

The Impact of Rap Music on White Youth

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ABSTRACT

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Music is a primary source of entertainment for American adolescents. Hip hop culture and rap music, in particular, have become the dominant genre of music among American youth. Hip hop rose primarily from the disadvantaged African American neighborhoods of New York City. Perhaps not surprisingly, though, it is White, middle class, suburban adolescents who drive the rap music industry with their disposable income and desire to resist the cultural norms of their parents' generation. While sophisticated analyses of hip hop itself are appearing, the connection to white youth has not been well-studied. This project begins to fill this void, specifically exploring how contemporary rap music affects White middle-class American adolescents. Interviews and surveys were conducted with a sample of students from a small selective northeastern liberal arts college. These interviews and surveys focused on the presence of rap music and hip hop culture in their daily lives, assessing the ways music has penetrated youth culture and influenced their perspectives on race, gender, class-consciousness, and other pressing social issues that affect America's youth.

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Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

Music is one of the primary sources of entertainment for adolescents in America. Hip hop culture and rap music, in particular, have become the dominant genre of music among American youth. Rap is the commercialized music that can be heard on the radio while hip hop is the cultural phenomenon that encompasses rap music, breakdancing, dj-ing, graffiti artwork, fashion, language, and style. Hip hop arose from the primarily African American disadvantaged neighborhoods of New York City, and quickly dominated the national music charts. With the ability to reach the masses, rap and hip hop musicians took up social issues that affect their often difficult lives, addressing themes of politics, violence, gangs, misogyny, alcoholism and substance abuse. Perhaps not surprisingly, though, it is White, middle class, suburban adolescents who drive the rap music industry with their disposable income and desire to resist the cultural norms of their parents' generation. The influences of hip hop resonate through fashion, style, language, sexuality, television and other sources of entertainment. This thesis examines the impact of rap music on White youth culture. Through interviews and surveys, I found a strong relationship between rap music and adolescent culture. Despite its controversy, in the last decade, rap music has become an important and influential aspect of American popular culture.

Before examining all of the literature on rap music, one must look to the relationship between music, sociology, and youth culture. I began by looking at the sociology of music, and the way that music acts as an activity and an object. Music is present in nearly every aspect of individual and community life, and it is able to unite

people. Next, I turned to youth culture, as a subset of the parent culture, and the way that adolescents resist the status quo. This is closely followed by the connection between youth culture and music. Throughout history, the music that appeals to the adolescent community has created a wedge between the parent culture and the youth culture. This idea can be traced back to the 1950s and the advent of rock and roll music, but holds true for grunge, punk, rap, and other youth music throughout history. The history of hip hop culture is outlined, which began in the South Bronx in the late 1970s. The tumultuous history has had an influence on the themes found within the music, which often include violence, gangs, drugs and misogyny. Finally, I examined the pervasive influence of rap music on white youth culture. This can be seen through the influx of music, movies, television shows, radio stations, clothing lines, magazines and other popular culture mediums that are targeted at the youth of America. With an understanding of the sociology of music, youth culture, and the impact of music on youth culture, one can begin to understand how rap music is so influential. The history of rap music and hip hop culture is important to understanding the way that America's youth received and incorporated the music into their own culture. In the last decade, rap has taken over as a dominant genre of music and the effects of its influence can be seen in White youth culture.

The Role of Music in Society

During a candid interview with Tia DeNora, a well-known sociologist of music, a Nigerian man said, "Europeans merely listened to music, whereas in Africa people made music as an integral element of social life" (2000: ix).

In the twenty first century, sociologists have used their analytical tools and general theories of sociology applied to nearly any subject of study to determine what is sociological about the matter. Many sociologists have been able to combine their personal interest in a topic with their desire to understand the sociology of that topic. Music is a field that is entertaining and insightful while it is able to reach a vast audience of listeners through radio, television, advertisements, and the Internet. Music also has the power to influence feelings and moods (DeNora 2000), making it a compelling choice of topic for sociologists. Roy and Dowd found the common themes of music in the important works of Max Weber, W.E.B. DuBois, Alfred Schutz, Howard Becker, Richard Peterson, Pierre Bordieu, and Tia DeNora (2010: 184) who were able to see the significance in the study of music, the people who create it, and its effect on those who listen to it. DeNora argues, as shown in the above quote, that the social effects and powers of music have been underestimated in Western culture, despite the “plethora of music’s uses in daily life” (2000: ix). Regardless of whether or not society understands the impact of music on its people, there is an important connection between culture and music that sociologists work to uncover.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines music as, “the art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.; musical composition, performance, analysis, etc., as a subject of study; the occupation or profession of musicians” (Oxford English Dictionary 2010). In sociological terms, defining music is more than just this formal explanation; it is a “force in social life, a building material of consciousness and social structure” (DeNora 2000: 2) that can affect each individual differently. Music can be treated as an object or as an

