersey muthafuckas…”(Spence, 2003, p.458). As identified by numerous academics (including Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002; Watkins, 2005; Dyson 2007), many hip-hop and rap artists talk about their struggle to be the “king” or alpha-male of his own domain, which can include whole areas referred to as a “ghetto” or “hood.”
Watkins refers to an artists’ struggle through music as one that includes a journey from “ghetto reality” (Watkins, 2005, p.2) to the mainstream entertainment industry. Rose (1994) and Boyd (2002) examine the idea of the “ghetto” in hip-hop and rap cultures first as a space of toughness, poverty, and hardships. They suggest that it is difficult to escape from ghetto life. These researchers also examine the notion that, once an artist has emerged from the “ghetto,” he will, or should always carry its symbolism and meaning with him in order to remain credible within the cultures. The artist may then use those harsh experiences to form lyrics and messages for his fans. It can be argued that, within the hip-hop or rap communities (especially among gangsta rap artists), turf ownership is a major theme that has led repeatedly to real life incidents of criminal behaviour, violence and misery for artists throughout the history of the genre.

Establishing territory is central to creating an image of toughness for most hip-hop or rap artists. By so doing, they are considered credible storytellers and are increasingly compelling to their audiences. By rapping about, for example, the state and city they represent, and also their specific neighbourhoods, including its streets and even corners, fan bases can relate either as neighbours or as witnesses or supporters of those areas, regions, cities and specific locales. For example, Eminem, in the title track made for the movie 8 Mile, in which he starred, raps about the neighbourhood where he grew up, in Detroit, 8 Mile. In the video, highway signs bearing the words 8 Mile in green are clearly visible. As such, Eminem has grown increasingly associated with that area, and all the roughness, poverty and threatening characters conveyed. It lends him a credibility – that not only did he survive the rough streets of 8 Mile, but he came out on top and ended up ruling them. It’s not only a compelling image, but also one that makes Eminem seem appropriately powerful and tough.

Though an artist is promoting the merits of his ’hood, that glorification is not necessarily an invitation for other artists to come and occupy the territory. For example, Gang Starr says in the single Dwyck, “You wish you could come into my neighbourhood…You could say I'm sorta da boss so get lost” (Spence, 2003, p.81). The artist raps all about his turf, and makes it difficult for anyone else to lay claim to it. Once an artist becomes associated with a specific area there is an honour code that keeps others from infringing it.

_Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology_
The fifth theme, *Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology* appeared most frequently in the sub-genre of gangsta rap (27 out of 51 songs or 53%), followed by new school (14 out of 51 songs or 28%). The figures for pop rap were eight out of 51 songs or 16%, and, for old school hip-hop, were two out of 51 songs or less than 1%.

In this theme, issues about reclaiming the n-word as a way to empower the artist – to help define his identity and agency (Rose, 1994) comes to the forefront. Hip-hop and rap artists seem to use the n-word with both positive and negative connotations. Lyrically the n-word is used in both self-reference as well as to reference others. Many artists use the n-word consistently throughout their songs, for example, Onyx, Ja Rule, Ice Cube, Method Man, Redman, and Mobb Deep all use the term liberally throughout their lyrics. If an artist says, “I’m a straight up nigga,” like Ice-T does in his rap, *Straight Up Nigga*, he appears to be telling the world that, despite the white establishment’s historic abuse of the term and the slavery and subsequent hatred, the black man has overcome it, and by reclaiming the word and empowering it, they will continue to battle for autonomy.

While there is much to indicate that a white patriarchy has dominated both inside and outside of the hip-hop and rap environments, black rappers have not been quiet about expressing their disdain towards white power, and white culture generally. Common slang used to describe white people in rap music includes, “snow,” “peckerwood,” “honkey,” “cracker” and “W” (Westbrook, 2002: 216). Another arguably more serious and disturbing example of black racism toward whites is a video posted on Youtube⁶ which shows Kanye West with Jay-Z surrounded by figures of mutilated and dead white women. Here we see images of Kanye West hating and despising women and as a result killing them or enjoying their bodies (sexualizing them) upon their death. The fact that they are women and white are both of particular importance in reference to the topic of this thesis.

Some male rappers, who lament difficult lives in their lyrics, still manage to do so in a non-violent, non-racial, non-sexist form. For example, socially conscious rappers who fall under the new school subgenre, such as Common and EPMD, talk about how change is needed in the

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⁶ [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIfwayTAE40](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIfwayTAE40)
mainstream hip-hop and rap communities. Rapper Common sings in *Ghetto Haven* about music as a trigger for happiness and unhappiness respectively (Spence, 2003, p.126). He suggests that it both offers an escape from the harsh realities of ghetto life and can also predict a promising future. By comparison, EPMD raps in the song *Crossover*:

Some say, “There’s no business like show business,”
But if this the truth, please explain why is this:
Rappers been around long, makin’ mad noise, you see,
Still I haven’t seen one rapper livin’ comfortably.
(Spence, 2003, p.66).

He points out that hip-hop and rap artists have to work hard to reach a plateau of success, but that doesn’t mean they are happy. As has been long professed by many in the entertainment business, money does not equal happiness. EPMD may also be contending that all of the hate and struggle required of an alpha-male in a hip-hop/rap community might not be the path to contentment that the messaging promises.

Rapper 50 Cent comments in *P.I.M.P*, “Yeah in Hollywood they say there’s no business like show business./In the 'hood they say there’s no business like ho’ business, ya know” (Spence, 2003, p.308). In this rap, perhaps 50 Cent is juxtaposing the classic image of white Hollywood against the stark realities of hip-hop. Repeated use of racial slurs help to delineate black from white, hip-hop from mainstream, men from women.

Johnson (2003) argues that, “through the process of appropriation” (p.5), white hip-hop and/or rappers, though few in number, are able to gain access to the industry because of their tendency to appropriate cultural norms including alpha-male domination and an acceptance of the black struggle, or a struggle against a cultural norm to which you do not belong. His argument is similar to that advanced by Kitwana (2005), i.e., that “hip-hop, as the mainstream pop culture of our time, has been appropriated by young white Americans” (p.2).

Black male hip-hop and rap artists seem to have embraced the n-word as a sign of identity and power, for example, in the highly publicized Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G saga. Both used the n-word frequently in their lyrics, and both used it self-referentially. Tupac actually redefined
the term “as an acronym to mean Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished” (Westbrook, 2002, p.97), because he was frustrated with the ways black male hip-hop and rap artists were being defined and described. Use of the n-word, though common in almost all gangsta rap music, seems to have become more mainstream in all genres of hip-hop and rap as a sign of identity and a vehicle used to express the artists’ angst and frustrations about the industry, other rappers in the community, and society at large.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have organized my discussion of lyrics into five themes. The first theme, *Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women*, appeared most frequently in the gangsta rap subgenre. Academics such as Rose (2004) and Dyson (2007) have examined the virgin vs. whore identity and discussed the implications of labelling women. The representation of women as “bitches and hos” has become commonplace in hip-hop and rap music, as the research in this chapter makes evident.

The second theme, *Ostentatious Display of Wealth*, also appeared most frequently in gangsta rap. The implications of this theme have been discussed by numerous academics, including Rose (1994), Boyd (2002), and Milner (2004). One of the theme’s most important aspects is the need to build and maintain an image (Boyd, 2002). An issue that stands out in this section is the seduction of children into the materialistic world of hip-hop/rap. For instance, Lil’ Romeo in his song, *My Baby*, raps about a Bugs Bunny chain and places great emphasis on owning material goods from an early age.

Theme three, *Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances, and Weapons*, also appeared most frequently in the gangsta rap category. Academics talk about violence against women and violence leading to murder as subthemes in this category.

The fourth theme, *Establishing Territory*, is related to the frequent “shout-outs” by rappers, which are directed to individuals within their crew. Critical study has looked, in particular at the oft-mythologized East/West Coast rivalry (George, 1999; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Kitwana, 2004). This category appears to be very important to the hip-hop/rapper in establishing an alpha-male identity and credibility.
The final theme, *Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology* appeared least often in the analysis, but that does not lessen the implications of the use of the n-word and other words that delineate and marginalize the races. It has been both used as a form of resistance and as a way to reclaim identity.

The five themes taken as a whole demonstrate the pervasiveness of divisive messaging in hip-hop and rap music, but particularly in gangsta rap music—between sexes, races and even classes—artists propagate images of strength by diminishing everyone else. A primary aspiration of most mainstream hip-hop and rap artists seems to be to separate them from the white and racist status quo. Where society deems drug use negative and bad, hip-hop and rap appears to embrace it as fearless and good. Similarly, violence, name-calling, racist and sexist behaviours, all of which are viewed through a societal lens of suspicion and even hate are all embraced by the hip-hop and rap collective as empowering and alpha-male identity establishing. Subsequently, anyone who does not meet the necessary criteria to join the group—namely strength, money and hypermasculinity, is, whether or not they spend money on the records and refer to themselves as fans of the genre, are on the outside of it.

As I turn to the focus group made up of young academic women, it is important to understand their value within the culture before they even answer the first question: As women, they are silenced. As non-blacks (even if they are of mixed race) they are seen as adversarial as indicated by messages repeated in the lyrics of the genre. We can expect that the ensuing dialogue will be very interesting.
Chapter 4: Focus Group Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents and interprets discussions in the focus group that I conducted for this study. I set out the key themes that emerged and also analyze comments made by each of the participants concerning the specific songs chosen as the basis for the focus group questions. The main analysis of the focus group discussion is provided in the Summary and Analysis section of the chapter.

The four participants, were women from Ontario based colleges and universities of varying ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. They brought many important facts, ideas, and opinions with them. Each woman selected a pseudonym for herself and described herself in the following way:

- Remy Ma: Chinese-Canadian – age, 22
- Rah Digga: Iraqi-Filipino- Canadian – age, 20
- Trina: Carribean-Canadian – age, 24
- Foxy Brown: White-Canadian – age, 19

The women appeared instantly at ease with each other and, although they did not always agree with one another, they demonstrated their respect by listening to each other and taking turns speaking. There were times when one participant took the lead in the discussion, posed an idea, and asked the others to respond. There were also moments when participants felt the need to interject in order to provide additional comments, or to disagree with one. I saw that the participants were engaged with the focus group based on their enthusiasm about providing verbal feedback and as a result of non-verbal cues, such as focus on the answers of their peers which including reacting to comments made both positively and negatively (including nodding, shaking of the head, smiling, sighing, etc.)

The focus group session continued without friction or inter-personal difficulties of any kind. This meant that it was easier for me as a researcher to draw conclusions that were neither muddled by
needlessly emotional confrontation, nor complicated by distractions from outside influences. As the researcher and facilitator, I attempted to make the focus group a relaxed environment for the participants. I intended that it be a place where they would feel free to express their emotions, feelings and opinions without judgment. I believe I was successful in this and ultimately fostered a very engaged participatory session that yielded a variety of original, well thought out, concise responses.

The participants communicated verbally as well as through non-verbal cues, such as animated facial expressions and expressive body language. I noted shrugged shoulders, rolled eyes, gestures of surprise or agreement, emphatic hand placement, and other non-verbal indicators but did not record these consistently. In the times I didn’t record a specific response, it was likely due to the fact that I was attending to the participant’s words without the distraction of jotting notes. I didn’t want the act of recording to take focus and direction away from the discussion at hand. In general, the participants used hand gestures and emotionally charged facial expressions liberally.

The most heated discussion occurred during the follow-up questions at the end of the focus group, when I asked the participants how it is that young women are able to enjoy hip-hop and rap music—particularly the more offensive messages of gangsta rap music—and at the same time critically analyze the messages generated and communicated by the artists. The participants’ concerns centred on one of the core issues I had initially raised for consideration—the fundamental ambivalence of women towards hip-hop and rap music. This ambivalence was articulated by Remy Ma who said: “I think one of the reasons— as a woman who is critically engaged, you still want to find a place in hip-hop and to [simultaneously] separate yourself from it [is that] nobody wants to ostracize themselves from something [they] think is fantastic. My passion lies in hip-hop but my struggle is trying to fit into hip-hop somewhere. I think that [for] young women who are critically engaged, that’s the battle that they face.” On the one hand, Remy Ma loves engaging in the music and finds it aesthetically gratifying, but on the other hand, she is ambivalent about some of its messaging.

When describing her experience reading the lyrics of a Tupac song Remy Ma comments on the ways in which Tupac seems not to question a certain status-quo. “The problem is,” she says, “that [the attitude] enforces whatever dichotomies or binaries exist and how do we get beyond
that? What every young kid reading this, they think well, that’s the way it is, and although he calls for changes, the majority of the lyrics kind of enforce what exists in the streets as natural and as non-important, you know, that’s not constructive.”

Focus Group Themes/Sub-Themes and Concepts

In analyzing the focus group discussions, I organized the participants’ responses around the following main themes: Hypersexuality, Hypermasculinity, and Compulsory Heterosexuality.

In the focus group discussion, the song Candy Shop by 50 Cent received the most attention. Overall, the panel felt that 50 Cent promotes the idea that men are superior to women. They also found that men are required by nature as well as through the socialization process to take on masculine roles and maintain a projected “straightness.” Further, anything that deviates from that norm is to be criticized. In the song, 50 Cent raps about his penis by calling it his “magic stick,” as if it is its own animated being, separate from himself, thereby disengaging from accountability from “its” actions. His magic stick represents everything a man should be and everything he should do, including projecting an aggressive masculinity at all times. It appears as an instrument of power in lyrics such as, “the magic stick, I’m the love doctor.”

As Rah Digga suggested, “This song perpetuates stereotypes of black sexuality, about gender relations, and also about compulsory heterosexuality.”

I asked the participants, “What do you think about what you heard and what you read?” Remy Ma replied, “I’m tired of hearing about 50 Cent’s magic stick. It’s irritating because it is really the centre of his entire existence. [There is a] continual emphasis on hypersexuality, hypermasculinity, and heterosexuality….I find that there is no reference in hip-hop/rap to homosexuals, unless it’s really derogatory.”

Remy Ma’s comments suggest that 50 Cent as a male rapper places great emphasis on sex, sexual relations, and his own sexual prowess. Secondly, she references concern about 50 Cent’s near-constant attention to the hypersexuality of women when she argues that the rapper seems to infer that, “Women need to be hypersexual beings, ready and willing at any time.”
As is in practice with the general tenants of Freud’s Madonna/Whore or Virgin/Whore archetype, Ruby Hamad in *Raunch Culture and the Virgin Whore Dichotomy* uses pop culture references to explain:

This dichotomy is played out again and again in pop culture. For every Taylor Swift, there is a Lady Gaga, for every Hannah Montana circa 2007 there is a Miley Cyrus version 2010. Young women, it seems, are either lauded for their innocence or derided for their overt sexuality. But what Swift, Gaga, Montana and Cyrus all have in common is that they all define women in relation to whether or not they have sex. Much as she may like to believe it, Gaga is not the Swift antidote, she is merely the flip side, the 'whore' to the 'virgin', the warning that once you shed the cloak of girlish innocence a life of debauch sluttery awaits you. In neither case is the idea of sex simply something that a woman does, like eating a meal or wash her hair, rather it becomes the thing that defines her.  

Hamad indicates that women, when sexualized are expected to take on whore-like qualities, and must be ready and willing to put out. Otherwise, their only other option is to maintain a near virginal chastity.

50 Cent’s *Candy Shop* looks at two important themes for critical analysis: First, he talks about his Candy Stick in reference to his penis as a tool for the woman to consume. She must be willing, ready and able to go and pleasure him and second, his woman needs to be a whore in the bedroom and subservient in the home, cooking and cleaning, as well as taking care of things. The woman needs to appear virgin-like to others and only reveal her “true” (and by “true” I mean “sexualized) self to him.

50 Cent’s music videos feature an abundance of half-naked women whose only apparent purpose is for the servicing and pleasing of him. In the video for *Disco Inferno* a series of beautiful

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women in thongs shake backwards toward the camera with 50 Cent in the middle. At times, women surround him, touching him from all directions as he pours bottles of expensive champagne over their rear ends and breasts. None of them seems offended that she is one of many women vying for 50 Cent’s attention, nor do any seem to care how he treats her, ignores her or fondles her, in turn.

Remy Ma also indicated in her observations that hip-hop and rap allows no deviation from the purported norm – that all men must be aggressively heterosexual, and all women must be submissive to the man's sexual needs. This can be compared to a section from the song: “So seductive, you should see the way she wind… Go 'head girl, don't you stop, Keep going 'til you hit the spot” (50 Cent, Candy Shop). Remy Ma argues that the lyric “Wanna show me how you work it baby, no problem./Get on top then get to bouncing round like a low rider./I'm a seasons vet when it come to this shit./After you work up a sweat you can play with the stick” makes it apparent that “Heterosexuality is compulsory. Men must be straight. They must want to fuck women.”

