

HIP-HOP AND PRODUCT PLACEMENT: THE STRUGGLE TO "KEEP IT REAL"

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The entertainment industry is one of the most lucrative businesses worldwide, making billions of dollars per second. Magazines and television channels such as *People Magazine* and Entertainment Television are dedicated to following the celebrities that grace the Hollywood big screen or belt tunes over the airwaves; but just who are the real stars? Is it the celebrity who appears on the red carpet for a premiere, the outfit she is wearing, or the car in which she appears at the premier? The entertainment industry and corporate America have, unbeknownst to the general public, become business partners. This unlikely union is known as "product placement." In their essay "Product Placement as a Marketing Tool in Film and Television," H. Ronald Moser and his colleagues define "product placement" as a "paid product message aimed at influencing movie or television audiences [and music listeners] via the planned and unobtrusive entry of branded product onto a movie or television [or song]" (1). Corporations pay entertainers or production companies large sums of money to have their product placed in films and songs, and hip-hop is a culture that is being strongly targeted by marketing executives and their product placement advertising methods.

Hip-hop is a community within the entertainment industry that is not only a mixture of music such as rap, rhythm and blues, pop, reggae, gospel, soca, reggaeton, and rock n' roll, but also a life-style with language, clothing, swagger, and mentality that produce a common bond between people world wide. In "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop," author Marvin Gladney explains, "Through rhythm and poetry, hip-hop has endeavored to address racism, education, sexism, drug use, and spiritual uplift" (291). Originally popular amongst African-Americans and Latino-Americans, within the past decade or so, hip-hop has become accepted and admired by White-Americans and in other countries. Now that hip-hop has a broader audience, product placement has become more prominent in hip-hop lyrics and music videos. Advertisers are taking advantage of hip-hop artists and their influence on the hip-hop community and its followers by drawing attention to their products by having them featured in an artist's song or music video. The use of a product in hip-hop lyrics and music videos as a featured prop exemplify Rachel Bowlby's concepts of "the universal showroom" which compares the processes of selling a product to a

theatrical production (94), and “arresting and penetrating the mental stream of the buyer” (105), both of which she discusses in her book *Shopping with Freud* with other sales tactics used by advertisers and salesmen. Many within the hip-hop culture are no longer concerned with gaining the interest of followers to alert them of social injustices through positive music. They are concerned with promoting the sales of products through what have become musical commercials. Hip-hop has changed from its original concerns with social issues and individual expression, and the endorsement of material items may be at fault for this transformation. Product placement is further diluting hip-hop into a culture that honors what one *has on* over what one *has to say*.

Many people who are unfamiliar with hip-hop mistake it for a genre of music, but hip-hop is much more. Those who live and understand hip-hop accept it as a lifestyle. Carl S. Taylor and Virgil Taylor define hip-hop culture in their essay, “The Hip-Hop and Youth Culture: Contemplation of an Emerging Cultural Phenomenon”:

Hip-Hop, like Rock and Roll before it, is not only a genre of music, it is also a complex system of ideas, values, and concepts that reflect newly emerging and ever-changing creative, correlative, expressive mechanisms, including but not limited to song poetry, film, and fashion. (251)

The culture is a community within itself. It houses hip-hop dictators, such as respected radio DJ New York’s Hot 97’s Funk Master Flex, who has the final word on whether a song is hot or not, hip-hop mogul and fashion entrepreneur Sean “Puffy” Combs who creates fashion trends with his clothing line Sean John, and Russell Simmons, who is donned as the “Godfather of Hip-Hop” because of his great efforts to get rap and hip-hop culture accepted and respected by mainstream entertainment with the creation of the first all-hip-hop record label Def Jam. Yet before hip-hop became so mainstream and heavily targeted by advertisers, it was a cultural art form in which artists and followers could express what was going on within the communities in which hip-hop thrived. During the genesis of hip-hop, many rappers free-styled or ad-libbed their verses. In “The Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop,” author Lewis Gordon writes about his experiences with hip-hop in its earlier stages:

I recall the many dance events and MC [freestyle] battles that took place in city parks in the Bronx of my adolescent years of the mid-through late 1970—a world in which the public schools were also

places where after school activities were the rule not the exception . . .
by the 1980's, most of this disappeared under the anti-public sphere
politics of the Reagan era. (381).