activity (Roy and Dowd 2010). As an object, music has a moment of creation with notes and tones that are repeated as the building blocks for songs and compositions. Music is also a commodity that can be bought or sold, which originated in the late 18th century with the rise of copyright laws and music publishing (Roy and Dowd 2010). In the centuries since, music has taken a spotlight in the recording, radio, television and film industries, which are constantly expanding with technologies like digital music and the Apple iPod. Music, as an activity, is usually communicative, and therefore sociological because of the intertwining between the music itself and personal interactions. Music is a performance that is affected by more than just the musician, but all of the people that work to create the experience and those who participate in the experience. There are various other actors that are involved in music: “people involved in the creation and dissemination of music, including...support personnel who may have little involvement in the musical performance itself” (Roy and Dowd 2010: 187).

In addition to the creation and the performance of the music, music is an activity in which listeners participate. “Musical meaning is particularly sociological because it both happens through interaction and makes interaction possible” (Roy and Dowd 2010: 189). This connection between the individual and the music is difficult to pinpoint, and therefore the “patterns of cognition, styles of action, ideologies, institutional arrangements” (DeNora 2000: 4), which comprise the social matters, should not be presumed, but rather demonstrated, as many researchers have worked to do through interviews and ethnographic studies. In order to fully understand music from a sociological perspective, one must look at the way music is active in social life. Shepherd and Wicke argue that to understand “culture requires an understanding of its articulation

through music just as much as a viable understanding of music requires an understanding of its place in culture” (1997: 34). Many scholars wonder, what does popular music reveal about the people, but Frith, and other sociologists have asked, “how does it construct them” (1987: 137).

People are able to use music to identify themselves as individuals or as a collective group, and “people use music to give meaning to themselves and their world” (Roy and Dowd 2010: 187). The relationship between music and group culture can be seen in various sociological studies. Willis’ *Profane Culture* (1978), for example, examines the cultural practices of a small group of motorcyclists, or bikeboys, and the similarities between their musical interests and their social behaviors and social lives. Willis studied a group that favored fast paced music that brought about the urge “to get up and do something” (1978: 73), which was fitting for the group members whose lives revolve around riding their motorcycles. The rhythm of the music had the ability to bring about an action. Similarly, there are songs that have the ability to create the desire to run, dance, or simply relax.

In *Music in Everyday Life*, DeNora highlights the range of things individuals do to music and with music, including “work, eat, fall asleep, dance, romance, daydream, exercise, celebrate, protest, worship, mediate and procreate with music playing” (2000: 7). In these social and individual settings, music can be central to the activity, in the background, or replaying in the mind of the individual. Music does not always need to be a central figure in the daily lives of individuals, but there are subtle ways for music to penetrate into the minds of the unaware listeners. There is almost always music playing in department stores, restaurants, shopping malls, and supermarkets that is there but does

not command the attention of listeners in the same way that a song on the radio does. The songs played are often used to create a sense of calm, to try and influence shoppers to spend more money, in favor of the store. In-store experiments have been used to figure out what types of background music will influence how long it “takes to eat and drink, the average length of stay in a shop, the choice of one brand or style over another and the amount of money spent” (DeNora 2000: 18). Regardless of the ways in which music reaches the listeners, “at the level of daily life, music has power” (DeNora 2000: 16-17).

Music is present in all aspects of social agency, which includes feelings, perception, cognition, consciousness, identity, perceived situation and scene. DeNora argues that “music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel—in terms of energy and emotion—about themselves, about others, and about situations” (2000: 17). The power that music has is a social power that those who create and reproduce the music hold over the vast array of listeners. One might question if individuals have any conscious knowledge of the control that music has on their lives. Or in what way does the individual see music as an influential social power, and what influence has it had?