The song makes claims that are countered repeatedly by women in academia. For example, Adrienne Rich, an American poet and feminist points out that, “Heterosexuality needs to be reorganized…Female heterosexuality is an enormous assumption” (Rich, 1980, p. 637).

Jared Green quotes Rich in his book, Rap and Hip-Hop: Examining Pop Culture when she says that there exists “a sexual imbalance of power of males over females” (Green, 1980, p. 638). He charges that Rich calls this “Compulsory heterosexuality” indicating that straightness is not only the norm but is a fact (or should be) for all. Thus in the hip-hop and rap communities, the one who represents homosexuality is not viewed favourably. This “disdain for homosexuality” as Rich is quoted as saying, “appears to condone intolerance and even outright violent attitudes towards gays” (Green, 2003, p. 21).

50 Cent is not the only rapper who ridicules homosexuality; Eminem has been widely criticized for repeated references to homosexuals by using homophobic phrases and derogatory names including, “fuckin' fags and faggots.” His song entitled Criminal includes the following lyrics: “My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge/And I'll stab you in the head, whether you're a fag or les/A homosex, hermaph, or a transeves./Pants address, hey fags, the answer's yes.” Other
rappers, like Tyler The Creator in his *AssMilk* lyrics, says: “Come take a stab at it faggot/I pre-ordered your casket.”

The connection between being homosexual and being a target for violence because of sexual orientation is quite prevalent in the hip-hop and rap communities. On the other hand, there are artists such as The Game and Kanye West who have recently released statements encouraging hip-hop artists to stop bashing homosexuals in their music. Kanye even went so far as to say his cousin is gay and that there are gay hip-hop and/or rap artists out there who have yet to come out. One such gay rapper who is open about his sexuality is Deadlee, an artist of Mexican and African-American decent. I believe that encouraging gay/lesbian hip-hop and rap artists to come out will help their listeners and provide encouragement for other homosexuals who ascribe to the hip-hop and rap lifestyles.

Foxy Brown became irate while listening to *Candy Shop* and was quick to voice opinions. She said, “I think it’s actually the most degrading song I have ever heard…the woman is his slave…He finds that there’s only one purpose to having a woman and that is to fuck.” The other participants were nodding their heads as if to show agreement with Foxy Brown’s comments. Foxy Brown was adamant and plainly emphasized the words “the most degrading” in her remarks to the focus group. She went on to say:

> In this song, as is common with his other work, 50 Cent is positioning women as obedient to their master, the man. He is creating a master/servant relationship where the woman’s main role in life should be to service her man’s needs.

Trina agreed with Foxy Brown and added:

> In this case, it’s a little different because she also agreed with it…she is saying “yeah I’ll give you what I’ve got and so I will submit to you as a masculine man who is hypersexual, and I will basically do what you like me to do and I expect a little bit back from you but, you know, other than that, you can have your own way.”
Her comment was directed to Foxy Brown. While Trina was speaking, Foxy Brown nodded in agreement. When I asked, “How did this song make you feel?” Trina responded, “He’s talking about the way his dick is used as a tool to get women. It is degrading to women but at the same time, he is empowering himself in a man’s world.”

I could see this response surprised the other participants. I imagine that their staunch feminist ideals in some ways placed them at odds with the notion that the song might “empower” 50 Cent in Trina’s allusion to “a man’s world.” Therefore, I think Rah Digga’s reply was in a sense a way to re-empower herself as a women, especially when she minimized her comment by indicating that it sounded preposterous: “50 Cent is degrading himself by rapping about his magic stick,” Rah Digga said. “Yes, it sounds preposterous, but perhaps it is a way for him to relate to his consumers.” Here, one could infer that Trina and Rah Digga meant that 50 Cent is knowingly objectifying himself in order to feel that he belongs to his ’hood, community, and crew, perhaps because hypersexuality and hypermasculinity are commonly held values among gangsta rap artists. 50 Cent does so by taking on roles in the hip-hop and rap environments that have already been constructed – including promiscuous sex, excessive drug use and making money. These behaviours were not created or defined by 50 Cent, but rather they are ideals he is upholding to maintain the a hypermasculine image which is believed to secure a large and dedicated fan base, while ensuring that the “crew” with whom he surrounds himself is supportive and believes in him. In relation to this point, Black Entertainment Television (BET) aired a two-part special entitled Hip-Hop/Rap and Sex, during which a young black woman is interviewed. She states:

A lot of popular guys thought they were the Nelly or the 50 Cent of the school and because of that, they thought they had the right to treat and talk to girls as they wanted and that treatment is accepted. The girls are like stop it! And they don’t say it seriously, and you might even like that attention. So you see that as something to be accepted, it has become the norm.

This relates to what Trina and Rah Digga said about 50 Cent in the sense that he is not only objectifying himself, but also expecting to be looked up to by his fans, who may take what they see and hear and accept it into their everyday lives.
When I asked, “What is the main message of the song?” Participant Remy Ma jumped at the chance to respond. It seemed as though she had been waiting for this question to be asked so that she could express herself. She argued that that main message has to do with “The play between the male/female tension… I’ll give you something and you give me something…[But ultimately] It’s a very inequitable exchange.”

In other words, Ramy Ma was saying that the woman always gives more. This is true whether or not she really wants an equitable exchange, or whether or not he wants anything else from her. Further, I believe Remy Ma was saying that the woman is always at a disadvantage because if she “gives it up” she may be considered “easy” or a “whore” and if she doesn’t she may be considered “prude” or “not cool enough” and could be ridiculed or made fun of.

Rah Digga nodded in agreement and was also eager to respond:

[50 Cent] reinforces a hypersexual culture which is perpetuating rap and hip-hop music…this song perpetuates stereotypes of black sexuality, gender relations and compulsory heterosexuality. You hear nothing about homosexuals unless it’s in some derogatory form, like Eminem.

Rah Digga’s idea about the way homosexuals are portrayed is supported by Green (2003), who argues, “Far more typical are lyrics that reserve little else besides disdain for homosexuality and that, at their worst, appear to condone intolerance and even outright violent attitudes towards gays” (Green, 2003, p. 21).

When I asked, “How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?” Remy Ma responded:

I notice how women are constructed in his lyrics…he plays on this notion that she wanted to. “If you’ll be a nympho, I’ll be a nympho.” So there’s this notion if you want to it’s okay for me to be this aggressive because you’re allowing it….She enables his sexuality…it’s continuous…it’s really perpetuated by how submissive she has to be, you know…she doesn’t have a course of
her own, she doesn’t have a voice…. When a young girl would hear this and maybe take to heart some of the things that are said, she might think that she has to be sexually submissive in order to be loved, or in order to be worth something.

Remy Ma is saying that 50 Cent is making it look as if the woman wants it, exonerating himself and limiting his culpability. Victims of rape are similarly vilified both by the standard media and in court rooms across North America. As a case in point, two New York Police Department (NYPD) police officers were found not guilty by a jury of 7 peers (5 women and 7 men) of raping a “drunk” woman in her apartment while on duty. The jury quickly deliberated and found that they could not place a guilty verdict as there were many holes in the evidence and accounts on both sides and inconclusive DNA evidence. The media reported this case as a “he said/she said” case but sadly, the woman involved is now fighting an image battle after suing for 57 million dollars the NYPD, the officers and others. The media is referring to her as a “golddigger.” ⁸ That’s the other issue, women are either pegged as “wanting the sex” as consensual partners, or “making it up” for a greater gain.

Similarly, an Australian study reported by “The Evening Post” on Wednesday January 19, 2000 suggested that two out of five men believe it is okay to force sex on a woman. The study went on to state that, “Forty percent of the high school students surveyed agreed it was okay to use force, especially if the woman had previously had sex with him or if she started to get sexual but then said no” (The Evening Post, January 19, 2000). A more extensive survey of 998 men in Adelaide in 1997, found 31.7% of young men believed sexual violence was acceptable in some circumstances (The Evening Post, January 19, 2000). By maintaining that a woman’s clothing, behaviour or drug/alcohol intake indicates sexual suggestively or manipulation, i.e., the “She made me do it!” school of thought, then men can continue to live outside the realm of personal responsibility when it comes to their behaviour and the punishment of sexual deviance will remain difficult, if not impossible to prosecute.

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The hip-hop song *My Humps* by The Black Eyed Peas created much conversation among the participants. In response to my first question, “What do you think about what you heard and what you read?” after I played the song and gave them a moment to review the lyric sheet, Remy Ma commented that she feels this song is degrading to women. “It’s just plain ugly,” she said. “What I think is unfortunate is that this is what sells,” and she became emotional. Her voice modulation increased. She appeared to want the other participants to understand how strongly she felt about the issue of the general acceptance of these lyrics. This was evident in her vocal inflection, tone and her choice to emphasize certain words. She continued, “Fergie is demonstrating that it’s okay for others to view women as exotified bodies to gaze at and consume. Fergie sees this exotification as something empowering.”

From this, I gleaned that Remy Ma was upset that women may view their objectification as something normal and routine. As a result, the attitude may not be questioned. In other words, it has become so commonplace within the cultures of hip-hop and rap for men to view women as bodies to consume that the shock value is now gone. It is not surprising anymore when we hear of an artist making comments about women they want to use for sexual purposes. It is also commonplace for women to view themselves in this manner as well. Women, especially those who identify with a hip-hop and rap cultures, have become complacent about the ways in which their bodies and identities are viewed, consumed and reproduced.

Furthering this discussion of *My Humps* by the Black Eyed Peas, Remy Ma brought up the idea of the “commodification of objects,” suggesting that perhaps there is an implication that “the young woman are purchasable.” At this point, there was a look of disgust, not only on her face, but also on the faces of the other three participants. The thought of being a “purchasable commodity” and as an object did not sit well with the participants.

When asked, “How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?” Trina responded, “It’s not like a man is talking about degrading women, as you would usually see in hip-hop and rap music, but it is now about a woman degrading herself and showing that she is not only objectified, but she is purchasable too.” As we explored in chapter two, male rappers influence both young men and young women in different ways. My understanding of the participants’ comments was that they believed that it is worse for women than for men to portray themselves negatively. Through self-loathing, female hip-hop and rap artists sometimes give
credence to the misogyny generated by their male counterparts and stamp it as “cool,” “on trend” or worse, “acceptable.” In this acceptance, a broader range of destructive and even dangerous behaviours might result.

When I asked if anyone had anything else to add about My Humps, Remy Ma said, “This definitely plays into how bodies are exotified. Women are seen as being seductive, and as a tease.” She went on to talk about how race is discussed in the song, for example, when Fergie raps, “mix your milk/with my cocoa puff,” Remy Ma felt the language was highly offensive. “I identify with being mocha,” she explained, “somewhere in the middle, but I don’t really fit into this you know, coco puffy-ness or milky-ness, and I notice kids wanting to fit into those categories because those are the only ones that are defined for them.”

The discussion surrounding Chingy’s gangsta rap hit, Ass N Da Aurr was heated and generally compelling. Foxy Brown led off with the argument that, “Chingy is rapping that you will be lucky enough, or you are lucky enough to be the person to come home with me.” She believes Chingy is implying that a woman can’t want something of her own accord but that she has to be propositioned in order to feel motivated. However, once asked, Chingy assumes she is certain to go along with it, because being with him is a privilege. Remy Ma jumped into the conversation and added the following:

I don’t like this song. I’m actually not surprised, but it just makes me angry. This is on the Billboard Top 20, you know what I mean? This is not some random, underground socially conscious music. This is topping the charts in Europe and in the States now and soon to be in Toronto. So to me, I feel really, really threatened by the fact that this is the best we can do. After 30 years of hip-hop evolution, this is where we’ve come. And as well, out of the songs that we’ve heard today, this is I think the fourth or fifth song that refers to women and money. [This] reference between women and money…makes me feel threatened. The fact that we are perceived as gold digging whores, and that we only have our bodies as value to barter and exchange, angers me.
As Remy Ma discussed these points with the other participants, she appeared fidgety and uncomfortable. Tension was evident by her sudden movements in her chair. She was fidgeting with the pen in her hand, tapping it back and forth on the desk. She was looking around constantly, giving the impression that she was visibly uncomfortable. My interpretation of Remy Ma’s statement is that both the popularity of the song and its controversial lyrics are problematic for her. I connected this to one of her earlier statements suggesting that, “Fans might emulate the artists’ actions and words and incorporate those in their daily lives.”

Trina responded to the question, “How does [the song] make you feel?”, by stating:

Everytime I walk into a club or a bar I’m going to be looked at and objectified. It is not as if my friends and I can go out to a bar or club and have a good time, instead we are viewed as objects to be picked up, to be gawked and prodded at.

In response to the question, “What is the main message of the song?”, Remy Ma responded:

Chingy is at the club and the night’s coming to an end and he’s threatened that he’s not going to get any so he’s on the prowl, you know, the proverbial prowl that all men are on…I think the main message here is your night is crap unless you have gone and gotten some. Otherwise, if you had a great conversation, don’t tell anybody about it ‘cause you didn’t get it.

Foxy Brown believed that Chingy’s main point in this song is:

To find the hottest [girl] and get her so that I will feel so proud if I have the girl that everyone is looking at. So the man has to uphold his masculinity in front of his friends, but he can’t just pick up any girl, she must be the best looking girl, the one that everyone wants. Chingy wants to get the best girl, fuck her, and dispose of her and everyone will be jealous. She needs to know that she can be replaced at a moment’s notice, and not to get clingy or attached to him.
The final question I asked regarding *Ass N Da Aurr* was, “How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?” Trina responded with the following: “I would definitely say that women are marginalized, women are objectified, women are compared to being worth something depending on how they perform and how they look.” Trina’s comments about the lyrics, for example, “put your hands on the ground and put your ass in the air” raised questions about the relationship between owning and controlling women and the treatment of women’s bodies.

Rah Digga argued, “When Chingy raps for women to dance a certain way it is a way of controlling their being, in order to attend to his needs.” She further commented on Chingy’s masculinity by stating:

I agree with what Trina said – it’s very submissive for women…I get the sense that [Chingy’s] masculinity is very threatened when he states, “come to me so I can hurt you, ah honey, don’t act like it’s hard to do.” I mean there’s violence within. I must dominate this woman because somehow I feel my masculinity is threatened in some way and so I must have this girl in this sort of submissive position in order for me to feel like a man, right?

The hip-hop song *There It Go (The Whistle Song)* by Juelz Santana incited animated discussion among the participants. Foxy Brown said, “There is a group of hip-hop artists who have something to say and who are very passionate, and then there’s the hip-hop artists who really don’t care, they are just there to make money, they just want to get their songs out there and get themselves heard.” Trina agreed with Foxy Brown’s assessment and also thought that the issue in this song is “[Santana’s] relentless whistling at young women.” Rah Digga and Trina felt that the song was repetitive and objectifying of women.

Remy Ma said, “I hate how the song began with the lyrics, `its dipset bitch.’ This sets the tone for the entire song. Women are whistled at. Who else gets whistled at? Dogs. When you want them to come and you’ve thrown the ball…this is telling that gender relations are constructed in mainstream hip-hop culture.”
Trina responded to the question, “How does the song make you feel?” by stating that she is “angry because this is what sells, and, when this is played in the club, the guys will start whistling.” Simplicity, Trina seems to believe, is the rapper’s way of condescending to his audience, but they don’t feel angry about it because they are oblivious. Even more, they are complacent about what he is saying, and even what music is playing at the club. It is more of an aesthetic choice than something to take a closer look at and analyze. Trina indicates that by stating something over and over again, referring to a woman as a “ho” or “bitch,” for example, the audience could grow desensitized to the terms because they become commonplace.

Remy Ma furthered argued for the idea that “women are compliant…there is no female voice…it merely is [Santana’s] perception and this is the only perception that counts.” Both Trina and Remy Ma suppose that some form of compliance and acceptance emerges through the process of repetition.

**Legitimacy**

Missy Elliott’s pop rap song, *Get Ur Freak On*, reflected for the participants a good example of the process of gaining legitimacy in a man’s world. Women have to engage in a sustained fight in order to compete with men and break through the glass ceiling. There was a perception that Elliot had to fight even harder than women on other career trajectories to become successful in the male-dominated hip-hop community. The simple act of gaining the respect of her male counterparts in order to be finally welcomed into the hip-hop and rap communities was a tremendous obstacle in and of itself.

Before Elliot there were few notable female hip-hop artists. And those that had gained some acceptance in the community had mostly done so by accepting the stereotypes their male counterparts placed upon them. For example, Salt-n-Pepa, Lil’ Kim and TLC are great examples. From what they wore to what they sang about tied into a hypermasculine worldview of what it means to be a woman in hip-hop. By dressing provocatively and playing sexualized feminine roles, they attained great success in the hip-hop and rap and mainstream musical worlds.