The free-styled verses of early hip-hop featured metaphors and imagery about the lives the rappers were living. Unlike the large auditoriums and megaplexes in which hip-hop artists appear now, street corners, parks, and classrooms served as earlier stages for rappers to showcase their talents and release their emotions. In the early 1980's, popular hip-hop DJ Grandmaster Flash and his group the Furious Five wrote and performed the classic, "The Message," a song about the streets of New York City, which, at the time, were drug infested, poverty-stricken, and a site of continual social injustice amongst the African-Americans and Latino-American who resided there:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs,
you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
Cause the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car
Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.

(Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1982)

The words of the song are harsh, but many songs of that time frame were also harsh. Artists rapped about the realities that plagued the residents within their communities. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five expressed feelings of helplessness and desperation in their songs, rapping that they "had no choice" and "[they] tried to get away, but [they] couldn't get far." These songs were popular because they alerted listeners to what was going on in their community and what needed to be changed.

Hip-hop artists today are no longer as concerned with the welfare and necessary changes of the community in which many of their followers reside. Popular songs within the hip-hop culture are now havens for brand names and

product placements. American Brandstand, an online barometer that calculates the number of times a brand name is mentioned in music, claims that Cadillac was the most mentioned brand for the year 2004, followed by other brands such as Hennessy (#2), Nike (#11), and Juicy Fruit (#48) (Agenda Inc.). One can assume that there is a correlation between the increase in brand mentions and the sudden increase in sales of their popular models, like the Cadillac Escalade among African-Americans. Dan Neil, author of "Bling of the Road," an article featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, discusses the importance of the automobile, specifically the Cadillac, in hip-hop, and how followers have revived slumping sales for the car brand:

For Cadillac, the tipping point came with the 1999 introduction of the Cadillac Escalade . . . the 'Slade quickly became the image ride for the brand-obsessed hip-hop culture. In 2003, Cadillac's truck sales—Escalade, ESV, ETX, SRX—grew almost 20% over the previous years, while car sales were flat . . . the priceless exposure for the Cadillac brand in a trend-setting demographic . . . for example [rapper] Chingy's ballad-like [song] "One Call Away" currently in heavy rotation on music video networks, features him kickin' it in a Cadillac XLR. (Neil)

Cadillac and other brands have become staples and icons within the hip-hop culture through consistent mentions in songs and placements in videos. Becoming a staple or permanent fixture within a specific demographic is the ultimate goal of an advertiser. It generates steady sales and profits. Bowlby's concept of a "universal showroom" (94) asserts: "All the world's a showroom, everyman or woman is an advertisement for himself or herself, aiming to 'impress' or please" (95). Songs and music videos are definitely advertisements for selling an image of what people want be: moneymakers who have the ability to buy what ever they want. Artists are selling an image to hip-hop followers that portrays them as rich and frivolous shoppers or, as Urban Dictionary, an online dictionary that defines prevalent slang, defines them, "ballers" and "shot callers." Unfortunately, many of hip-hop's followers are unable to lead the luxurious lifestyle that hip-hop artists portray and rap about. Donna Owens writes about product placement of cars in hip-hop and their sales in an untitled article for BET.com:

"It's attracted a lot of attention when certain artist have expressed interest in acquiring a vehicle" says analyst John Thomas of the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) . . . "It always helps

when somebody has a product placement in a video or song. Free exposure ignites some of the sales." . . . Consider the hot new Chrysler 300C, launched last April . . . [when the] vehicle appeared in [rappers] 50 Cent and G-Unit video, interest soared . . . the love affair between rappers and flashy cars mirrors the symbolic importance the automobile has had in the Black community for decades. Even while the Black workers were experiencing double-digit unemployment two years ago, African Americans spent some \$47 billion on cars and trucks, according to *Target Market News*, which tracks Black consumer statistics. "The young, trendy individual wants a vehicle to match [his] lifestyle." (Owens)

As Owens observes, car companies, specifically Chrysler, benefit greatly from product placement. She compares the relationship between the two industries to a "love affair," but an affair has connotations of being neither legitimate nor morally right. The car companies made money from a demographic that was experiencing a massive unemployment rate. The pressure to have the newest item within the hip-hop community is greater than the desire to be financially stable. Some people feel it is unfortunate that the hip-hop industry, a culture that is supposed to be relevant to its followers, sells a fantasy that contrasts with the ways its followers actually live.