Youth Culture

“By its very nature, popular culture impinges on people unceasingly; it is part of their environment, part of their background noise, color, and verbal imagery of their lives”
(Riesman 1950: 359)

One large group that has been studied by many sociologists is the youth of America. Youth has been defined as, “the stage of life that entails a ‘psychosocial

moratorium' from adult responsibilities and thus enables experimentation with identity (Moore 2010: 23). Youths, adolescents, teenagers, and any other synonyms are commonly used to refer to the individuals in between childhood and adulthood, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. This stage of youth came about because of the affluence and economic development of the middle class. People now had the ability and financial stability to send their children on to college or other forms of higher education, which further postponed the transition into adulthood and the workforce (Moore 2010).

Early studies of youths conducted by sociologists based out of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s studied the behaviors of juvenile delinquents. They looked to prove that criminal behavior among youths was different than delinquent adults with a predisposition towards criminal behavior. It was determined that petty theft and acts of violence were ways in which adolescents were learning social codes and norms, in order to prepare themselves for adult life, albeit an adult life of crimes including racketeering and trafficking of liquor (Bennett 2000). Youths were establishing their own norms and values, consequently creating a youth culture, or a subculture within the greater American culture. Culture is the shared attitudes, goals, values, and practices that characterize a group, organization or institution, and subculture is a group with their own cultural values that still falls within the larger group culture. The deviant behavior of these youths, as a subculture, was seen as a reaction to the structural changes taking place in the parent culture, including prohibition, The Great Depression, and World War II (Bennett 2000).

Moore argues that present day youth culture is comprised of “an assortment of subcultures that have mixed together to form new hybrids and styles over the course of the past 30 years or so” (2010: 23). Sociologists examining youth culture focus on the

“plurality of issues and circumstances” (Bennett 2000: 11) rather than attempting to impose a singular mold to define a vast array of characteristics. That being said, modern-day youth culture encompasses an array of different niches varying in musical, stylistic, and fashion preferences, most of which have been commercialized and absorbed into the all-encompassing umbrella of popular youth culture.

Adolescence today often proves to be a difficult time in one’s life involving more than the biological changes that are common with moving from childhood to adulthood. The struggles of those within this age range vary from body weight and image, bullying, styles of dress, drug and alcohol use, sexual preference and sexual behaviors (Jagodzinski 2005). Certain aspects of teenage behavior can be a source of concern to parents and teachers, watching young people evolve from childhood to adulthood. Youths across the country get involved in drug and alcohol use, drop out of school, become pregnant, smoke cigarettes, and other rebellious behaviors that are appalling to their parents. Some of these actions can be attributed to peer pressure, but there is also a need to resist the status quo. Adolescents in this stage of life believe that they are old enough to control their lives, yet they are still dependent upon their parents and must adhere to their rules, which causes the desire to rebel. Because of the transformations taking place in this transition phase of their lives, youths are less bound to tradition, “and more dramatically influenced by new events, ideas, and values” (Moore 2010: 22). This also can explain the erratic or rebellious behavior that many parents see as their teenager is transitioning into adulthood.

Music and Youth Culture

“In many different parts of the world popular music is a primary, if not the primary, leisure resource for young people” (Bennett 2000: 34).

The relationship between music and youth can be traced to the beginnings of the twentieth century, however the divide between the music of the parent culture and the music of America’s youth came in the early 1950s with the advent of rock and roll. Rock and roll took music in a completely new direction stylistically, which, sociologist Andy Bennett argued, “acquired a distinctly youth-oriented and oppositional stance” (2000: 34). Additionally, at this time television and film, were new alternate sources of media that were becoming popular, and were a different way to spread music across the country. *Rock Around the Clock* (Sears 1956) was a film that featured several rock and roll bands in concert, and the reaction to this film was unlike anything before. Audiences were singing and dancing in the aisles of the theatres, and in some instances vandalism of cars and storefronts was a result of the film (Bennett 2000). Television was a new invention, that provided a new medium for artists to reach their audiences, and the visual representation of artists created a bond between the audience and their music. Furthermore, during televised musical performances, at home viewers were able to see the reactions of those in the live audience, and were able to base their response off of the excitement of other fans that they saw on television. During this time, some parents viewed rock and roll as devil worship, and the differences between youth culture and the parent culture only grew. In more recent years, the music of adolescents has evolved, but “has continued to drive a wedge between the generations and to mark off youth from the parent culture even more dramatically” (Bennett: 2000: 35).