For Missy Elliot, who, like Queen Latifah, dressed in a more masculine way, emulated some of the hypermasculine behaviours in order to achieve success and legitimacy. Because no matter
what, Missy was a women trying to survive in a male dominated hip-hop world. No matter how hard she tried to fit in it was a struggle for her.

Remy Ma suggested that Elliot took on the role of the woman on the outside of the hip-hop world/community, the one who is not able to break through barriers. This stance contrasts that of Fergie, who was seen by the panel as conforming in order to blend into the community. Fergie has embraced the existing female stereotypes in hip-hop, by acknowledging and validating her sexual position in the community and willingly accepting and even enjoying the attention. Part of her enjoyment of male attention flows into what male hip-hop and rap artists message – including how women love the attention of being looked at, gazed at, whistled at etc. It makes them feel wanted, needed, and loved.

Regarding the idea of female artists gaining legitimacy, Trina stated, “[Elliot] is realizing that we live in a male-dominated society and especially a male-dominated hip-hop/rap scene…She is saying that she is not here to think of her body but she’s here because of the lyrics that are coming out of her mouth.” In other words, Trina suggests that Elliot is tackling the image of woman-as-sexualized and instead fostering the creation of a new hip-hop paradigm – woman-as-intellectualized. Trina thought that, “Missy Elliot is more focused on her music than on how she looks, unlike other artists in the industry.” The participants nodded their heads in agreement. Overall, they viewed this song by Elliot as a positive contribution.

Remy Ma responded to Trina’s statement with the following:

…[Elliot is] struggling in a man’s world because you still see the same construct [in her] music. Hip-hop/rap replicates a reference to violence and reference to legitimacy…Hip-hop/rap essentially is about being legitimate…she is putting her foot down in a world where she clearly knows she doesn’t belong and I think that is empowering…

Her argument suggests that women have to compete with men in the hip-hop and rap industries, and that, in order to be legitimate, both male and female rappers have to establish and maintain credibility. Hypermasculinity was also discussed in reference to Elliott, who though having her own unique individuality within a male dominated hip-hop/rap community, has had to develop
her own legitimacy. She too purveys a sort of “hypermasculinity.” By presenting herself as an Alpha Female, Elliot is mimicking her male counterparts, and not entirely separating herself from them. From what Remy Ma implied, while Elliot’s own style and uniqueness are inevitable in that she is a woman, she still faces the barriers set by the industry that require her to follow the rules already in effect. Remy Ma’s viewpoint suggests that, in order to be credible, any artist has to take on a tough, or alpha image, one that supports the subgenre’s status quo, which emphasizes street credibility, and the ability to dominate with violence and drugs. According to Remy Ma’s argument, Elliot is not entirely a part of the status quo of the sub-genre, because she does not seem to buy into the same street mentality, however, as a female rapper, this might simply be because she can’t.

Other female hip-hop artists have come up against similar walls. For example, Nicki Minaj, whose work we did not listen to in the focus group, is seen as rough and tough. She also claims to be empowered as evident by first track on her Pink Friday album entitled I’m The Best where she states: "I'm fighting for the girls that never thought they could win," and, "I am here to reverse the curse that they lived in.” Her voice is strong, however, by the same token, her image (dress, dance, overall communication style) remains hypersexualized and conforming to the ways in which men have traditionally viewed women. By purveying an independent, free and dominant spirit, Minaj continues to propagate the prevailing hip-hop and rap messages. In a recent interview with The Guardian UK (referencing her alter ego “Harajuku Barbie”) Nicki Minaj said, “She's innocent. She lives in a fantasy land and she plays dress up. And she's really cutesy. And, you know, you can't be mad at her because she's sweet.” 9

Here we see that it’s ok to view Harajuku Barbie aka Nicki Minaj as childlike, sweet, innocent and of course, hypersexual. She takes on multiple personalities in order to cover all of the proverbial bases, stereotypes though they may be. Rah Digga further backed up this idea of female artists in the genre continuing to replicate stereotypes by saying, “I’m in agreement with what Remy Ma said earlier about [Missy Elliot], not in terms of being innovative though, she

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basically just inserts herself into the male role. She just replicates that role rather than adding anything new.”

It became apparent that Remy Ma and Rah Digga disagreed about the meaning behind the idea of legitimacy and replication. Rah Digga believed Missy Elliot was real and a formidable presence for women, she legitimatized women’s place in hip-hop and continues to encourage women to embrace the music. While, Remy Ma believes that Missy was just another cookie cutter hip-hop artist who would do anything to fit in and didn’t set her self apart by promoting a strong, female identity in hip-hop. She believes she follows rather then leads and replicates the male figure in hip-hop.

With regard to the question, “How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?” Remy Ma talked about how Missy raps, “Is that your chick?” Remy Ma’s body language indicated her displeasure with that line, and she also stated, “it’s her way of gaining play, you know, because if she doesn’t – unfortunately, it’s the nature of the business, right? If she doesn’t do this as a woman, then she’s not going to get airplay.” As described in chapter two, female rappers not only have to compete with other female rappers, but they must also compete with their male counterparts. In so doing, they usually replicate the established norms.

In the focus group discussion regarding the song, *Get Ur Freak On*, the participants argue that as much as Missy Elliot doesn’t replicate male hip-hop artists there is still the emphasis on dismissing women’s importance. Remy Ma states, “the reference to a woman as a chick… irritates me.” So in this way, Remy Ma concedes that while Missy Elliot does appear to establish an individual, unique identity, she is still pandering to the paradigm of hypermasculinity in order to feel a part of and belonging to the hip-hop and rap cultures and communities.

When the participants discussed how Jay-Z’s gangsta rap categorized *Hard Knock Life* positions murder as something that is an everyday occurrence, they furthered their discussion on legitimacy. The song also seemed to emphasize for them that, in order to succeed in the industry and in life, you have to establish your identity and protect your territory, or “’hood.” In this song, according to Remy Ma, “Jay-Z discusses the perils of the rich versus the poor,” a sound argument, “but,” she continues, “in discussing these differences, he encourages violence as a
form of retaliation against those who double-cross him.” He also promotes the use of murder as a mechanism by which to “get what you want.”

Rah Digga continued on the topic of violence:

It’s no wonder there are ongoing feuds and violence in the hip-hop community…because that has become the norm in the industry. In order to become something, you have to prove yourself worthy. I don’t just blame Jay-Z. The onus is on the artists, the producers, distributors and the media to curb this dependence upon violence and weapons in order to assert identity. I feel angry for two reasons: (1) that Jay-Z used children…in this song, who sang the chorus, “it’s a hard knock life, for us.” This is a ploy for young people who are easily influenced and thus, should not be used as a mechanism by which to send a message, and (2) the song was a copy of the original It’s a Hard Knock Life from the musical “Annie,” where the orphans are singing.

Her second point is that the song lacks originality. As a copy, it loses some artistic legitimacy.

It appears that Jay-Z’s use of children’s voices and a children’s musical as a way to connect further with youth culture serves to exacerbate Rah Digga’s existing concerns about the negative influences of gangsta rap messages on kids. Underlying Remy Ma’s reaction to the exploitation of children is also related to the use of female voices over male voices. Case in point: Jay-Z uses the young female orphans from the play Annie to sing the song’s chorus. This may appear as though Jay-Z is positioning young women to feel strong and empowered – but had this song been sung by young male voices, it may have projected an entirely different message: One of dominance and aggression.

It is difficult to remain complacent about the practices of the music industry. Producers, distributors, artists, and agencies are trying to use any method they can devise to sell a product or image. The adage “sex sells” did not come about for nothing. Racy images of women, both
young and old are compelling across gender lines. Perhaps there is something empowering to
women in these images, or perhaps they are detrimental.

On the other hand, the stereotyped images of men can also prove devastating to a subculture. In
*Hard Knock Life*, Remy Ma questioned the contribution of Jay-Z to society with the following
comment:

> This selling of an image is a form of “cultural colonialism”
because he talks about how hard the street life is for a Black man,
but he doesn’t live it, and those lyrics create interest, desire and
action for the consumer to not only buy the music and the
accompanying merchandise, but most of all to buy into the
ideology that Jay-Z is like you and me, an ordinary person, facing
ordinary struggles, which could not be further from the truth.

Her idea of “cultural colonialism,” suggests that Jay-Z is profiting from the process of
stereotyping himself as aggressive and dominant. The rest of the participants nodded their heads
in agreement with Remy Ma’s points. This led to the third question, “What is the main message
of the song?” Remy Ma commented that, when she looks at people whom she idolizes, “Like
Nelson Mandela,” she realizes that it is such a “contrasted message [to that sent by Jay-Z].” She
is perplexed by the idea that, “People look up to Jay-Z when they should idolize other much
more significant individuals who have made a ‘real’ difference in the lives of many.”

**Lack of Agency/Voice**

Rah Digga’s statement that “Fergie’s agency resides in her overly sexualized body and image,”
referred to the hypersexuality of women in hip-hop and rap music videos. In support of Rah
Digga’s argument, Trina had commented that, “[With Fergie,] it is now about a woman
degrading herself and showing that she is not only objectified, but she is purchasable too.”

In terms of characterization, the participants felt that women were sometimes idealized when
mute, or powerless, as they seem to be in 50 Cent’s song, *Candy Shop*. Remy Ma commented
that, “[The song’s female protagonist] doesn’t have a voice. She is encouraged to be highly
sexual and subservient to her man.”
The participants discussed the idea of representation and agency in The Black Eyed Peas song, *My Humps*. Remy Ma argued, “It just continuously repeats the notion that [the female protagonist] has value only in her ‘junk’ and it’s only used when he wants it.” The word “junk” a slang term for rear end, is used lyrically. Fergie, according to Remy Ma, seems to value herself by how she moves, shakes and allows for male penetration.

Foxy Brown added to Remy Ma’s argument by pointing out:

[She has to] have the boobs, act like a slut and a whore, have everything…that’s how society has moulded us to be. Every girl must be sure to have a great body because otherwise, guys won’t like you. She has to have big boobs and I mean big, that’s what kids want to be and that’s what they look up to.

From her voice (inflection, tone and intonation), Foxy Brown appeared upset by the way Fergie promoted hypersexuality in *My Humps*. The participants’ conversation regarding the song made it evident that they were in total agreement about how women (in this case Fergie) do a disservice to the representation of the female agency. This relates to what Green has argued as the “difficulty to distinguish between reality and representation” (Green, 2003, p. 20), when a listener is not necessarily considering the content of the song critically.

The issue of agency or lack thereof can be found in the song *Changes* by gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur. Remy Ma argued, “I personally feel like I don’t belong in this [song] as a multi-racial person. He only speaks of blacks and whites.” She points out the contradiction of hip-hop for her as a multi-racial woman: “I’m involved in hip-hop culture, but I really have trouble fitting in because I am not black or white. But I absolutely love what the culture has to offer.”

I see parallels between Remy Ma’s statement and ideas represented in Gaunt’s work, (2006) for example, “…Females are actually attracted to their own sphere of musical practice subverted within hip-hop practice” (Gaunt, 2006, p. 121). I see that for Remy Ma and the other young women derive excitement and pleasure from the cultures of hip-hop and rap, even though they may see the contradiction between their enjoyment and their political or personal beliefs. A woman may not be focused on, for example a blatant anti-female sentiment like the idea that the female body can be an accessory for men, because she may be engaging in the appeal of the
culture at other levels. Perhaps she likes the push/pull of the dynamic energies between male and female players. She might enjoy the monetary excess and general power played out in much of the hip-hop narrative. Or perhaps she is simply enthralled by the rhythm and music of the songs. Remy Ma said clearly that she does enjoy the genre as a whole and takes pleasure in it, despite the reality that she finds it hard to truly fit in and discover her own agency within the cultures lyrics and subgenres.

Thinking about Remy Ma’s comment in relation to Gaunt’s (2006) ideas about agency, it makes me wonder, how do others, particularly women and other marginalized populations, fit into the mainstream of hip-hop and rap? If the culture is most often represented by black male artists and consumed by white youth, how do other visible minorities and women find their agency within it? (That is, assuming, like Remy Ma, others listen to it.)

Remy Ma brought up some very important points in her analysis of this song that indicated the dichotomy of her feelings. “…I absolutely love what the culture has to offer,” she professed. She further ascertained that the song has “a simple backbeat, so I’m forced, as a listener, to listen to his lyrics.” Whether or not she likes the simplicity of the beat, or that passive listening is therefore encouraged remained unclear. However, it does amplify the notion that lyrics are central to hip-hop and rap music and therefore the messages are implicit, whether or not the listener agrees with them.

Within the songs Changes, My Humps, Get Ur Freak On, and Candy Shop the participants each discussed the “good beat” and viewed it as something positive, something they enjoyed and could dance to. Even though they found areas of concern within the lyrics, they were able to look past them and focus on the rhythm and overall pleasing qualities of the sound of the music.

The song that created the most positive responses by the participants was Get Ur Freak On, by Missy Elliot. All four participants agreed, and Rah Digga stated, “it’s a really good dance song.” Remy Ma exclaimed, “I love the beat!” “I want to get up and dance to it,” said Trina. “A lot of times with Missy [Elliot]’s music you don’t really listen to the lyrics because of the fact that her beats and the beats that she and Timberland do are always something to dance to.”

If the scope of Elliot’s music does not present a lyrical message, given the importance of lyrics to the genre at large, can it even be analyzed under the same microscope lens as the rest of hip-hop
and rap. If Elliot’s message is no message, then her part in the genre becomes watered down and insubstantial. However, perhaps, based on the general feeling of pleasure and enjoyment of the participants, Elliot and Timberland’s focus on the music over the lyrical message actually unifies those populations left out of the hip-hop and rap mainstreams.

Rah Digga reacting to Remy Ma’s arguments about feeling left-out of the music due to her multi-racial roots, stated that, at least in the song Changes, “Tupac does essentialize blackness in a certain way…” This comment also referred back to a point that Trina had made arguing that, “Black people are…generalized.” Rah Digga responded by stating that there are “massive generalizations about blackness…in rap music.”

By generalizing, even the core, or mainstream population, hip-hop and rap further marginalizes other non-black male populations. But the question then arose asking whether or not generalizing the core or mainstream population might alienate non-black members of that group. Gaunt (2004) makes the point that using a state of “blackness” as the central point around which hip-hop/rap culture unites, there is some suggestion that everyone who cannot relate to this blackness feels, or could feel marginalized or alienated. Rah Digga also points out that Changes is in essence musically simple. “The simple beat makes you listen to the lyrics,” she said. “You’re forced to listen to the lyrics.” Remy Ma shares this perspective, citing that the catchy beat encourages passive listening. Both participants found it difficult to avoid absorbing the lyrics of the song. However, for both the experience, in spite of the lyrics was an enjoyable one.

In responding to my question, “What is the main message [of Tupac Shakur’s, Changes?],” Trina responded:

This song was released after Tupac’s death, so whose agency is being represented? Was this Tupac’s wish to release this song upon his death? Was this a song that was recorded prior but was not released for whatever reasons? Did the record label purposely release this song in order to project a differing image of Tupac, even though his reputation as a gritty, hardcore gangsta rapper is what he left behind?
It was evident that Trina felt passionately about the question, to whom do we attribute these beliefs? Tupac? His mother? The label? She came off as angry that full disclosure of the circumstances behind the song’s release was not made more transparent by the record label, producers and distributors in order to maintain some form of legitimacy regarding the deceased rapper’s legacy.

Perhaps Trina needed to know more about the song’s intention due to the fact that control, power and dominance play out so heavily in the narrative of the culture. The character of Tupac Shakur is as important as the man himself. In other words, if in his lifetime Shakur chose not to release the song because it did not fit his character’s narrative, then its post-mortem release might seem somehow dishonest, at least from Trina’s perspective.

**Contradictions**

Foxy Brown called *Changes*, “powerful” and “moving.” Overall, both women responded positively to the song because the messages in it were positive. The lyrics include the lines:

> I got love for my brother but we can never go nowhere
> unless we share with each other
> We gotta start makin' changes
> learn to see me as a brother instead of two distant strangers

The fact that he is looking for proactive ways to eliminate black-on-black violence, a topic he previously rapped about with a romantic bent, resonated strongly with the participants. In *Changes*, it sounds like Shakur is promoting the idea that change is necessary in order for the violence to end. Unlike the message in Jay-Z’s, *It’s a Hard Knock Life*, wherein the participants felt that Jay-Z discusses the trials and tribulations facing black youth, but does not provide any ideas or solutions to these problems.