However, others argue that the placement of products in songs and music videos is exactly what hip-hop as a culture and booming economic industry need, giving artists and followers the confidence that past generations were unable to attain. As Neil writes in his article,

The rise of Cadillac in hip-hop begins with the American bluesmen of the mid-20th century at a time when the name Cadillac was the definition of excellence and the cars were automotive totems of the ruling class . . . [Bluesmen] were also black men in Jim Crow's south and, if that weren't marginalization enough they were musicians. For these artists, the Cadillac—the ultimate status symbol for white America—was all the more potent as evidence of worth and achievement. (Neil)

Neil uses Cadillac to emphasize the struggles the African-American community has had to overcome in hopes of being treated with equality during a time when they were not. In the past, Cadillac was considered the epitome of extravagance and class.

Now that African-Americans are able to afford this luxury, many feel as if they have finally achieved a communal dream of being equal in a society that once rejected their citizenship and rights. Lyrics and sightings in music videos give followers a positive, maybe attainable, dream of owning large, pricey items. Many hip-hop artists' lyrics portray a "rags to riches" lifestyle in their songs and videos. Product placement enables them to do so and, if they feature the newest cell phone model or car, it is more believable. Late hip-hop legend Notorious B.I.G aka Biggie Smalls rapped about his struggle to obtain fame and celebrity status in his classic "Juicy":

Remember Rappin' Duke, duh-ha, duh-ha
You never thought that hip-hop would take it this far
Now I'm in the limelight
'cause I rhyme tight
Time to get paid,
blow up like the World Trade
Born filla, the opposite of a winner
Remember when I used to eat sardines for dinner
Peace to Ron G, Brucey B, Kid Capri
Funkmaster Flex, Lovebug Starsky
I'm blowin' up like you thought I would
Call the crib, same number same hood
It's all good...
Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis
When I was dead broke, man I couldn't picture this
50-inch screen, money-green leather sofa
Got two rides, a limousine with a chauffeur
Phone bill about two G's flat
No need to worry, my accountant handles that. . .
Birthdays was the worst days
Now we sip champagne when we thirst-ay
Uh, damn right I like the life I live
'Cause I went from negative to positive

(The Notorious B.I.G, 1994)

With the profits of his success, he lives a carefree life where money is no longer an issue, when, just a couple years before, it was. He drops many brand names of

alcohol, games systems, cars—labels associated with wealth at the time he composed the song. At this stage of hip-hop, the specific placement of products was not prevalent, but his audience and the audiences of other hip-hop artists were able to relate in the search for financial stability within a community that did not allow such economic mobility. The mention of brand names exposed listeners and followers of a better living condition than the one they inhabited. However, Notorious B.I.G., like other hip-hop artists, went unpaid for the contributions he did for the sales of the mentioned brands.

One of the first paid product placement or hip-hop endorsed deals happened in the 1980's to Run DMC, who are considered to be the founders of rap music, especially for their contribution in making rap music mainstream with their collaborations with many popular rock and roll artists of the time. In "Can Hip Hop Cash In?" Abram Sauer writes that "[in] 1986: Run DMC perform their song 'My Adidas' to fans that react by holding up their Adidas. Adidas representatives, recognizing opportunity, immediately sign[ed] the trio to a US \$1 million sponsorship contract." Run DMC's sponsorship was one of the first collaborations between hip-hop and Wall Street. Originally, Run DMC wrote the song "My Adidas" as an ode to their favorite brand of sneaker: "and I walk down the street and I rock to the beat / with Lee [jeans] on my legs and Adidas on my feet" (Run DMC). Although the song was not purposely composed to focus attention, and eventually large sales, for the shoe company, "My Adidas" was in such heavy rotation and exposure in the 1980's that it made Adidas Shell Toe sneakers a permanent fixture in 80's hip-hop culture along with the large gold chains and Kangol hats they wore and rapped about. In *Shopping with Freud*, Bowlby discusses "method[s] of arresting and penetrating the mental stream of the buyer" (105,), breaking down the process into four steps. "[There are] a number of stimuli which will naturally cause the mind of to turn its attention to the proffered idea. These include repetition . . . extensivity . . . intensity . . . and movement" (106). Although all the elements of "arresting and penetrating the mental stream of the buyer" correlate with the use of product placement in hip-hop, one particular component stands out: repetition.