Throughout history America has faced some turbulent times, and in reaction, some musicians adopted socio-political issues and incorporated them into their music. Their messages were able to reach vast audiences across the world, educating their listeners about problems and informing audiences of their personal views. James Brown spoke of the Black Power Movement with his 1968 “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” and Country Joe and the Fish’s 1967 “Fixin’ to Die Rag” protested against the war in Vietnam (Bennett 2000: 41). White and Black fans across the nation were chanting the lyrics to these songs, as well as others that took on political agendas. The political opinions of these musicians reached their audiences, and the music was able to influence the opinions of their fans. In more recent years, large concert events such as Live Aid, which raised funds for the Ethiopian famine, and Farm Aid, which helped American farming families, have become popular. On September 11, 2009, Jay-Z held a benefit concert in which all of the proceeds went to the New York Police and Fire Widows’ and Children’s Benefit Fund, to help those who lost family members on September 11, 2001. These events featured headlining artists and help to vastly increase the public awareness of these issues and raise funds for these national and international problems. By presenting the ideological views of a famous figure, such as a popular music icon, impressionable youths are likely to take interest in a cause that they may not have previously known about.

In addition to the socio-political ideals that were marketed to youths through music, the impressionable youth audience was a target for music based marketing campaigns. Adolescents are the primary targets for purchasing music, or any consumer product, because, “young people, especially those who were still living with their parents,

had the highest amounts of disposable income” (Bennett 2000: 12). Teenagers are willing to go out and buy the music that their favorite artist is singing, as well as the sneakers that they are endorsing, and tickets to the movie that they are featured in. When looking at the entire lifestyle of an adolescent, their spending habits, music choices, and other factors are able to explain a lot about the individual. The branding and marketing of a musician’s image will be further explored when looking at the relationship between rap music and youth culture.

A Brief History of Hip Hop Culture and Rap Music

“Hip hop emerged out of urban poverty to become one of the most vital cultural forces of the past century” (Bradley 2009: xiii).

Hip hop is a cultural movement that has brought about a great deal of change in America since the 1970s. Hip hop encompasses not only rap music, but also dj-ing, breakdancing, and graffiti artwork. “Today, when we speak of hip-hop culture, we are also referencing a hip-hop-specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility, and worldview” (Kitwana 2005: xii). Tricia Rose, a well-known sociologist and professor of Africana Studies, defines rap music in her pivotal work, *Black Noise*, as “a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” (1994: 2). Rap music is able to articulate the pleasures and the problems that stem from primarily disadvantaged African American communities, with themes that include gangs, gun violence, drug sales and abuse, prison, women and sex. Rappers also discuss the marginalization of the African American race, which “brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society”

(Rose 1994: 2). Rap music gives a voice to a young African Americans, who had previously been rendered mute by the White parent culture. The culture of hip hop came about relatively quickly, and rap music was able to take over as a dominant genre of music. Over the course of the past thirty years, “hip hop culture has gone from being a marginal New York subculture to being a phenomenon that has not only saturated mainstream America but has also had a massive impact at a global level” (Boyd 2002: 14). Unfortunately, many consumers and listeners are unaware of the full history behind hip hop culture and rap music.

Hip hop emerged from postindustrial urban America as “a cultural form that attempt[ed] to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community” (Rose 1994: 21). The tumultuous relationship between these social forces and African American cultural identity was central to the creation of hip hop culture, as were the conditions of New York City in the 1970s. At this time, cities across the nation were losing federal funding for social services and factories were closing to make way for luxury housing complexes. The job market was shrinking, there was limited affordable housing, and the people within the poorest neighborhoods had the least protection from these changes but were subject to the most harm. Despite the severity of the economic decline of New York City, in 1975 President Ford vetoed requests for a federal bailout, which would have alleviated the city’s bankruptcy. Drastic budget cuts were made, and over 60,000 city employees lost their jobs, which included the majority of the social and public service workers. There was great inequality within New York City, and “between 1978 and 1986, the people in the

bottom 20 percent of the income scale experience an absolute decline in income, whereas the top 20 percent experienced most of the economic growth” (Rose 1994: 28). This bottom 20 percent was disproportionately represented by African American and Hispanics, and between 25 and 30 percent of all African American and Hispanic families in New York City were living at or below the poverty line (Rose 1994). New York City became “sharply divided between an affluent, technocratic, professional white-collar group managing the financial and commercial life of an international city and an unemployed and underemployed service sector which [was] substantially Black and Hispanic” (Walkowitz 1990: 190). The disparity between upper class white-collar businessmen and lower class unemployed minorities made New York City resemble a Third World country (Walkowitz 1990).