Tupac Shakur, mostly known for his work as a hardcore gangsta rapper, surprised the participants with this heartfelt song about making positive changes in your life and community. Remy Ma noted:

> [The song] neutralizes and naturalizes things in the sense that
> Tupac knows there are problems on the street, but he minimizes
the problems as naturally occurring. For example, the line “that’s the way it is/nothing we can do to change it,” it’s a naturally occurring phenomenon, then perhaps the assumption is he wanted to rap about how to evoke change, but at the same time, he knew that change was not going to occur immediately.

All the participants were able to relate to these lyrics in ways that had been more challenging with other songs. Given that the song rarely brings up gender and focuses instead on the political, social and economic problems of the early-mid 1990’s, the challenging lines of sexism and racism did not create meaningless boundaries for the women in the discussion. Accessibility was easier for the participants to attain. Therefore the use of terms such as “meaningful,” “powerful,” and “evocative,” were repeated in the ensuing conversation.

Trina was able to point out ways the song’s message might even be made stronger, something the women were less keen on propagating in songs whose meanings were harder for them to swallow. “This song,” she said, “definitely shows what needs to be changed, but it doesn’t talk about the solutions that need to happen.” Remy Ma agreed that Tupac “neutralized” or “minimized” the idea of change and that, as a result, he conforms to reality.

To the question, “How does it make you feel?” for the first time, Trina responded that she felt “generalized”, although she was quick to add that, “I feel that way not just in this specific song but in hip-hop music overall.” I inferred that she meant that in this song she felt even more connection to the message and its inherent meaning. The song speaks strongly of stereotypical social disparities among the races. I felt that Remy Ma, as a black woman felt more connected to the message in this song because it essentially speaks to a black community and not just black men. It does not marginalize women in the way that other hip-hop or rap songs do. Changes allowed her to feel a part of the black community and to, therefore, look back across her understanding of hip-hop and rap music from the standpoint of a black person. Remy Ma further stressed that “[feeling “generalized”] does not deter me from consuming and listening to the music.” As a listener, Remy Ma discussed how she feels that this song is generally viewed as contradictory to Tupac’s tough, gangsta style way of life.

The conversation returning to Jay-Z’s gangsta Hard Knock Life included Remy Ma, speaking about how she thought that the lyrics were about “violence (and) the rift between the rich and the
poor.” Her statement implies that those who are poor, despite race, are acting in rage against the rich white patriarchy. She backed up her point by saying:

The violence, [Jay-Z] discusses…it’s a part of their reality and it’s a part of their life, but it’s also in retaliation to everyone who tries to double-cross him or who tries to do things to him. He murders them. That’s one of the things in hip-hop right now, the word “murder” is synonymous with success…this is where the culture is going. But then he has little children singing it’s a hard knock life. Well, no wonder it’s a hard knock life, the world you have constructed is violent.

Her point equating “murder” with success struck me. I also noticed how she used the words “they” and “them” disassociating herself from the audience to whom she is suggesting the song is talking. On the other hand, when talking about Tupac’s Changes she was much better able to express the song as motivational and meaningful to her directly. In other words, I was particularly intrigued by the fact that it was easy for her to relate to the song with the positive message. Whereas she plainly distanced herself from the song that simply pointed out the flaws in the system. “Whether [Jay-Z] knows that he is part and parcel of the problem, I don’t know,” she said. She seemed to wonder whether the song’s narrator who is condemning the hard knock life of the “orphans,” the poor, and the downtrodden realizes that the condemnation itself further propagates that hard knock life. “The messages that some rappers use to promote their image as ‘hardcore’ is so that they can engage in violence,” she points out. She further argued this point in her response to the question, “What is the main message of the song?” to which she replied that hip-hop/ and rap as a genre seems to try to appeal to its audience “by legitimizing murder and violence…it’s a problematic message to many young, especially for me, young males,” implying that this process of legitimization might convince young males to buy into the ideas put forth by the rapper and to mimic them as a way of feeling a connection.

By separating herself from the so-called at-risk population, namely “young males,” Remy Ma’s analysis of the song illustrated the point that in order to cope with the difficulties of hip-hop and raps’ narrative of violence, women are able to dichotomize the meaning into an “us/them” scenario. If Remy Ma herself is not the target of the song, she can enjoy the song responsibly.
However, a “young male,” especially of a certain socio-economic class is a target and therefore can be negatively impacted.

Rah Digga, on the other hand, found a way to relate to the song a little more generally. She said, “[Jay-Z] talks about improving life but he also perpetuates stereotypes about materialism, where only the few get to really enjoy and experience.” It seems she was able to perceive that Jay-Z’s message encompasses anyone who has ever wanted something out of their reach. However, she also takes on the contradictions inherent in the song. For example, if it is a hard knock life, then why does Jay-Z talk about drinking Courvoisier and Hennessey, and about wearing “bling?”

In terms of the question, “How does it make you feel?” the participants stated that he placed too much emphasis on “materialism,” instead of focusing on “real” societal issues.

**Pain vs. Pleasure**

I examined the participants’ responses in connection with and/or contradiction to the “pain and pleasure principle” as coined by Sigmund Freud and then coopted by popular culture. Where this insight is relevant to hip-hop and rap music is in the arguments made by music critics, academics, as well as the four participants, that gangsta rap lyrics are often outlandishly vulgar, and should therefore be, at least censored, or even outlawed by media markets and distributors. This kind of assertion lies parallel to the complex and very mixed experiences reported by hip-hop and/or rap listeners, including the focus group members. As much as the group members experienced frustration, anger and other forms of “pain” when examining the lyrics of the music, they also made apparent their fundamental enjoyment of the genre. This, in turn, raises questions about how pain and pleasure work together, creating ambivalent feelings.

For example the song, *Hard Knock Life*, by Jay-Z, elicited the following response from Remy Ma:

> It was just a reminder to me of everything that I don’t like about hip-hop. I feel that as a part of the culture and contributor to the culture, I’m owed something… I feel that I’m owed lyrics that are empowering and I’m owed good music, and in turn, I support the culture through listening to the music and playing the music and
going to the concerts and doing those things. [But I feel as if] this is a place, where I’m failed because...he legitimizes himself and really, at the end of the day, it’s because of songs like this that he has built his empire...it’s a form of cultural colonialism...he’s selling people this notion and completely profiting from it.

Remy Ma feels as though Jay-Z is a living contradiction, in that he is a multi-millionaire living anything but a “hard knock life.” She wants to feel the artist is also experiencing pain and discomfort. Given the current economic situation, she wants him to relate to those in need and also help to do something about it. This can be connected to the work of Motley and Henderson who states: In hip-hop culture, there is a tension between authenticity or “keeping it real” and profitability or “selling out” (Motley and Henderson, 2008, p. 250). I wonder if Remy Ma may feel as though Jay-Z is simply providing lip-service to sell more records and to increase his already dominant position in the hip-hop market. But he isn’t “keeping it real” because this song couldn’t possibly represent his (at least current) reality. Similarly Kitwana (2005) concluded that “Kids … love hip-hop because it’s the dominant youth culture” (Kitwana, 2005, p. 70). In other words, there is more to the music than the music—there is a culture and identity that people want to be a part of. People need to feel a sense of belonging. Much as in the same example of the Occupy Wall Street protests or, at the other end of the political spectrum, the American Tea Party movement, where people are feeling a sense of urgency for change. In a way, hip-hop and rap cultures can be seen as environments where people who are at a disadvantage feel a sense of inclusion, connection and belonging. If they don’t feel that way, then they will want change. Motley and Henderson argue that “[As a result of the] human condition [people] want a sense of belonging and a group identity” (Motley and Henderson, 2008, p. 248). This can be fulfilled in a hip-hop environment that deals with the issues and struggles of the disenfranchised.

While I believe Kitwana’s idea that hip-hop and rap are appealing because they are the mainstream is fairly simplistic, I believe that it might explain to some extent why smart academic women, such as my participants, find themselves simultaneously drawn to the culture but put off by its sexist messages. Of course, I believe that there are other reasons people seem to enjoy hip-hop and rap music, not the least of which is the music itself.
Virgin vs. Whore

Rah Digga began with the idea that, “In hip-hop music, you’ve got to have this divide between the two, the virgin and the whore. [A woman] can be both, but only do as her man pleases.” The participants’ comments most often focused on the lyrics of 50 Cent, Juelz Santana, and Chingy, who incorporate misogynistic messages and language including strong repetitive references about women as “bitches,” “hos,” and “baby mommas.” However, even in terms of a song the participants deemed positive, Changes, by Tupac Shakur, Rah Digga noticed that, “From my observations, I see a lot of younger people, younger teenagers, feel as if they have to act a certain way because of the words being put forth in songs.” The other participants nodded their heads in agreement.

In the song, Hard Knock Life, by Jay-Z, Remy Ma responded to my question, “How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?” by pointing out that, ‘He is trivializing women as ‘childlike’ or as children with the constant references to women as ‘baby girl’, or ‘bad girl.’” Remy Ma said, “there is a motherly reference to women with the use of ‘ma’, ‘mom.’” She continued, “Jay-Z is rapping about a woman’s place and her roles…he plays into the whole sexual division of labour and this is problematic for me…I feel as though women in this song have been not only marginalized, but their place has been clearly defined.”

For Remy Ma, the song objectifies and trivializes women, and her agency is defined by her position, not as an individual, but in relationship to other women, and, most importantly, in relationship to her man. Rah Digga reacted to Remy Ma by saying:

I agree with you, but I have to take this a step further. There is this obvious division…in contemporary rap lyrics, [which] is the virgin-whore dichotomy…young girls are just strippers, they’re the bad girls…they’re really in this cage, being gawked at and fucked whenever the man wants it. Then you’ve got your girlfriend or mother or someone who is [seen as] the “respectable” woman, the one who cleans, cooks and does whatever the man wants. In hip-hop/rap music, you’ve got to have this divide between the two…the good girl and the bad girl, or the mother, girlfriend, whore, this is what sells.
I was surprised that the archetypes Remy Ma identified were “young” and “old.” Virginal, by default actually correlated to the “old” and whorish referred to the “young.” The participants were angered by the virgin/whore concept, as was indicated by their terse facial expressions. With such unachievable expectations formulated by Jay-Z lyrically, where did these four women fit into this representation? How about their friends? Their mothers?

Regarding Chingy’s song, *Ass N Da Aurr*, Remy Ma pointed out:

Chingy makes frequent reference to a woman as “ma.” This reference points to a form of “nurturing” and need for this “ma” figure. But the woman who is a “ma” is not the kind of woman that Chingy is going to pick up at the nightclub in front of his friends. The “ma” is not the one who will satisfy his sexual needs and heighten his masculinity. He needs a woman that is hypersexual, the “whore,” but not too much of a whore, she has to be somewhat reserved as well.

*Ho* by rapper Ludacris was the final song in our discussion. Remy Ma argued:

Luda was probably writing this song with his buddies sitting around, patting themselves on the back, thinking that they are so creative…I must admit it’s pretty creative, [making] extensive use of the word “ho” in ways I could never imagine. I didn’t know he spent so much time thinking about “hos.” But then again, so many people do…And I look at this and I can’t help but think that is problematic that he’s spent so much time on it, that so much money was spent on it and it got released and it still remains on the charts. But what is even more problematic…it is so normal for this to come out and to slide under everyone’s radar that we don’t even take a moment to really critique it and really understand its impact on our society.

Remy Ma’s comments elicited laughter and giggles from the other participants. It seemed that, while by intonation she was judging Ludacris and even talking him down, there was some
humour there as well. In fact, so blatant is the overuse of the word “ho” that perhaps even Ludacris is in on the joke. But it is safe to agree that the song is not outwardly trying to be funny. Ludacris sings the word so naturally, that to the average person it has a humourous bent.

Trina added that “the word ‘ho’ is not only used often, but that [in the context of the song] it has been worked into every part of our everyday lives.” Remy Ma said, “I found this song to be humourous. The lyrics are funny, but I do question whether I should laugh out loud.” In particular she found the reference to a “hozone” and “hoasis” funny, and she wondered out loud if there is a “connection to the ozone layer and being a ‘ho.’” This elicited a laugh from the panel. She felt relieved by one of his lyrics that says, “…Because most of us niggas is hos too!”

“There was a separation, a clear divide between a nigga and a ho that I realized when I was listening to the song just now that I never noticed before,” she explained, “but I completely understand. If someone was speaking to me, I would completely understand how a nigga is not a ho, and that’s problematic because women are easily constructed as hos.”

A ‘nigga’ is usually defined as a black male, a friend or gang-mate. A ‘ho,’ on the other hand usually refers to sexualized females, girlfriends and friends of girlfriends. When Remy Ma finally saw a distinction between the two characters in the narrative, it drove home the connection between harmful lyrics and their potential effect on women. However, that Ludacris closes the gap by admitting that “most niggas is hos” is also able to placate her. If Ludacris is a nigga and most niggas is hos, then maybe being a ho isn’t as bad as some of the other lyrics suggest.

Trina sees another side and believes that when Ludacris raps, “most of us niggas is hos too”, that he is implying that “…being a male ho is okay, it is eroticized…” but that somehow being a female ho has solely negative connotations. Ludacris also raps the line, “Can’t turn a ho into a housewife,” to which, Foxy Brown replied, ”[A ho is] never going to be that person that the man wants to marry, that he wants to have children with.”

On that same note, Rah Digga pointed out, “The word ‘ho’ is such a disempowered term compared to the word ‘pimp,’ which is very empowering. You would never hear a woman being referred to as a pimp. It’s always a gender specific reference. Whereas a ho is very specifically
female and very specifically negative versus pimp, which has power and is constructed in a very dominating way.”

Even though Ludacris perhaps “humbly” admits that “…most of us niggas is hos too…” Rah Digga’s point is, in essence, that in the narrative of hip-hop or rap, men are in charge. Pimps control the hos. Men are pimps by definition and women are hos.

She went on to point out Ludacris’s line, “…it’s just an hoasis with ugly chicks’ faces,” and argued, “This reverts back to the ideal…[that] looks are very important. [Women must] look [a certain way] in order to be wanted and needed by a man.”

The participant’s conversation explored the notion, that people might often find themselves represented in ways that do not reflect their personalities. Collectively they implied that, once a woman gets labeled a “ho,” she cannot overcome it and she will always be considered a “ho.” She becomes what Trina referred to as “…a ho from birth till death.”

The participants were in agreement that within the worlds of hip-hop and rap, “hos” must be readily available sexually to men, but are simultaneously excluded from any serious long-term relationships with a man. The benefits to being a ‘ho’ for a woman include copious male attention, physical intimacy, as well as a vague implication of power – they possess something men want. At the end of the song, the female protagonist seems to have consented to sex. When Ludacris says the line, “Ho, bring yo’ ass”, she replies, “Okay, hold on.” Remy Ma asked, “What happens when she does resist?…what happens when she says no?” Her question evokes issues of violence. According to her, there might be serious (violent) consequences if a woman says “no” to a man.

The point that perhaps there was some power in the line, “Okay, hold on,” also came up in the participant’s conversation. Trina said:

I completely agree with what Remy Ma has said. In this song, however, at the very end it is evident that the woman is consensual to that and she is the one who said “okay,” so as much as she defended it for a little bit, just as long as it took her to defend, did she turn a round and say she would do it. This really does further
the idea that no matter what a woman thinks or acts, feels, you know, she is a ho and nothing but. Her image won’t change and this is what again society looks at and says well, okay, no matter which woman I talk to, she may defend it for a bit but eventually I will be able to crack her down and show and prove that she is this ho that she is.

It’s important to look at the idea that this female protagonist in particular is allowed some level of empowerment. She doesn’t drop everything and run to Ludacris, but instead makes him “hold on.” This indication that the erotic foreplay inherent in hip-hop and rap includes a return volley on the part of the women is an incredibly noteworthy point. The push-pull of the dialogue, even when the female voice is limited or not included is central to the game – both with or without violence. So even though there is a fair amount of hostility in the phrase, “Ho, bring yo’ ass,” on the part of Ludacris, there is plenty of power and even dissent in a reply, that although it begins “Ok,” ends with, “hold on.”

**Dis/empowerment**

With respect to the themes of disempowerment and empowerment, the participants expressed the feeling that, as loyal consumers of the music, they were owed empowering lyrics. Overall, they felt, as Rah Digga argued, “[That the lyrics for eight of the nine songs] contained some form of sexism and heterosexism, and overall are disempowering to women.” The participants felt that they should be able to enjoy some positive messages, especially considering that some research has shown that young white women constitute the majority of consumers of hip-hop and rap music (Cheairs, 2005).