Repetition—"say it often; the power of the trade name" (Bowlby 105)—can occur within the hip-hop culture in a number of ways, such as continual rotation of a song on the radio or music video show, interviews where artist may wear or mention a brand, or even specific brands that continually endorse hip-hop events. Run

DMC's popular ode to Adidas, for example, was a continual or "repetitive" image of what they believed was, at the time, hot in hip-hop culture. Donna Long and Al Lucia write, in their essay, "A Little Bit O' Soul," that "[Music is] a powerful way to help people remember and can inspire them to use what they already know. Research by such organizations as the American Medical Association. . . shows that music can provide an anchor and an emotional connection to improve retention" (16). Listeners adopted Run DMC's style as their own, and began wearing Adidas's brand after continually hearing the song, which elicited a connection between the artists, the fan, and the brand. Advertisers hope that consumers' reactions to repetition will result in their remembering and purchasing their products. Repetition also results in familiarity with the advertised product. In "Feenin: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," author Alexander G. Weheliye discusses changes that occurred to music within the African-American culture as contemporary music became too influenced with the new technology: "Many tracks flaunt an obsession with hi tech consumer gadgetry, especially mobile phones . . . lyrically hardly a track exists that does not mention cellular phones, beepers, two pagers . . . stressing the interdependence of contemporary interpersonal communication and informational technologies" (32). Hip-hop lyrics and music videos constantly remind listeners what new trend is available. Writer Adam Graham quotes hip-hop pioneer Russell Simmons in his article for the *Detroit Times*, "'[Hip-hop has] become the best brand-building community in the world,' says Russell Simmons, 45, co-founder of Def Jams Records. 'If (rappers) decide Snapple is hot, or Coca-Cola is hot or Pepsi is hot, then they become hot'" (Graham).

The newest trend world wide is updated technology, mainly cell phones and other portable communication devices. Many companies who invest a large amount of money into their product-placement deal with an artist want consistent mention of their product to alert and impress listeners with their product's importance. They will do anything to keep a connection between an artist and their product profitable. An example of repetitive mention of a specific product following an initial placement is evident with the alliance between famed R&B artist, Tweet, and Verizon Wireless. In "Hip-Hop Goes Commercial; Rappers Give Madison Avenue a Run for its Money," Erik Parker writes that

Verizon recently recruited Elektra recording artist Tweet to endorse Verizon Wireless services. She uses Motorola phones in her video for

“Call Me,” and a commercial for the Verizon campaign was shot at the same time with Elektra and Verizon sharing costs. Record label executives insist that this merger of content and advertisement can be a win-win situation—as long as endorsements are subtle and realistic.

Both the Tweet’s music video and Verizon commercial present her using the same phone. They reach a large audience—those who enjoy her music and those who watch television and catch her in the Verizon commercial. If a person continually sees Tweet with the same phone, they are more apt to purchase an identical phone because she endorses it. Richard Liggett’s article “An Urban Rite of Passage: Worlds of Music, Ads, Collide in a Unique Venture” discusses another example of repetitive product placement when he interviews Steve Stoute, an executive of AG Worldwide, a hip-hop friendly advertising and design business.

In [rapper] Jay-Z’s music video “I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me),” the rap artist arranges trysts with beautiful women using some hot new technology. “Only way to roll is, Jigga [Jay-Z’s nickname] and two ladies./ I’m too cold, Motorola, two-way page me,” he sings while pulling out the trendy little device to set up a bedroom rendezvous.

“We made that happen for Motorola,” says Steve Stoute. (Liggett 3)

Again, when fans hear Jay-Z’s lyrics and then see him actually using the device in his video or elsewhere, they will be more apt to purchase it. If the song and video are popular and in heavy rotation, they reach a broader audience. Hip-hop followers continually see these placed products in their favorite songs and videos and feel compelled to buy them.

In the onslaught of fans continually seeking new trends, some may feel that hip-hop has lost its original zeal as the empowering musical message for its followers by writing about the living conditions that many of them endure. New but highly acclaimed rapper Kanye West writes about the phenomenon of hip hop fans mass consumption of brand names within the last decade or so in his song, “All Falls Down,” on his 2003 Grammy Award winning album, *College Dropout*:

Man I promise, she's so self conscious
She has no idea what she's doing in college
That major that she majored in don't make no money
But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny
Now, tell me that ain't insecure