However, the bankruptcy and social inequalities were not the only issues facing New York City. Between the late 1930s and 1970s, Robert Moses, a very powerful city planner, executed numerous projects to reshape New York City, which included the building of highways, public parks and housing projects. In 1959, Moses began to build the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which was designed to facilitate transit from New Jersey and Long Island into New York City. Like the majority of Moses’s public works projects, the Cross-Bronx Expressway benefited upper classes and impaired the poor. This only intensified the development of the vast economic and social inequalities that characterize contemporary New York. The construction cut through the center of densely populated working class areas of the Bronx, which called for the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings, and the ultimate downfall of the Bronx. “Where once apartment buildings or private homes had stood were now hills of rubble, decorated

with ripped-open bags of rotting garbage that had been flung atop them” (Caro 1974: 860). This destruction brought about the forced relocation of about 170,000 people, comprised mostly of Jews, Italians, Germans, Irish and African Americans from the working and lower middle classes (Rose 1994).

“Robert Moses, the most powerful modern urban builder of all time, led the white exodus out of the Bronx” (Chang 2005: 11). Businesses and apartment buildings were quickly vacated, and those who could afford to, moved to other sections of the Bronx or Westchester. As part of Moses’s “urban renewal” project, many Hispanic and African American families without options were abruptly relocated to the South Bronx, where there was an abundance of public housing but a lack of jobs (Chang 2005). The devastation to the region was pervasive, but politicians and the press gave up on the South Bronx. Without social services or jobs, violent gangs began forming throughout the Bronx, and “between 1973 and 1977, 30,000 fires were set in the South Bronx alone” (Chang 2005: 15). However, the disadvantaged youth growing up around such destruction and poverty were not going to sit back, unnoticed. “An enormous amount of creative energy was now ready to be released from the bottom of American Society” (Chang 2005: 82). Hip hop emerged from the devastation in the South Bronx, which has since been labeled “the home of hip hop culture” (Rose 1994: 30).

“Hip hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished” (Rose 1994: 34). Many of the individuals who emerged as hip hop artists had been trained for jobs that no longer existed, in fields that were not hiring, or positions that had been replaced by technological advancements and computers. At a time when

there were no jobs, no support systems, and no economic prospects, individuals were writing poetry, creating artwork, dancing, and making music to get by. To make money through their artwork, hip hop artists created new names for themselves and affiliated themselves with crews, to gain credibility. Crews were local groups that formed an identity and a support system for its members. Crews were often associated with a neighborhood, and the members would create new fashions, styles and techniques that were unique to their area. The goal, as expressed in an interview between Tricia Rose and Fab Five Freddy, an early rapper and graffiti artist, was “to develop a new style nobody can deal with” (Rose 1994: 38). This was done entirely for street credibility and reputation, because the pioneers of hip hop did not know that they could profit from their pleasure.

In addition to the aforementioned influences that brought about rap music, African American culture, stemming from Africa and the Caribbean, also had great influences on the style of the music that was being created. “Hip hop is propelled by Afrodiasporic traditions. Stylistic continuities in dance, vocal articulations, and instrumentation... [create] Afrodiasporic narratives” (Rose 1994: 25). The use of technology to create the unique sound that characterizes rap music, including sound processing, mixing, drum machines, sampling and other techniques, have been used in African American aesthetics since the early 1900s (Perry 2004). Rap music’s roots can be traced back to the telling of oral traditions in Africa and the Caribbean. Oral poetry has deep roots “in West Africa where the poet functioned as much as a musician as a wordsmith, weaving narrative verse around patterns of call-and-response with an active audience” (Bradley 2009: 23). Additionally, the beat-box style that is found in rap music

is reminiscent of the drumming that was used in Africa to pass messages across long distances (Perry 2004). The combination of Afrodiasporic traditions and social injustices influenced the creation of rap music that we know today.