After listening to *My Humps* by the Black Eyed Peas, Remy Ma told the group about her frustrations, not only with male hip-hop and rap artists, but also with white female rappers. “The idea is that female hip-hop artists are responsible for empowering women and heightening girl power.” Further discussion about the question, “What do you think about what you heard and read?” in relation to *My Humps*, yielded this comment by Remy Ma:

> What actually disheartens me a little is the fact that it’s literally repeating messages that are not positive for young women. These
are just overly sexualized lyrics created to make a profit. It just continuously repeats the notion that she has value only in her “junk” and it’s only used when he wants it. So she is marginalized in that sense…it makes me irritated when I hear it, when I see it.

What Remy Ma was saying was that Fergie is promoting her “humps” or her curvy body parts, as tools to get her man. The song even goes so far as to imply that she would sell her body for the sole purpose of satisfying her man.

As Remy Ma spoke she shook her head and dropped the lyric sheet in exasperation in front of her. She became emotional, and I momentarily toyed with the idea of pausing the focus group for a short break. However, she quickly calmed down after having been allowed to sufficiently vent her frustrations.

Foxy Brown responded by nodding in agreement as she said, “[We are] sending a message to young girls that in order to be liked by men, you have to be sexy…you have to have the junk in your trunk, have the boobs, act like a slut and a whore…that’s how society has molded us to be.”

The other participants nodded in agreement. Foxy Brown’s statement also implies that pressures by the media have helped create this standard of what young women need to be in order to be liked by young men.

The discussion by the participants of Get Ur Freak On by Missy Elliott mostly revealed that it is “a really good dance song,” at least from Rah Digga’s point of view. Foxy Brown added that, “[Missy Elliot] she sees herself as being unique and individual…I think this is very empowering.” The fact that these women found her to be empowering was quite revealing about Elliot’s abilities to compete in the male-dominated environment. Maybe Missy Elliot represents some proof that there is power on both sides.

Beautiful Struggle, by alternative hip-hop artist Talib Kweli, was generally perceived by the group as a socially conscious song presented by a socially conscious artist. They collectively enjoyed and felt included in the message within the lyrics due to the fact that they discuss social hardships as well as look at ways to improve them. Remy Ma said, “Engrained in his writing are layers of politics and of black history. It’s poetry to me because, like Tupac, he investigates the
ills of society…. [He raps about being] *High on my intelligence/I’m high/My dope is my words.* He pushes us to say, “This is the struggle, and this is the revolution, and we are all part of it.””

According to Remy Ma, Kweli is rapping about the need for social, economic, and political change via revolution. As the conversation continued, it became clear that the participants agreed that he does not conform to traditionally held ideas about what a rapper is or should be. This perception is evident in Rah Digga’s comments, “I’m just comparing the lyrics [to] Jay-Z’s *Hard Knock Life* [in that] Jay-Z’s main message does not have a solution…he aspires to a material life. While Kweli’s song has a direct message, a proposed solution.”

Trina agreed with Rah Digga as evidenced by her body language. She nodded her head excitedly as she expressed: “What I love about [Kweli] is [that] he is one of the artists that not only tells the problem, but alludes to a solution to that problem.” In her answer to the question, “How does it make you feel?” Remy Ma answered, “I felt empowered by it because as he says, ‘this struggle is beautiful, I’m too strong for your slavery.’” She continued, “[H]e makes some racial references but gender-wise, sexuality-wise he speaks to a public. And I feel as though I was included in the struggle and for once….I’m like, damn, I can fit in this.” She further commented that, “There is slavery occurring, there’s an apartheid occurring and perpetuated, and we reproduce it, but we are also part of the struggle within it.”

Trina looked at the song as though it was designed to challenge the more traditional (negative) messages of hip-hop/rap, even indicating that Kweli did not mean the song for a traditional hip-hop/rap listener:

> This type of hip-hop is for an intellectual clientele. That is the problem with society now. They will listen to what they understand and what is blunt….they will not sit down and listen to this because halfway through they’ll be like, I don’t understand. And so when they don’t understand, they’re intimidated. Furthermore, the media dumbs down hip-hop, because it’s not the way hip-hop is supposed to be, it is not supposed to be intellectually stimulating. It is supposed to be rough and tough and treat women as objects. So it is important that Kweli created this song to challenge traditionally held ideas, but [for] what audience?
If people find something confusing, will they be afraid or unwilling to understand it?

Rah Digga was eager to interject with this reply:

It’s not that society doesn’t care, or doesn’t necessarily understand, it’s that we are made to believe that we need material possessions and goods to make us happy and fulfilled. If Kweli is a socially conscious rapper, yet still part of mainstream commercial culture, then how can his message really impact the consumer who is used to a certain rapper promoting or glamourizing a way of life?

Trina and Rah Digga, point out the oft-repeated argument that pop-art is often watered down for the masses. Specifically, hip-hop has been viewed recently as being “watered down” to fit into mainstream media. A blogger by the name of Escobar300 writes:

I’ve come to the realization that Hip hop has officially LOST his pro-blackness. Every video from Rick Ross’s Aston’s Music, Wiz Khalifa’s Black and Yellow, Soulja Boy’s Speakers Go Hammer, Diddy’s latest fluff, and many others were representations of what’s hot at the moment and they were all identical and more to the same. The Powers to Be have done their job: They have watered down hip hop to the point where it’s no longer the voice of the suppressed. a representative of the struggle and as Chuck D would say “The CNN for the Black Community” Hip hop has taken a dangerous turn.10

Meanwhile, the participants also condemn Kweli’s song as anti or counter to traditional hip-hop culture. While our panel did not heavily feature The Roots, Beastie Boys, Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets and other socially conscious, best selling artists of the late 1980’s-1990’s, the pervasive messages of violence, misogyny and anti-homosexuality has not been lost on them.

In response to my next question about Kweli’s song, *Beautiful Struggle,* “What is the main message?” Trina responded, “We are the ones that are going to be able to change this world….It’s us putting all our voices together and coming up with a revolution and showing that we are the people that are going to have to change it.” It’s not the record labels, the producers, the corporations, or the officials who will find solutions to poverty, homelessness, the environment, and other issues; it’s the people who have to create the conditions for change.

Remy Ma expressed her agreement with Trina:

> I completely agree with Trina, one of the things that I got from the song was the fact that he begins by saying “the revolution is inside of you”… he means when you’re listening to [his] music…if you don’t change yourself, you’re not going to change the world…the revolution occurs within…expanding your spiritual boundaries, expanding your intellectual boundaries, so that hip-hop as a culture can grow.

Foxy Brown drove the point home saying, “This one positive song will not change the face, the course…[of] the way hip-hop music is viewed. Everything is about guns, drugs, violence and fucking women. One song cannot change the scope of the scene entirely.” Her general idea can be best understood from the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism, the process of sustaining cultural practice and belief through everyday interaction. If hip-hop and rap are consistently viewed and treated as promoting “negative” images and ideas, then those practices will very likely be sustained.

**Focus Group Follow-Up Discussion**

After the discussion, I decided to ask further follow-up questions. The first follow-up question I asked was, “How do you respond to the language of ‘ho,’ ‘bitch’, and ’nigger/ nigga’ within the songs you heard today and/or overall in hip-hop and rap music?” Trina was eager to answer, “I think a lot of times ’nigga’ is a bare term that we are so used to that it doesn’t faze me personally.” Trina’s intent was not to dismiss the way ’nigga’ is used, but instead to illustrate how it has become ubiquitous in the music, thereby desensitizing it. “I feel like … we are all just supposed to think this is how we are referred to now and that it’s not a problem,” she continued.
“A woman is a “bitch,” a woman is a “ho” and because it’s used so much, it’s just another word for woman.”

Here, she reflects similar assertions made by Kitwana (2004) and Morgan (2004) that state that people become desensitized to some words and after a while they become colloquial and lose meaning. On the basis of Trina’s answers, I was compelled to ask her the follow-up question, “Do you feel that because you are a member of a visible minority that you can actually say the n-word to others within your own ethnicity while someone else may not?” She responded:

No. I don’t feel that I can because I know the effect it has on the rest of the people I am associated with. I feel that it’s a word that has a horrible history and that should have been left in the past, and when they re-dug it up it was almost like you’re taking us back to where we tried so hard to come from years and years ago.

I found Trina’s reply eloquent. The n-word continues to evoke unspeakable pain as well as fear for many. The way in which hip-hop and rap have “reclaimed” it, wreaks of explosive rage and hate, even in its new, albeit black, incarnation.

The next question I asked was: “In the culture you live in, is it okay for someone within that social group to say the n-word”? I mentioned other words and identifying tags: “Can Italians talk about being ‘Ginos’ or ‘Ginas’? Can Chinese people refer to themselves as ‘Chinks’, etc.” I realize in the simple act of rewriting the questions that I refrain from using the n-word even as I am more comfortable writing other racially derogatory names. Similarly, upon asking the questions I did the same thing. I point this out because it speaks to the larger idea that the n-word is, clearly, a special case. Using the n-word carries with it years of historical oppression and struggle. This is not to infer that the use of other clearly derogatory words don’t carry historical significance. They are problematic in their usage as well, but some words, such as the n-word carry more of a charged meaning.

Remy Ma’s response was as follows:

I feel it’s important to realize that it is a part of the dominant discourse [in hip-hop culture] and so it slips under our radar,
especially mine because I listen to so much music in the course of the day…[that include] three words: “ho,” “bitch” and the n-word… I’m not White, I’m not Black and I don’t use the n-word because I can’t.

Remy Ma considers that use of racist discourse and stereotyping as a common practice in everyday communication generally. In other words, people tend to use racist/sexist language daily without thinking twice about it and as a result, it becomes commonplace and goes undetected or unnoticed as something problematic. She also thinks that, as a result of her not identifying as either white or black, she does not have the authority/power or legitimacy to use 'nigger / nigga'. Remy Ma continued to affirm her beliefs with this statement:

I don’t have the racial history behind it so I don’t relate to that [word] at all. In terms of the words “ho” and “bitch,” you hear it all the time, and it still makes me angry when I hear it, and probably because the way the words are used, in a very disempowering sense…in terms of male rappers, it’s just disempowering to women. For female rappers, it’s empowering…“bitch” means you’re strong, you’re aggressive…I would relate more to [being a bitch] than [to being a] “ho.”

The answers focused principally on whether or not the participants themselves feel comfortable using derogatory or stereotyping words, and in particular whether or not they feel comfortable using the n-word. None did.

Perhaps it is related to the commonsense notion that people who identify as members of a group can make jokes about the group as a whole. Similarly, the use of the n-word by hip-hop and rap artists who have embraced their blackness, be it cultural or racial, have, in some sense earned the right to use the word whereas the rest of us have not.

The next question I asked the panel was, “From the hip-hop or rap videos that you have seen, what would you say are the common themes?”

Foxy Brown responded:
There is a trend in all these videos where the girl is wearing the really short skirt, and the boobs are hanging out and the guy is just you know…these hip-hop artists are showing that this is their life. These girls are all around them. They’re here to be all over them and make them feel good…it’s so degrading.

Remy Ma was eager to contribute this observation, “[E]verything is constructed to emphasize [that the female is] there to support [the male]…they perpetuate hypermasculinity, hypersexuality and, when it isn’t there, it’s not considered a good video. No money, no women, no video.” Trina nodded her head in agreement with Remy Ma and added, “I also would say that the themes we see in the hip-hop/rap music videos today are money, women, and violence. And those are the three essential parts of creating a video.” Rah Digga responded, “We also forget how the male artists use drugs so often in their videos to heighten their legitimacy within the hip-hop/rap world. So not only are women used as objects, but men use drugs as objects of power and control.”

None of the women shared stories of positive imaging in hip-hop and rap videos, perhaps as they are less typical. On the other hand, it is also possible that our conversational focus had been primarily on the negative messages. It is also likely that the more shocking images, negative though they were, stood out for them in light of the direction of our conversation.

My next question was, “What do you believe are the messages and images that the media transmit to the public regarding male hip-hop and rap artists?” Trina answered, “I think that the media [machine] has a lot to do with [the] music videos [we see]. A lot of times, the artists are doing what their manager says, or their executive producer, [or whoever] is essentially paying for the video.” She was indicating those specific people in authority within the media that play a major role in creating and disseminating the ideas and images that are transmitted by the artist via the music video.

Rah Digga said:

I remember when 50 Cent came [to Toronto]….I remember watching CTV. They had a discussion on whether or not there was any violence in his show. They had TV cameras parked in front of
Ricoh Coliseum and then they actually went inside and spoke to a couple of parents and asked them why they decided to bring their kids to the show, and to me it was a complete racist discourse – how they portrayed the entire incident….It was this Black rap artist, [and the media made it appear as though] there was going to be violence….They talked about how much security was there, and to me they seemed surprised that there was no major incident, and that just sort of exemplifies how the mainstream media portray rap music.

Despite the fact that in an academic discussion about gangsta rap and 50 Cent in particular, Rah Digga agreed fervently with the assertion that 50 Cent does glorify violence in his music, she still found a mostly white Canadian media “racist,” when publicly suggesting the very same thing. According to Rah Digga, media personnel assumed that violence was going to occur at the 50 Cent concert, or that violence was going to be condoned, and they positioned the entire segment to anticipate it.

Next, I asked, “Do you believe there is a specific consumer of hip-hop and/or rap music?” Remy Ma responded, “I believe white middle- to upper-class young girls and boys who live in suburbia are the biggest consumers of hip-hop and/or rap…If you’re looking at consumerism and economics, impoverished kids do not have the finances…[so the music] is marketed towards the young, white, middle class suburban society [youth].”

Rah Digga said, “I can see why someone from an impoverished background would be attracted to someone like 50 Cent, because they see he came from the same background…I understand why they’d be attracted to the materialism because they want that too, they see white middle class folk having the same things and they want that.” But, then why are the white youth attracted, if we are assuming that they didn’t come from the same background as someone like 50 Cent? Foxy Brown suggested “…[Hip-hop culture wants] that [white] middle class to say, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s really cool, like listening to the song, look at their clothes, I want that too.’”

There are some that would argue that in spite of their fascination with the music, lyrics and even culture, generally white suburban youth don’t tend to follow, or mimick many of the prevailing messages of hip-hop or rap. This could be a result of “The crisis in White Identity” (Yousman,
2003, p. 375) where young white listeners are finding their way through social and peer pressure in order to fit in. They may follow (in style, behaviour, etc.) in ways promoted by hip-hop artists but this may be only to fit in with their peer groups and not because they in turn enjoy it. In fact, the music seems to reflect the realities of the market less inclined to buy the music than those who are actively buying it, in the opinions of the participants. In fact, they, as consumers of the music similarly find themselves repeatedly alienated by its messages and subject matter. The participants also looked at the identifiable power struggles within the industry, specifically in relationships between male and female rappers.

When I asked, “Why do you think young women listen to and engage in hip-hop and/or rap music?” Remy Ma answered, “Because it’s mainstream and really, it’s almost inescapable. As a young woman it’s hard to find the venues where positive hip-hop can be found because there’s so few, and they’re driven underground by executives who make money off consumers.” She takes issue with the hip-hop industry’s patriarchal, capitalistic motivations, which, for her disallows her to make “real” choices and fundamentally limits opportunities for women. Her arguments are in line with Kitwana’s (2002), who argues that “Too many young black men are open, brash, and adamant in voicing patriarchal and oppressive views toward women. Not only do they believe these views; they swear and live by them” (Kitwana, 2002, p.103).

Trina questioned her own consumption of the genre with this remark: “As I am a dancer…do I dance to this music that dehumanizes women? Or do I dance to this music because I love the beat? That’s kind of where we’re stuck between a rock and a hard place.” I did not want the participants to feel as though they had to choose one side or the other. In my treatment of this question and of the focus group discussion, I was really interested in probing the participants’ feelings about consuming the music. The fact that Trina loves the beat is a sound argument for listening to the music. A dislike of the lyrical message on other hand is an equally sound reason to turn it off. In both cases she is right.

My final follow-up question was: If you know that hip-hop and rap music dehumanizes women, if you know that there are certain songs and certain artists that actually promote a certain way of thinking, then why do you think young women still listen to it, even young women who are critically engaged with the material, or understanding of the material, such as yourselves? Why do you think that happens?
I understood that these were leading questions that are framed in such a way as to cast a negative light on listening to hip-hop or rap. They imply that the act of listening to hip-hop or rap is no better than writing and propagating the messages directly. I was hoping that the tone would encourage the participants to find some way to defend hip-hop and rap.

Remy Ma pointed out:

Nobody wants to ostracize themselves from something they think is fantastic. My passion lies in hip-hop, but my struggle is trying to fit in hip-hop somewhere, and I think for young women who are critically engaged, that’s the battle they face. And I don’t think anyone who thinks that they fit in it properly is engaging in whatever negativity exists or is completely lying to herself…it’s not that she doesn’t have a choice. It’s just that there is no other option than what stands before her at that moment. Hip-hop music is mainstream and inescapable for young women.