The concept of school seems so securrrre...
And she be dealing with some issues that you can't believe
Single black female addicted to retail and well...
Man I promise, I'm so self conscious
That's why you always see me with at least one of my watches
Rollies and Pasha's done drove me crazy
I can't even pronounce nothing, pass that versace!
Then I spent 400 bucks on this
Just to be like nigga you ain't up on this!
And I can't even go to the grocery store
Without some [air force] ones that is clean and a shirt with a team
It seems we living the American dream
But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem
The prettiest people do the ugliest things
For the road to riches and diamond rings
We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us
We trying to buy back our 40 acres
And for that paper, look how low we a'stoop
Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coop/coupe...
We all self conscious I'm just the first to admit it. (Kanye West, 2003)

West mocks the rappers and the dependency of hip-hop culture on name brands. In the song alone, he mentions twelve brands to emphasize how materialistic hip-hop has become. He raps about how many in the community are so enthralled with buying luxury items like Versace clothing, that many cannot even pronounce, because they are focused on the wrong aspect of life instead of trying to better themselves intellectually and academically. In the line "We trying to buy back our 40 acres," he makes a historical reference to the promise of reparations in the amount of "forty acres and a mule" made to enslaved African-Americans towards the end of slavery. "40 acres" is a metaphor for respect; it is believed that respect is only given once it is earned. African-American slaves worked for centuries for free and earned their "40 acres." Earlier artists earned the respect of the hip-hop community by rapping about injustices and other important issues. Now artists think respect can be bought not only within the hip-hop community, but also among a previously-resistant upper-class society just because they wear "some ones that's clean and a shirt with a team,"

drive nice cars, and have lots of money. But West goes on to say that, regardless of the amount of money you have, those outside of the hip-hop community such as large corporations, who do not understand or who discourage your history and culture, will never consider hip-hop artists and their fans as equals. They will work with the artist as long as they continue to make them a profit. Their respect for hip-hop artists cannot be bought, regardless of all the materialistic items artists claim to have. Even Kanye West admits that, because it has become engrained into almost every aspect of hip-hop culture, he is also subject to being materialistic.

Some people feel that hip-hop has not become more materialistic, but only appears so in attempts to show the world what the rappers have now, referring to the prominent theme of “the rags to riches” in the hip-hop culture. In *Soul Babies*, a book by Mark Anthony Neal, Neal writes an essay, “A Soul Baby in Real Time: Encountering Generation Hip-Hop on Campus,” about the conundrums the new hip-hop generation face in trying to fit themselves amongst past hip-hop generations.

Generation Hip-Hop is really a hybrid of past struggles, the need for self-determination, and a desire to succeed on America’s terms, as virtually every other ethnic group strives to achieve. The challenge to “keep it real” and “still get paid” may seem crass to older generations, but it is the dominant ethos of generation Hip-Hop. Despite tremendous insecurities about what “keeping it real” means and whether or not “getting paid” will buffer them from the tragedy of race and ethnicity in this country, they still forge forward . . . embracing whatever identities allow them to most effectively succeed in the mainstream and survive margins. (193)

The hip-hop community has overcome a lot of obstacles to become mainstream and accessible to those unfamiliar with the culture, but it sometimes seems as if the strides of previous generations were in vain. Today, artists will do anything to make a few bucks, including sacrificing making good music or sending to fans a positive message. In artists’ attempts to “keep it real,” they do exactly the opposite and become a paragon of materialism and falsehood, adorning themselves with brand names and money to project a new image of what “keeping it real” is when that is not what real life is about. “Keeping it real” is a popular saying amongst the hip-hop culture. *Urban Dictionary* defines “keeping it real” as “the act of being yourself, usually by buying and wearing items that everyone else has.” This ironic hip-hop

cliché is now the goal of most artists in the hip-hop community. Hip-hop was built on people being honest with the situations in which they were living and expressing themselves through the hip-hop lifestyle in hopes that it could bring a solution to their problems; hence, they were “keeping it real” with themselves. Originally, there was no “sugar coating” the situations past hip-hop artists encountered.