The fact that Remy Ma focused on how separate she felt from the messages she heard in the music she loves struck me. It made me wonder if people who live a hip-hop lifestyle, the people who many might believe could better relate to hip-hop and rap actually find the same enjoyment in it. Perhaps it is exactly this compartmentalising, this feeling of us-and-them that makes one group the hip-hop artist and the other its audience. Remy Ma considers that although women face struggles with the lyrics, as she does, she and others still seem to find some pleasure and enjoyment in the genre, although she wishes there could be a stronger sense of belonging.

In wrapping up the focus group session, I asked if there were any final thoughts. The women came up with an idea to create a hip-hop record label for the four of them. This resulted in numerous suggestions including, “Young Women Hip-Hop/Rap Consumers” (YWHHRC), “United Feminists For All,” and “Modern Young Women in Search of Equality in Hip-Hop and Rap Music.”

The focus group seemed to give these women the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns in a safe and open environment free of any criticism and/or disapproval. The participants did tell me upon completion of the focus group that they truly enjoyed the
experience and gained valuable insights into how they perceive the genre. They all exchanged contact information and promised each other to keep in touch.

The group’s conversation made it apparent that the participants had a lot to say about the songs they heard and the lyrics they read. Beyond that fact, this chapter shows how necessary it is to continue the dialogue regarding the investment of young women in hip-hop and rap and their corresponding identity formation.

It was my hope that my research would crystallize the boundaries for connection between the lives of these young academic women and the cultures of hip-hop and rap music. Further, I hoped to look at a broader female identity within the collective, male-dominated hip-hop and rap cultures and industries.

**Analysis**

I have offered some observations in the sections above concerning the discussions generated in the Focus Group and the follow up discussions. My comments were not intended as a fully developed analysis, as I wanted to make sure the excerpts from the Focus Group were placed in a context for the reader to appreciate. With all of the Focus Group and follow up conversation now assembled, I will look at my research in two stages, first a deconstruction of the precise language used by the respondents, and second, I offer a series of conclusions about the respondents' comments and omissions.

Unless otherwise indicated, the participants will not be named in this analysis and will instead be taken as a unit, focusing on the general uniformity of their answers:

1. The music "….perpetuates stereotypes of Black sexuality, gender relations, and compulsory heterosexuality."

At the commencement of this project, this is the type of comment that I expected would be generated in a Focus Group comprised of four females who have studied in interdisciplinary programmes focused on gender and race. The phrase "compulsory heterosexuality" is a curious one, and in retrospect I ought to have pursued the question with a follow up. If we accept that our sexuality is a part of our identity, it is not the heterosexuality of the hip-hop rapper that is
compulsory, it is the sense that an unnamed female will participate in or reinforce the sexuality of the male narrator that the lyrics convey.

(2) The music is degrading to women

As with the comment set out at (1), this observation was expected. It was reinforced at many points in the Focus Group. Having reviewed how the participants agreed so emphatically with this idea, I reached two other tentative conclusions. The first was that perhaps these women were swayed by peer pressure. In other words, there might have been a dynamic at play whereby admitting an attraction to alpha-male messages might be difficult to reconcile among present company, even if such an omission was not intentional. I also believe that I as a researcher failed to present to the women the other side of the narrative dialogue. Therefore they did not think about or discuss any kind of reply to these alpha-male messages. It was only after the fact that I thought about the idea that if they themselves are the female protagonist in the song, their strong, angered and powerful response might constitute the same thing as the missing voice. I realized that lyrically many of these songs only represented one half of a sexual power play. After listening in on their dialogue, I was able to construe, to some degree, the other half of the conversation.

(3) The music as an example of the "commodification" of women

I found this comment to have particular weight; the women portrayed in the songs are not just sexual objects, they are the means by which the rapper gets rich. The complicated societal relationship between women and sex, prostitution and women as sexual commodities is real. When coupled with today’s headlines it is easy to see why the participants found themselves so plainly shut out of this particular message, and why they would want to stay shut out of it- if not change it entirely.

(4) In the 30 year history of this genre and its evolution, "this is the best we can do?"

This suggests that hip-hop and rap music taken as a whole, should be fulfilling a greater social purpose, eliminating sexism and misogyny and ending racism, violence and hatred. The
respondents noted in this context their concerns about words such as “ho” and “bitch” and the imminent desensitization that accompanies their overuse. The comment does indicate that the respondents saw themselves as potentially having a role in creating a new direction for these messages.

(5) "I love what the culture has to offer"

The respondents found it difficult to reconcile their love for the genre with their frustrations with some of its messaging. The participants were able to explain their love of the genres by saying, “I love what the culture has to offer.” The participants spent a lot of time wondering about the fact that some of this music was ever green lit and produced to begin with. While I, too, wonder about the role of women in hip-hop and rap and whether or not there is room for feminist ideology within it, I also recognize that there is appeal in a culture of excess and a sexiness to power and strength.

**Summary and Analysis of Focus Group Discussion**

The focus group included four women of diverse ethnicities (White Canadian, Caribbean Canadian, Iraqi-Filipino Canadian, and Chinese Canadian) who take pleasure in and generally enjoy hip-hop and/or rap music, including gangsta rap, as well as male and female artists not necessarily included in the focus group. In this chapter I closely examined the participants’ discussion of a series of songs. Their reactions ranged from passive to intense to highly emotional, as evidenced by their body language and vocal inflections.

In their conversation about the theme, Hypersexuality, Hypermasculinity, and Compulsory Heterosexuality, the participants concluded that, in general, the male artists not only objectified women and exotified the disenfranchised, but that they also proudly displayed their naked bodies, revealed or sang about their private parts and moved provocatively – stereotyping and sexualizing themselves. One example is 50 Cent’s song, *Candy Shop*, during which his penis is referred to as his “magic stick.”

The participants also discussed how male rappers must be heterosexual, hypersexual, and be able to uphold their masculinity at all times – 50 Cent and Chingy, both largely considered gangsta rappers, are two examples that came up repeatedly in discussion. In order to convey power,
strength and a general alpha-dog persona, women are treated as inferior to men, according to the participants. Remy Ma argued that there is an “inequitable exchange” between men and women. She further exerted that the man stipulates what he wants from the woman, and, in return, she meets his needs and satisfies his wants, without wanting or asking for anything in return.

All the participants agreed that Missy Elliot’s pop rap song Get Ur Freak On, seemed to present another voice and add a bit of power to the other side of the dialogue. In contrast, when the participants looked at how hip-hop artist Fergie projected the female voice, they felt she objectified herself and other women, which they found to be another form of misogyny and perhaps even self-loathing. Trina stated, “…it is not about a woman degrading herself and showing that she is not only objectified, [it’s that] she is purchasable too.”

In addition to the alienation they perceived as women, they also discussed the role of race in terms of feeling a sense of connectedness to mainstream hip-hop/rap culture. Remy Ma argued that, because she is “not black or white,” considering herself “multiracial,” she has experienced difficulties fitting in to the culture, but still found pleasure in the music. The fact that the other participants who did not identify as black did not comment on race is by itself a powerful omission. I found it interesting that throughout the conversation Remy Ma was the only participant to identify or even reference race. The other participants never responded nor added to any personal racial discourse (they were of all different races). Had I asked specifically how they felt about a song in terms of their race, I may have gotten different answers.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Hip-Hop and Rap Study

Within this thesis I have looked at the impact of the marginalizing of young women in some of the messaging within hip-hop and rap cultures on young, university-educated women. Through discussions in a small focus group, I considered what seemed like a paradox, where young women embraced hip-hop and rap music and cultures despite their often anti-female lyrics. I explored the reasons these women might be drawn to hip-hop and rap music and cultures even when some of its prevailing ideas are overtly offensive to them. By breaking down the messaging conveyed popular in hip-hop and rap, including the importance of excessive wealth, alpha-male dominance, violence and misogyny, I discussed the ways they racialize and gender of the world at large.

In the literature review I brought together various theories and concepts and ideas surrounding the effects of hip-hop and rap on young women in academia. Huq, for example points out that, “there is a sense of a double standard in the criticism of rap music for violence and sexism when these sentiments have not been subject to the same degree of condemnation in other more mainstream White popular cultural forms” (Huq, 2006, p. 117). Meanwhile Rose argues that rap music and hip hop culture rather then oppressing black women, actually enables them to assert their social, economic and sexual independence (Rose, 2001, p. 126). Rose also talks about female rappers keeping communication lines open to their male counterparts, rather then opposing or chastising them outright thereby becoming part of the process rather then an opponent of it (Rose, 1994 p. 147).

The literature review, also looks at theories pertaining to the three themes: Youth subcultures, popular culture, and hip-hop and rap. Youth subcultures have been considered by some scholars as movements that often seek to challenge the hegemonic powers while others suggest that members of youth subcultures are simply compliant consumers who are easily manipulated by and integral to a capitalist system. Huq in Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Post Colonial World suggests: “…subcultures are subordinate…there is an acceptance of one’s
situation” (Huq, 2006, p. 14). Hip-hop and rap readily serve as a youth subculture in that, like their predecessors including the British mod movement of the 1960’s and punks of the 1970’s, they use music, fashion, style, ideology and behaviour modelling to influence and seduce its fan base.

In chapter two, I discussed my methodology, which used a combination of qualitative (focus group) and quantitative (content analysis) methods. In terms of the quantitative methodology, I analyzed much of the text of *Hip-Hop & Rap: Complete Lyrics for 175 Songs* (Spence, 2003). This spans hip-hop and rap music over the past 20 years and is the only truly comprehensive text available. It starts with a complete artist index that includes 175 lyrics of various artists. It lists each song by artist with the corresponding page number to find the lyrics. The next section contains an Artist Index by Genre – splitting each artist into one of the four categories – gangsta rap, new school, old school hip-hop and pop rap which is then followed by a content page listing every song title in the book and its corresponding page number.

In terms of the qualitative methodology, I recruited four young women of various socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities who were enrolled in undergraduate departments and taking part in interdisciplinary programmes focused on gender and race in Ontario. I initially began the process of recruitment through snowball sampling but found that using other methods such as word of mouth among professors worked to gather a group of willing participants. This was more of a qualitative focus approach, (rather then quantitative) and in consulting with my previous thesis advisor we agreed that a small group of participants would be the most successful in order to more deeply understand their emotional responses to the music. As a result of this qualitative study, I was able to identify a dissonance that was, from my point of view, truly unexpected: The young women seemed to both enjoy the music and to dislike the message at the same time. This I found to be an unusual conclusion. Due to the scale of the study, follow up research is inevitable.

In chapter three, I presented my analysis of the Spence text to develop five themes based on the lyrics cited in the text. Those themes are: (a) *glamourization of tobacco, alcohol, illegal substances and weapons*, (b) *ostentatious display of wealth*, (c) *establishing territory*, (d) *sexual exploitation and disrespect towards women*, (e) *inclusion of derogatory and racially charged terminology*. I analyzed the text through these themes in order to point out the ways in which the
four women in my focus group, not to mention most of our collective society is marginalized by hip-hop and rap messages.

In chapter four, I considered the reactions to hip-hop and rap by the young women who took part in the focus groups. The women are enrolled in programmes that emphasize critical race and gender studies and they enjoy hip-hop and/or rap music. Throughout the study, I was moved by how the women were able to succinctly construct, interpret, and (re)articulate their individualized identities as spectators and performers on the basis of the investments that they make in the music. I concluded that not only were the participants able to enjoy the music and find pleasure in it, they were also able to pinpoint problems and areas of concern. However, despite this critical understanding of the anti-female sentiments, they continued to enjoy the genres generally. The women were at ease admitting that they enjoyed the rhythm and musicality of hip-hop and rap, even if some of the messages of power, excess and dominance were counterintuitive to their personal belief system.

Pleasure is not something that is general or easily defined. I thought prior to engaging in this thesis that the women were probably going to take issue with the music and make various reasons against wanting to engage with and listen to it. Therefore I was surprised by their enjoyment, and even embracing of all of the music of the genres, including gangsta rap, oppositional nature and all. Young women in academia are not one homogenous group that are supposed to act and think alike. Furthermore, their enjoyment of and pleasure in the music while disliking lyrical content at the same time, doesn’t take away from their experience and doesn’t stop them from second guessing their enjoyment. In the case of rapper Chris Brown, despite being convicted of domestic violence charges against a popular female rapper in 2009, young women continue to purchase his music, attend his concerts and even idolize his brand and persona. It would be interesting to conduct future research to see how young women in academia would respond in a critical dialogue to the Chris Brown phenomenon and others like it.

Remy Ma stated clearly that she does enjoy hip-hop and rap as a whole and takes pleasure in it, despite the reality that she finds it hard to truly fit in and discover her own agency within the cultures, lyrics and subgenres. Applying that notion, perhaps uncovering her views on the matter of abusers-of-women as “Rap Superstars” would be exceedingly enlightening.
I also explored popular culture because hip-hop and rap have proven themselves to hold weight economically and in terms of mainstream popularity through media as diverse as music, film, television and fashion, including (and perhaps especially) gangsta rap which heavily features negative messages about women, race, drugs, violence and crime. Since hip-hop and rap have so effectively utilized the varied media-based sources of globalization, they have gained a widespread popularity despite their divisive, violent and even sometimes negative messaging.

There are even some scholars, as pointed out in the literature review who find rap music to be inspiring. Much of it, of course is. As articulated by Keyes 1993, Rose 1994, Pough 2003 and others – I find that some subgenres, such as feminist rap not only critique some of those negative images and stereotypes to the arguable detriment of women, but also works toward a change in the portrayal and stereotyping of women in a way that promotes positivity, individuality, and freedom of expression.

Pough says,

Rap is the contemporary art form that gives voice to a part of the population that would not have a voice otherwise… (Pough, 2003, p.237).

Rose further argues that rap music and hip-hop culture rather then oppressing black women, actually enables them to assert their social, economic and sexual independence (Rose, 2001, p.126).

Hip-hop and rap offer clear and compelling messages to build audiences that have gone from a membership made up of primarily disenfranchised urban youth and spread throughout white American suburbia. It now has a global audience and a reputation for motivating political change, including the 2011 Arab Spring.

The major points discussed by the various scholars I cited indicate that hip-hop and rap are still viewed as contested terrains in pop culture because of their various underlying “negative” themes that often arise. Rose 1994, Kitwana 2002 and Neal 2004 all suggest that as hip-hop and rap become more mainstream, the genre increases its emphasis on women as passive, sexually compliant participants within hip-hop and rap culture.
Because hip-hop and rap seem to strongly oppose many prevailing social and cultural norms (including blatant opposition of some basic laws), they can be seen as resistant to them. They accept and embrace many of those who feel disenfranchised by dominant norms. Therefore, hip-hop and rap can be seen as both resisting and accommodating.

As articulated by Keyes 1993, Rose 1994 and Pough 2003 among others – the subgenres of rap like feminist rap are working hard to promote positivity, individuality, and freedom of expression in the hip-hop rap culture.

Upon review of the research I conducted in the focus group, I conclude that hip-hop and rap are predominantly masculine in both energy and makeup. Similarly, there is a “blackness” that is also central to the movements. Both maleness and blackness are as much states of mind as they are physical conditions. As expressed in the messages of some female rappers like Missy Elliot, there is a desire to embrace masculine attitudes in order to be accepted in the genres. This is represented in her song, Pass Da Blunt, Elliot says, “Bitches/I never want to hang with bitches…Don’t piss me off and/ Son, better let y’all know you lucky/Cause if I come out buckin’/The whole world better be duckin”.

Later in chapter four I analyzed the focus group participants’ responses to four questions I had prepared in advance, as well as my follow-up questions (both random – based on the flow of conversation – and planned). I analyzed the responses in terms of content, as well as the participants’ reactions, body language and overall communicative patterns with the songs and with each other. This analysis revealed that the young women expressed displeasure by many of the themes/messages the artists addressed.

The participants discussed their displeasure with some artists and songs (both in the gangsta rap as well as pop rap and hip-hop genres) that promote the objectification of women, the pressure to gain legitimacy at whatever cost, and the inclination to deny agency to women. As the participants suggested, there are contradictions in the messages disseminated by these artists. Many of the artists discuss the hardships they have experienced, but at the same time they objectify women. This appeared contradictory to the participants who thought that objectifying women actually restricts black men from being able to assert their identities. It creates a form of acceptance that mistreating women is part of the hip-hop movement in general. The women also found that specific artists such as Talib Kweli promote positivity by encouraging young rappers,
and black males, to put down their weapons, stop the aggression and focus on building bridges within the community. As a rap song, the message is surprisingly elegant and simple. Change comes from within. The world has to be changed. Ultimately the women made it clear they were able to relate to this song.

The participants expressed more criticism than praise for the lyrics. They did find pleasure in terms of the musicality (beats and bass) and the associated dance aspects. They had negative critiques of gangsta rappers 50 Cent, Chingy, and Juelz Santana, among others. In contrast, they believed pop rap artist Missy Elliot was a positive role model, even though she in many ways mirrored some of the misogyny inherent in the male rap – which I attribute to the fact that she is a women and therefore her anti-women messaging is often in equal parts anti-male, softening it for a female audience. The participants also suggested that Missy Elliot is seen as empowering to young women because she is able to compete in the male-dominated environment. She retains her uniqueness and her identity in the male dominated environment.

Even though the participants in the focus group concluded that hip-hop and rap cultures do have noticeable negative effects on young women in academia, that insight does not deter these young women from taking pleasure in and enjoying the music itself. Young women are part of this consumption and are equally susceptible to the images of power and sexuality as their male counterparts. As far as seductive and compelling messages go, hip-hop and rap music and cultures rank among some of the most powerful.

I do not think that one can simply state that, even if the lyrics are saturated with negativity alone, young, educated women will still listen. I believe that these young women are critically engaged individuals who can critique the music and yet find pleasure in it. The women may actually see the culture as a way to stand united in opposition to an oppressive society as well as find appeal in the general aesthetics of the music itself. In other words, there is more to pleasure and enjoyment than what can be simply defined as “reasonable and good.”

The participants in my study easily acknowledge the pervasive negative messaging in some hip-hop and rap music, although they maintain that they are fans and intend to continue their association with the genres. The participants’ ambivalence was expressed in their view of Fergie, of the chart topping hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas. While they enjoyed her as an artist, they also suggested that Fergie often objectifies herself both lyrically as well as by her use of body-
bearing fashion in order to ingratiate herself with audiences. The participants further articulated that Fergie does not seem to do anything to improve the status of women as artists in the industry.

Another contradiction they acknowledged was that Tupac Shakur, who is known as a hardcore gangsta rapper, released a song that called out for changes in the black community. So despite what they perceived as overall negative messaging, they also felt that his capacity for good made him more compelling as an artist. They also looked at the contradictions in Jay Z’s gangsta rap chart-topper *Hard Knock Life* and faulted his use of children’s voices and the use of a popular children’s song to sell records and perhaps attract a younger audience. The song contends that life is hard, but does not provide any positive options for change. The participants found the lack of positive suggestion enough to offer a negative critique of the song. The song, they noted, is full of ostentatious wealth and power imagery.

While listening to the women talk about tensions and contradictions in the music and culture, I was struck by their ability to both acknowledge the negative messages, and still embrace the music. In the Focus Group Discussion section of chapter four, the conversation made it apparent that the participants had a lot to say about the songs they heard and the lyrics they read, showing how necessary it is to continue the dialogue regarding young women’s investment in these genres of music. This section also went into further analysis of salient themes and concepts within the focus group.

- Words such as meaningful, powerful and evocative, virgin and whore, were repeated in the discussion.
- Remy Ma talked about how Tupac in his song, Changes, neutralized or minimized the idea of change, and instead, he conforms to reality.
- Trina felt “generalized” expressing, “I feel that way not just in this specific song but in hip-hop music overall.”

I believe it is important, considering that females currently make up a large proportion of consumers of the genre that the female spectator/fan be seen as an integral part of the hip-hop and/or rap experience; even though many male artists, especially gangsta rappers, openly
objectify women in their music and videos. Women make up a large number of the fan base. In spite of the counter-intuitively negative messages, women may find the music pleasurable and as a form of escapism from the realities of everyday life.

**Weaknesses and Limitations**

In terms of weaknesses I noted shrugged shoulders, rolled eyes and gestures of surprise or agreement, emphatic hand placement and other non-verbal indicators – however I was inconsistent about recording them. Had I recorded these non-verbal exchanges, a more complex and potentially richer analysis might have been yielded.

Further, there were two specific limitations in my study:

a) As a result of having using a small group of participants (4) I was unable to glean a diversity of responses. A larger cross-Canada study might have yielded greater diversity not to mention the fact that more participants could have brought about further discussion.

b) The focus group was conducted in 2006. Since then, there has been tremendous change in the hip-hop and rap industries including, increased participation from strong, female voices including Nicki Minaj and Rhianna, among others, and a wider variety of songs and emerging viral sub-genres.

In retrospect I feel that I might have done a disservice to the study by naming the participants after popular female rap figures. I believe that these artists are, in fact, the other side of the dialogue in terms of hip-hop and rap messaging. In other words, if the female voices give as good as they get then perhaps some of the male messages wouldn’t seem as radical or even hateful. If the female protagonist (missing from the songs’ one-sided male protagonist voice) is equally strong, if not stronger, perhaps the messages would seem softer tonally.

*The use of the n-word*—In earlier drafts of the thesis I used the full version of the n-word. However, it has since occurred to me that it is only useful in the worlds of hip-hop and rap. In fact, I believe the word began to sound gratuitous in an academic forum. Therefore, I finally chose to use the word as minimally as possible and replaced it in large part with the term, “the n-word” to point to the offensive term without embracing it.
Finally, the focus group participants claim to enjoy all aspects of hip-hop and rap music even though they are educated and understand the negative messages disseminated by the various artists towards women and non-blacks, racially, socio-economically and culturally (as defined throughout this thesis). Remy Ma argues that part of the problem in listening to and engaging with hip-hop and rap is the negative messages and visual images that are these socially negative messages – so fundamentally divergent with mainstream society’s. She makes the following poignant argument:

I think one of the reasons – as a woman who is critically engaged, you still want to find a place in hip-hop and to completely separate yourself from it – nobody wants to ostracize themselves from something you think is fantastic. My passion lies in hip-hop but my struggle is trying to fit in hip-hop somewhere, and I think that young women who are critically engaged, that’s the battle that they face. And I don’t think anyone who thinks that they fit in it properly is engaging in whatever negativity exists or is completely lying to herself…it’s not that she doesn’t have a choice. It’s just that there is no other option than what stands before her at that moment. Hip-hop/rap music is mainstream and inescapable for young women.

She finds it difficult to step away from something that she loves, yet she finds it problematic that she can’t truly find a place or space in the industry.

Women in academia, as Remy Ma has articulated, are not going to stop listening to the music just because of the various negative messages disseminated by the artists, nor will they stop discussing it. However, I agree that there might be a need for change within the industry in order to make it more welcoming to all its many and varied listeners and consumers.
Concluding Reflections

Suggestions for future research include conducting a broader study with a larger sample of young women and men in universities across Canada. Utilizing the advice of the defence members, I would also like to look at the connections between realism and fantasy in terms of the production and consumption of hip-hop and rap. In so doing, I would be interested in conducting focus groups containing individuals of peer groups with similar interests and/or experiences (for example gays or people of Latin descent) to see how they would articulate their opinions and feelings about hip-hop and rap music.

I would also be greatly interested in applying Remy Ma’s point about abusers-of-women (as Rap Superstars) to analyze young women’s responses to situations playing out on the stage of popular culture such as the Chris Brown and Rihanna fight and subsequent reconciliation. What are the implications in terms of creating a positive spin on abuse and the message it sends to the fanbase and hip-hop and rap communities?

Personally I am interested in drawing on my own childhood experiences to create children’s books discussing same-sex relationships and families – to help young people find connections and touchstones when going through similar experiences, or watching their friends go through them. I believe this would have helped me to find solace during my own adolescence.

I believe in encouraging diversity and inclusion in the classroom and I hope to continue to do so through my pedagogical practice and my writing.
# Tables

## Table 1: Content Analysis

A: Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women  
B: Ostentatious Display of Wealth  
C: Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances and Weapons  
D: Establishing Territory  
E: Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>95 Songs/Lyrics</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Mr. Wendal</em> – Arrested Development (270-271)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2. <em>Whoa!</em> – Black Rob (456-458)</td>
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<td>3. <em>Respiration</em> – Black Star, featuring Common (358-361)</td>
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<td>4. <em>Tha Crossroads</em> – Bone Thugs-N-Harmony (411-413)</td>
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<td>5. <em>13 and Good</em> – Boogie Down Productions (416-418)</td>
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<td>6. <em>Dangerous</em> – Busta Rhymes (72-74)</td>
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<td>7. <em>Ride</em> – C-Murder, featuring Sam and D.I.G. (366-367)</td>
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<td>8. <em>Ghetto Haven</em> – Common, featuring D’Angelo (124-126)</td>
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<td>9. <em>Fantastic Voyage</em> – Coolio (85-87)</td>
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<td>10. <em>Insane in the Brain</em> – Cypress Hill (217-218)</td>
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<td>11. <em>Girls Ain’t Nothing But Trouble</em> — DJ Jazzy Jeff &amp; the Fresh Prince (135-138)</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>12. <em>Grand Finale</em> – DMX, featuring Method Man,</td>
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<td>Song</td>
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<td>13. They Want EFX – Das EFX</td>
<td>(414-415)</td>
<td>0 1 1 1 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Baby Phat – De La Soul</td>
<td>(8-9)</td>
<td>1 0 0 0 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat) – Digable Planets</td>
<td>(348–350)</td>
<td>0 1 1 1 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Fuck Wit Dre Day (And Everybody’s Celebratin) – Dr. Dre, featuring Snoop Doggy Dogg</td>
<td>(104-106)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Nuthin’ But A G Thang –Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg</td>
<td>(294-296)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>18. Summertime in the LBC –Dove Shack</td>
<td>(400-401)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 0</td>
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<td>19. Rapper’s Ball –E-40, featuring Too Short and K-Cl</td>
<td>(332-335)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>20. Crossover –EPMD</td>
<td>(65-66)</td>
<td>0 0 0 1 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. Just Don’t Give a Fuck –Eminem</td>
<td>(237-239)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. The Real Slim Shady –Eminem</td>
<td>(345-347)</td>
<td>1 1 1 0 0</td>
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<td>23. Lyrics of Fury –Eric B. and Rakim</td>
<td>(261-262)</td>
<td>0 0 1 1 0</td>
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<td>24. Young’n –Fabolous</td>
<td>(474-476)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>25. Envy –Fat Joe</td>
<td>(83-84)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>26. P.I.M.P. –50 Cent</td>
<td>(307-308)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>27. Da’ Dip –Freak Nasty</td>
<td>(67-69)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 0</td>
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<td>28. What’s Up Doc (Can We Rock?) –Fu-Schnickens, featuring Shaquille O’Neal</td>
<td>(449-451)</td>
<td>1 1 1 0 0</td>
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<td>29. Dwyck –Gang Starr, featuring Greg Nice and Smooth B</td>
<td>(80-82)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 0</td>
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<td>30. Keep Your Worries –Guru, featuring Angie Stone</td>
<td>(245-247)</td>
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<td>31.</td>
<td>Big Daddy – Heavy D &amp; The Boyz</td>
<td>(16-17)</td>
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<td>32.</td>
<td>It Was A Good Day – Ice Cube</td>
<td>(219-220)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>Colors – Ice-T</td>
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<td>Holla Hola – Ja Rule</td>
<td>(167-168)</td>
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<td>35.</td>
<td>Livin’ It Up – Ja Rule,</td>
<td>featuring Case (253-255)</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Big Pimpin – Jay-Z,</td>
<td>featuring Bun B and Pimp C (18-20)</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>Gone Till November – Wyyclef Jean</td>
<td>(144-145)</td>
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<td>38.</td>
<td>Get Money – Junior M.A.F.I.A.</td>
<td>(120-121)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>39.</td>
<td>Freedom – Jurassic 5</td>
<td>(101-103)</td>
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<td>40.</td>
<td>5 Boroughs – KRS-ONE,</td>
<td>featuring Vigilante, Buckshot,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Keith Murray, Cam’ron, Killah Priest, Prodigy, Redman, and Reverend Run (88-91)</td>
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<td>41.</td>
<td>Alright – Kriss Kross</td>
<td>(2-3)</td>
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<td>Tonite’s Tha Night – Kris Kross</td>
<td>(421-422)</td>
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<td>43.</td>
<td>I’m That Type of Guy –</td>
<td>LL Cool J (212-213)</td>
<td>1 1 1 0 0</td>
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<td>44.</td>
<td>My Baby – Lil’ Romeo</td>
<td>(278-280)</td>
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<td>45.</td>
<td>Renee – Lost Boyz</td>
<td>(354-357)</td>
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<td>46.</td>
<td>Area Codes – Ludacris,</td>
<td>featuring Nate Dogg (4-5)</td>
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<td>47.</td>
<td>I Got Five On It – Luniz</td>
<td>(188-190)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>48.</td>
<td>Have You Seen Her – MC</td>
<td>Hammer (155-157)</td>
<td>0 0 0 1 0</td>
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<td>49.</td>
<td>Flava In Ya Ear – Craig</td>
<td>Mack (92-94)</td>
<td>0 1 1 1 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Backyard Boogie – Mack 10</td>
<td>(10-12)</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Lookin’ At Me – Mase,</td>
<td>featuring Puff Daddy (256-</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td>Artist(s)</td>
<td>Release Year(s)</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td><em>How High</em> – Method Man and Redman</td>
<td>(177-180)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td><em>Ghetto Supastar (That Is What You Are)</em>  – Pras Michel</td>
<td>(131-132)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td><em>Hey Luv (Anything)</em>  – Mobb Deep, featuring 112</td>
<td>(161-163)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td><em>Who Dat</em> – JT Money, featuring Sole</td>
<td>(452-455)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td><em>Danger (Been So Long)</em>  – Mystikal</td>
<td>(70-71)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td><em>Chin Check</em>  – N.W.A., featuring Snoop Dogg</td>
<td>(49-52)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td><em>Street Dreams</em>  – Nas</td>
<td>(398-399)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td><em>Regulate</em>  – Nate Dogg and Warren G</td>
<td>(351-353)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td><em>O.P.P.</em>  – Naughty by Nature</td>
<td>(297-299)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td><em>Hot In Herre</em>  – Nelly</td>
<td>(169-170)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td><em>Big Poppa</em>  – Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>(21-22)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td><em>Hypnotize</em>  – Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>(181-182)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td><em>Got Your Money</em>  – Ol’ Dirty Bastard</td>
<td>(148-149)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td><em>Slam</em>  – Onyx</td>
<td>(388-390)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td><em>Ms. Jackson</em>  – Outkast</td>
<td>(272-274)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td><em>I Need A Girl (Part Two)</em>  – P. Diddy, featuring Ginuwine, Mario Winans, and Loon</td>
<td>(191-195)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td><em>Ditty</em>  – Paperboy</td>
<td>(75-77)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td><em>Cross The Border</em>  – Philly’s Most Wanted</td>
<td>(62-64)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td><em>I Stand Accused</em>  – Public Enemy</td>
<td>(198-200)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td><em>Been Around The World</em>  – Puff Diddy, featuring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td>Artist(s)</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Chart Position</td>
<td>Votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Come With Me – Puff Daddy</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(59-61)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>How High – Method Man and Redman</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(177-180)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Respond React – The Roots</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(362-365)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Walk This Way – Run-DMC, featuring Aerosmith</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(433-434)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>Let Me In Now – St. Lunatics</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(248-250)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>You Know What We ‘Bout – Silkk The Shocker, featuring Master P and Jay-Z</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(470-473)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>Getin’ Jiggy Wit It – Will Smith</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(122-123)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Miami – Will Smith</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(266-267)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Baby If You Ready – Snoop Doggy Dogg</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(6-7)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>Nuthin’ But A G Thang – Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(294-296)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>No Pigeonz – Sporty Thievz</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(283-285)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
<td>Rapper’s Delight – Sugarhill Gang</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(336-344)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>Pop Goes The Weasel – 3rd Bass</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(319-321)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Funky Cold Medina – Tone Loc</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(112-114)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>Check The Rhyme – A Tribe Called Quest</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(46-48)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>I’m A Thug – Trick Daddy</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(210-211)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Ghetto Is A Struggle – Tru, featuring Peaches</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(127-128)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>California Love (Remix) – 2Pac, featuring Roger Troutman and Dr. Dre</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>(31-33)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>How Do U Want It – 2Pac, featuring K-Ci and</td>
<td>Mase and Notorious B.I.G.</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track</td>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td>Artist/Songwriter</td>
<td>Legend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91.</td>
<td>Cantaloop (Flip Fantasia) – US3 (40-43)</td>
<td>0 1 0 1 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92.</td>
<td>I Shot The Sheriff – Warren G (196-197)</td>
<td>0 0 1 1 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93.</td>
<td>Rump Shaker – Wreckx-N-Effect (373-375)</td>
<td>1 1 0 1 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94.</td>
<td>C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me) – Wu-Tang Clan (28-30)</td>
<td>0 1 1 1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95.</td>
<td>Bust A Move – Young MC (26-27)</td>
<td>1 0 0 0 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend**