It would be a generalization to say that all hip-hop artists are victims of the materialistic mentality that paid product placement has introduced in the culture. Some artists genuinely do enjoy the product and turn down offers for an endorsement by large corporations. In a interview with about product placement with the Hennessey-loving rapper, Xzibit, Parker reveals that “Xzibit is wary of liquor companies that openly court him—though he proudly sports a Hennessey logo tattooed on his arm. ‘They [companies] offer you free bottles, but what the fuck is that?’ asks Xzibit, ‘They try to get you to [drop their name] by giving you a bottle or two. I’m not stupid. [Hennessey] don’t pay me shit. I just love the product’” (Parker). Many other hip-hop artists share Xzibit’s feelings towards paid product placement and endorsements, and believe that they are selling out if they allow themselves to be influenced by large corporations and their products. Not only do some artists reject product placement, Parker quotes a record-label executive who says, “I won’t have that conversation [with artists and their managers] if it doesn’t make sense to the artist. I won’t tell my hip-hop artist who grew up in Brooklyn to start talking about Hyundai because they want to give you a million dollars to pretend you drive it. They would laugh me out the room” (Parker). Some artists are concerned with their street credibility and their image in the urban sphere of the hip-hop community and cannot allow their credibility to become faulty due to an uncharacteristic endorsement.

The hip-hop culture was founded on urban life where all you had was your reputation. It amazes me that majority of present day artists disregard their street credibility and street reputation, foundations of hip-hop, and replace it with a materialistic mentality that worships brand names and money. Past generations of hip-hop rapped about injustices and poverty within the community, whereas present rap glorifies brands that majority of hip-hop fans can barely afford and say, in the words of rapper Kanye West, “Nigga you ain’t up on this!” Product placement is not one-hundred-percent to blame for hip-hop’s materialistic turn, but it is a huge factor. Rappers are choosing to perform a song exalting a brand and a particular life style

rather than real life issues that continue to plague the hip-hop community. This problem of lionizing material goods and creating a lifestyle around them is a problem that stems from years of oppression amongst past hip-hop generations. I am an avid hip-hop fanatic and I am proud that I am a product of past hip-hop generations. I listen to hip-hop, dress hip-hop, talk hip-hop, and live hip-hop, but I cannot help notice the changes that are occurring. Hip-hop needs to regain control over its culture and stop allowing brands and the companies that stand to gain financially from product placement control a culture that they ignored until they noticed it was profitable. Hip-hop should endorse itself for the wonderful contributions it has made to cultures worldwide.

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COMMENTARY: Mercy Harper

Monae Davis' essay "Hip-Hop and Product Placement: The Struggle to 'Keep it Real'" discusses the evolution of materialism in the hip-hop community. The name-dropping of products in hip-hop songs began as way for artists to demonstrate their victory over financial troubles and establish a respected reputation. Davis argues that corporate America's takeover of this trend in the form of paid product placements helped materialism win out over real issues. Davis concludes that the hip-hop community should "regain control over its culture." While her concluding argument is powerful and well argued, one question arose for me: how can it be done?

The establishment of individual reputation still seems to be integral to hip-hop artists. Reputation is closely linked the concept of “keeping it real.” Davis writes that hip-hop was constructed around these ideas. Hip-hop was about “being honest with the situations in which they were living and expressing themselves through the hip-hop lifestyle in hopes that it could bring a solution” (15). Through this original definition, one can see that materialism is a possible offshoot. An underprivileged artist that finally starts making money through hip-hop would understandably celebrate his or her triumph over a dire situation through materialistic pleasures. For such an individual, the hip-hop lifestyle has brought a solution. However, the key word here is “individual.” The stereotypical materialistic hip-hop star revels in self-satisfaction, but his or her hip-hop “solution” has not changed the situation left behind.

The issue lurking behind materialism in hip-hop is egoism. Because the hip-hop community places such emphasis on reputation, an artist can truly capitalize on a hard life. Does it not seem fair to think that such an artist should work to improve the situation he or she came from? Some artists certainly have established respect through helping others and becoming politically active. Davis gives the example of Kanye West, who admits to struggling with materialism, but is a politically-active individual. While some in the hip-hop community are bucking the materialistic trend, stereotypical “bling-bling” stars still flood the airwaves. The American corporate money machine supports these predictable “stars” through product placement and major record label deals. How can anti-materialistic artists survive?

I believe that Davis’ hope for a return to community-driven hip-hop is possible, and happening today. Anti-materialistic artists have their own record labels, clubs, and radio stations. It is up to the hip-hop community to seek out these independent artists and support them. The American corporate machine creates a bastardized and pasteurized version of every art form. It seems to thrive upon untalented, materialistic, and downright boring “stars.” If the members of the hip-hop community turn off their TVs and support local and independent music, they can wrest the culture that is rightfully theirs from the claws of consumerism.