*If Yes = 1 point*

*If No = 0 points*
Table 2: Hip-Hop/Rap Lyrics (95 Songs)
Category/Theme (Percentage) Calculations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Genre</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Gangsta Rap</td>
<td>New School</td>
<td>Pop Rap</td>
<td>Old School Hip-Hop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women</td>
<td>29 / 69</td>
<td>15 / 69</td>
<td>19 / 69</td>
<td>6 / 69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostentatious Display of Wealth</td>
<td>29 / 74</td>
<td>20 / 74</td>
<td>19 / 74</td>
<td>6 / 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substance and Weapons</td>
<td>31 / 75</td>
<td>22 / 75</td>
<td>17 / 75</td>
<td>5 / 75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Territory</td>
<td>27 / 74</td>
<td>23 / 74</td>
<td>21 / 74</td>
<td>3 / 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology</td>
<td>27 / 51</td>
<td>14 / 51</td>
<td>8 / 51</td>
<td>2 / 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend

Notation: The frequency of the five themes found within the sub-genre of hip-hop/rap. Results tabulated as a number and as a corresponding percentage. All numbers were rounded to the nearest decimal point.
Table 3: Overall Rank/Order of the Five Themes Accompanied by Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank/Order</th>
<th>Five Themes</th>
<th>Total Points</th>
<th>Total Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Glamourization of Tobacco, Alcohol, Illegal Substances and Weapons</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Ostentatious Display of Wealth</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Establishing Territory</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Sexual Exploitation and Disrespect Towards Women</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Inclusion of Derogatory and Racially Charged Terminology</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:

Calculation of total points was measured by the number of times the five themes appeared (as points) in the sub-genre. For example, if the total points were 75 (the number of times the themes appeared within the sub-genre) divided by 95 (the total number of songs) that would create a percentage. All percentages were rounded up to the nearest decimal point.
Table 4: Call For Participants

1. CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS– UNDERGRAD WOMEN (19-26) WHO ENJOY HIP-HOP/RAP MUSIC

This call for participants is to ask for your assistance in the collection of data for the research that I am working on in relation to hip-hop/rap music. Your participation in this research project would greatly enhance the work of my dissertation and the future direction of sociological research on the effects of hip-hop/rap music on young women.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your name and other identification factors will NEVER be revealed, nor included in my research. A pseudonym will be used to ensure confidentiality. At any time, if you feel as though your identity has been compromised, you have the right to ask questions and/or to exit the research process.

In asking for your voluntary participation within this research project, I should tell you how it would be organized. There will be one focus group consisting of three to five young women, of which I am asking for you participation. Again, this is all voluntary.

The date for the focus group will be held on Friday, October 13th, 2006. The focus group will be held from 12:00 – 3:00 pm and will include breaks. I need your confirmation that you can definitely attend. We will meet in a relaxed, comfortable setting in the city of Toronto. There will be drinks and snacks provided.

I will need you to pick two hip-hop/rap songs of your choosing. In picking those two songs ensure that one is a song that you take pleasure with and enjoy and another song that you don’t like/prefer because of whatever reasons. This is a great opportunity for you to share your opinions on hip-hop/rap music and to be apart of a very important academic project. Again, I would greatly appreciate your assistance. Please pass this message on to any and all persons who you believe may be interested.
If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Sandra Zichermann

2. September 6th, 2006

ATTENTION: POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT

Dear Research Participant,

This letter is to ask for your assistance in the collection of data for the research that I am working on in relation to hip-hop/rap music. I’m looking at reasons for the popularity of hip-hop/rap music, messages in the lyrics, and young women’s responses. Your participation in this research project would greatly enhance the work of my dissertation and the future direction of sociological research on the effects of hip-hop/rap music on young women.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your name and other identification factors will NEVER be revealed, nor included in my research. A pseudonym will be used to ensure confidentiality. At any time, if you feel as though your identity has been compromised, you have the right to ask questions and/or to exit the research process. In asking for your voluntary participation within this research project, I should tell you how it would be organized. There will be one focus group consisting of three to five young women, of which I am asking for you participation to be interviewed. Again, this is all voluntary. The date of the interviews within the context of a focus group will be held on: Friday, October 13th, 2006. The focus group will be held from 12:00 – 3:00 pm and will include breaks. I need your confirmation that you can definitely attend and be interviewed on this date. We will meet in a relaxed, comfortable setting in the city of Toronto. There will be drinks and snacks provided.
I will need you to choose two hip-hop/rap songs and name those choices when you complete the Consent for Voluntary Participation form. In picking those two songs ensure that one is a song that you take pleasure in and enjoy, and another song that you don’t like.

I have attached the Consent for Voluntary Participation form which I ask you to read over carefully and sign and return to me as soon as possible. To reiterate, your informed consent to participate and be interviewed in this study under the conditions described is assumed by your completing the Consent for Voluntary Participation form and submitting it to me as the researcher. Do not complete the form or hand it in if you do not understand or agree to these conditions.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at your convenience. My contact information is at the top of this letter. If you would like further information you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Helen Lenskyj at 252 Bloor Street West. Toronto, Ontario. M5S 1V6. You can also contact her via telephone at 416-923-6641 x2326, via fax at 416-926-4751, or via email at hlenskyj@oise.utoronto.ca.

Sincerely,

Sandra Zichermann
Table 5: Consent For Voluntary Participation

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study and understand that:

1. I will be interviewed using a guided interview format consisting of four open-ended questions in the context of a focus group.
2. The questions I will be answering address my views on issues related to the effects of hip-hop and rap music. I understand that the primary purpose of this research is to understand the effects of hip-hop/rap music on young women.
3. The interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate analysis of the data.
4. My name will not be used, nor will I be identified personally in any way or at anytime, except through the use of a pseudonym.
5. I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time.
6. I have the right to read the transcript and request changes if necessary.
7. I understand that results from these interviews will be included in doctoral dissertation and may also be included at academic conferences and in manuscripts submitted to academic journals for publication.
8. I am free to participate or not to participate without prejudice.
9. Please fill in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hip-hop/rap song that I take pleasure in and enjoy:</th>
<th>Hip-hop/rap song that I do not like:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Song)</td>
<td>(Song)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Artist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Artist)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researcher’s Signature  Participant’s Signature

Date  Date
Table 6: Detailed Timeline/Structure for Focus Group

DETAILED TIMELINE/STRUCTURE FOR FOCUS GROUP

Song A: *Changes* (PRO) (4:28) – 10 minute discussion

Song B: *My Humps* (CON) (5:26) – 10 minute discussion

Song C: *Get Ur Freak On* (PRO) (3:59) – 10 minute discussion

Song D: *Candy Shop* (CON) (3:29) – 10 minute discussion

BREAK: 5 minutes

Song E: *Hard Knock Life* (PRO) (3:58) – 10 minute discussion

Song F: *Ass N Da Aurr* (CON) (4:05) – 10 minute discussion

Song G: *Beautiful Struggle* (PRO) (4:04) – 10 minute discussion

Song H: *There It Go: The Whistle Song* (CON) (3:00) – 10 minute discussion

BREAK: 5 minutes

Song I: *Ho Song* (2:52) will be played followed by a 20-minute discussion and wrap up questions.

12:00 – 12:15 _Introduction (Code Names/Timetable)_

12:15 – 12:30 _Play Changes_ and engage in discussion

12:30 – 12:45 _Play My Humps_ and engage in discussion

12:45 – 1:00 _Play Get Ur Freak On_ and …

1:00 – 1:15 _Play Candy Shop_ and …
1:15 – 1:20_BREAK

1:20 – 1:35_Play Hard Knock Life and …

1:35 – 1:50_Play Ass N Da Aurr and …

1:50 – 2:05_Play Beautiful Struggle and …

2:05 – 2:15_Play There It Go: The Whistle Song and …

2:15 – 2:20_BREAK

2:20 – 2:35_Play ‘Ho’ Song and …

2:35 – 2:55_Further Discussion

2:55 – 3:00_Wrap Up/Final Thoughts/Good-byes
Table 7: Ethics Review Protocol Form

1. Background, Purpose, Objectives

There is an emerging body of literature demonstrating that sexually explicit lyrics are a feature of hip-hop/rap music. In my dissertation, I plan to focus on the rise of hip-hop/rap in the West as it proliferates across media of a particular culture, that positions women and wealth in a particular way. The proposed research is guided by the following research focus: Exploring the responses of three to five young women, (between the ages of 19-26) who are enrolled in a Women’s Studies programme in University and who are familiar with and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap. This research will allow for these young women to be able to reflect and analyze the music based on their subject positions.

2. Research Methodology

I propose to use multiple research methods in understanding the current state of the hip-hop and rap music scene as well as the ideas and feelings held by young women. In recruiting three to five young women who are enrolled in a Women’s Studies programme in university and who take pleasure in and have an affinity for hip-hop and rap music, I propose the use of snowball sampling. Dornyei defines snowball sampling as the following:

[it] involves a ‘chain reaction’ whereby the researcher identifies a few people who meet the criteria of the particular study and then asks these participants to identify further members of the population. This technique is useful when studying groups whose membership is not readily identifiable (e.g., teenage gang members) (Dornyei, 2003: 72).

Snowball sampling can be applied for two primary purposes. Firstly, and most easily, it is an ‘informal’ method to reach a target population that as Dornyei stated, may not be “readily identifiable.” Secondly, snowball sampling is used most frequently to conduct qualitative research, primarily through interviews. I will start with an acquaintance who is currently undertaking a Women’s Studies degree at a university in Toronto and then ask that person to find me a potential interviewee. I will recruit 3-5 young women (19-26 years old) who are willing to take part in a focus group. I’ve chosen the focus group as my main method because group interaction would promote an open exchange of ideas and information. Listening to music is a
social phenomenon and, as a result, my interests are in the group dynamics of listening to rap, rather than a response from a specific individual young woman listening to rap.

The focus group will be held in a comfortable and relaxed setting. The potential focus group interviewees will be first given an introductory/information letter and consent form that will be signed and dated. In addition, the introductory letter and subsequent consent form will ask the participants for one hip-hop or rap song they take pleasure in and enjoy, and one song they do not. The goal is to have seven songs in total (two from each participant) plus one of my choosing which will be Ludacris – The ‘Ho’ Song. Once the information is complete, the young women will be interviewed in the context of the focus group where the following will occur.

- The participants will be asked to read the cover letter, and answer the demographic information;
- The songs chosen by the participants will be randomly played. Each song is between three to six minutes. The total time set for the session is three hours including breaks. There will be four open-ended discussion questions for each song. Those questions will ask the following:

What do you think about what you heard and what you read?
How does it make you feel?
What is the main message?
How are women treated in the song and in the accompanying lyrics?

Each participant will have an accompanying lyric sheet to follow along with and pen and paper for jotting down notes. I will audiotape the discussion and take handwritten notes. The precise organization will be based on the following form and timetable (based on three participants as an example):

Opening statement (introduction of code names; timetable of session) this should take approximately 10 minutes.
Song A will be played (PRO)\textsuperscript{11} followed by a 15 minute discussion
Song B will be played (CON)\textsuperscript{12} followed by a 15 minute discussion
Song C will be played (PRO) followed by a 15 minute discussion
BREAK: 5 minutes
Song D will be played (CON) followed by a 15 minute discussion
Song E will be played (PRO) followed by a 15 minute discussion
Song F will be played (CON) followed by a 15 minute discussion
BREAK: 5 minutes
The ‘Ho’ Song by Ludacris will be played followed by a 30-minute discussion.
There will be a wrap up discussion (40 minutes) of the four questions (as listed above).
The cover letter will explain what my role is as researcher, and what their role is as participants
and how their responses will be used.

The next document will be a short questionnaire (page #2) that will ask background information:
Age: ________________ Current Education: ________________
Do you self identify as being a member of a visible minority? If so, which one? ________________
Do you own an iPOD or another portable musical playing device? ________________
What is the genre of music that appears most frequently on your iPOD etc? ________________
How many hours a day do you listen to music? Where do you listen? ________________
What genre of music are you listening to during the day/night? ________________
Approximately, how many hip-hop/rap CD’s do you own? ________________
Do you own any hip-hop/rap CD’s by Ludacris? If so, which ones? ________________
In the last month approximately, how many hip-hop/rap CD’s and/or downloads have you purchased? ________________

3. Participants
There will be one focus group of three to five young women (aged 19-26) who are enrolled in a
Women’s Studies programme in university and who take pleasure in and have an affinity for hip-

\textsuperscript{11} PRO refers to a positive song chosen by the participant.
\textsuperscript{12} CON refers to a song that the participants dislike for their own personal reasons.
hop and rap music. The rationale for recruiting young women is the scope of this research, which is to ascertain young women’s responses to, and enjoyment/dissatisfaction with hip-hop/rap music.

4. Recruitment
As previously mentioned (Research Methodology) the young women will be recruited through snowball sampling. I will start with an acquaintance that is currently undertaking a Women’s Studies degree at a university in Toronto and then ask that person to find me a potential interviewee i.e., snowball sampling occurs.

5. Risks and Benefits
There are no identifiable risks to the participants in terms of physical, psychological/emotional and social risks. The only risk that could possibly occur through this focus group is where one member takes command of the conversation i.e., doesn’t allow for others to speak their minds freely and honestly. As the researcher, the strategy that I will execute will be to inform the participants prior to their involvement in the focus group (i.e. through telephone/email conversations) and immediately prior to the focus group itself to insist that all members are able to freely express their opinions and ideas. If it should occur that one member is dominating, I will step in and mediate. The benefits of my intervention will be to minimize a hostile environment and to try to briefly manage the flow of conversation only to make it an open and welcoming focus group to all the participants. The benefit of this focus group is that these young women can exchange ideas and information and perhaps not only learn from the experience, but also build friendships with the other participants.

6. Privacy and Confidentiality
Within this research I will ensure the highest level of confidentiality. In terms of data maintenance, I will audio record the focus group and then transcribe the information at a later date. The audiotape and notes that I will take during the focus group will be stored in a safe location. No personal information at any time will be released. A pseudonym will be used for each of the three-to-five young women to ensure confidentiality. At no time will these individuals be identified. Even my supervisor nor my committee members will not have any indication of who specifically by name was interviewed. They will only know the participants by
their pseudonyms. Once the final touches are done on the dissertation all identifying factors (including the audiotapes) will be destroyed.

7. Compensation

In terms of compensation, I will ask the participants how they will attend the focus group, if transportation is an issue, I will gladly supply the money (i.e. tickets/tokens/cash for the TTC/GO TRAIN etc) needed to arrive at the location for the focus group. Other than that, the only form of compensation will be drinks and snacks that will be provided to the participants during the focus group.

8. Conflicts of Interest = N/A

9. Informed Consent Process

In obtaining informed consent (see Information/Introductory letter and Consent for Voluntary Participation forms) from the participants, the following three guidelines will be precisely followed and administered. 1. To inform the participants that their participation in this research is voluntary; 2. The participants need to be informed of the process and of any changes that may arise; and 3. As the researcher, I must guard against making participants vulnerable.

Furthermore, in the process of initial and ongoing communicating with the human research participants, the following will be acknowledged and rigorously practiced:

I will clearly identify myself - aside from the information already available within the cover letter – before and during the focus group (if and when needed);

I will clearly identify my propose for collecting their opinions and ideas;

I will inform the participants of any risks they may be taking by participating i.e., if the focus group becomes quite heated, (ie., an argument ensues) it will be my responsibility to ensure free flowing conversation. Yet, as previously mentioned in Section 5: Risks and Benefits, there is a risk that one person may try to outtalk and try to convince the other members of the focus group their own values and opinions. I will ensure that every participant is able to speak freely and has their opportunity to express their opinions and ideas;

I will inform the participants of their rights:

a. Their right to withdraw from part or all of the study at any time; and

b. Their right to read the transcript and request changes if necessary.
10. I will inform the participants about how they will be given a pseudonym:
a. I will be clear on how I will ensure the utmost protection of the participants identity and;
b. I will be clear on the steps I have taken to protect their identities.

11. I will also inform the participants about:
a. How results will be disseminated and
b. The projected benefits of my research.

12. I will indicate that participants are free to participate or not without prejudice (as evident in the introductory letter and the Consent for Voluntary Participation form).

13. Scholarly Review = N/A

14. Additional Ethics Reviews = N/A

15. Contracts = N/A

16. Clinical Trials = N/A
Works Cited

Primary Sources (Recordings and Videos)


Secondary Sources