Rap music developed in the South Bronx after graffiti artwork and breakdancing had already become popular. DJs provided the beats for breakdancers, the background music for graffiti artist gatherings, and other impromptu community parties. DJ Kool Herc has been credited with innovating rap music by using the instrumentals from other genres of music and combining them to make a unique beat. DJ Kool Herc was also known for the gigantic set of speakers that traveled with him playing his music, which were modeled after speakers used in the dance halls of his homeland, Jamaica (Rose 1994). While breakdancers were performing to the beats provided by Herc, he was writing rhyming poetry, and began projecting his lyrics with an echo chamber over the music. Local DJs would perform their music at clubs and would copy the songs onto cassette tapes, which traveled throughout the Bronx, and eventually, around the world. Following in Herc's path, DJs throughout New York created new techniques and styles to distinguish themselves. They were able to attract large crowds, who wanted to see the DJ perform, rather than the breakdancers or graffiti artists who once stole the show. Grandmaster Flash, an early innovator in the rap movement, would bring an extra microphone along with his equipment to inspire spontaneous audience member participation (Rose 1994). As rapping grew more popular, DJs began to form neighborhood crews of talented rappers that, similar to breakdance and graffiti crews, hosted parties, dances, and rap battles against other crews. "These parties and competitions lasted for several hours and required that the performers had a well-stocked

arsenal of rhymes and stories, physical stamina, and expertise” (Rose 1994: 56). Early rappers developed their own basic lyrical style, that mixed elements of street jargon and slang, their own personal experiences, and some humor to create simple verses that matched the beat provided by the DJ (Perkins 1996). Rapping, this new cultural phenomenon, was able to flourish in the otherwise destitute neighborhoods of the South Bronx.

Taking note of the consistently huge crowds that neighborhood rappers and DJs were drawing in, independently owned record labels began to sign and produce rap records. In 1979, Sylvia Robinson of Sugar Hill Records brought rap music into the public imagination (Bradley 2009). She founded and created the Sugar Hill Gang, a group of three young African American men from New Jersey, whose prior employment consisted of pizza deliveries and nightclub security (Bradley 2009). Their debut single, “Rapper’s Delight” was the first hip hop song to break into mainstream music, and by the early 1980s, “Rapper’s Delight” had sold several million copies and was at the top of the popular music charts (Rose 1994). The Sugar Hill Gang’s first song “reached number thirty-six on the U.S. charts and became the largest-selling twelve-inch record ever at the time” (Perkins 1996: 10). This was the first experience with hip hop culture for the majority of America, and many rappers have cited “Rapper’s Delight” as their first encounter with the unique sound and style of hip hop. Although “Rapper’s Delight” was not the first hip hop song, it was the first time that rap music was heard nationwide. Throughout the early 1980s, various small record labels began to produce rap singles and albums of artists such as Rakim, Public Enemy, L.L. Cool J, Salt N Pepa and more.

As rap music began to circulate the nation, rap artists were no longer solely coming from the South Bronx, but emerged from cities such as Houston, Boston, Miami and Los Angeles. The rap music from each region had its own unique style and local culture, which was portrayed by the vocabulary and themes within the music (Perry 2004). “During the late 1980s Los Angeles rappers from Compton and Watts, two areas severely paralyzed by the postindustrial economic redistribution developed a West Coast style of rap that narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life as a poor young, Black, male subject in Los Angeles” (Rose 1994: 59). Los Angeles had been known for Hollywood and the wealthy celebrities that lived there, but hidden behind the beauty was poverty, gang violence and instances of police brutality (Perry 2004). The regional style that emerged, known as gangsta rap, was specific to rappers such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Ice Cube. Regional styles also emerged from different parts of America, including the Midwest and the Southeast, incorporating some of the local culture and style into the music. As rap music grounded roots in various regions across the country, the audience grew and the popularity of the music as a dominant force that could not be stopped. In 1998, MTV (Music Television) declared that it was the “Year of Hip Hop” (Perry 2004), and shortly after, the cover of a February 1999 issue of *Time Magazine* declared America to be a “Hip Hop Nation” (Boyd 2002). Rap music had completed its transition into the mainstream and had saturated the American culture.

Today, when listening to “Rapper’s Delight” and other early rap music, it sounds a lot more like disco music of the 1970s than the rap music that is characteristic of the twenty first century. That is because rap is constantly changing to sound newer and better, and rappers have been known to reinvent their style to keep their audiences

coming back for more. It is incredible to think of the progression that has occurred in last thirty some odd years; rappers have moved from the streets of the South Bronx to headlining sold out concerts at Madison Square Garden. The effects of rap music can be seen in many facets of American culture. Many popular radio stations and MTV formerly refused to play rap music but now there are successful radio and television channels solely dedicated to playing rap music. Rappers perform at sold out concerts throughout America and the world, because rap music has been able to reach nearly every country. There are clothing lines, stores, and sneaker companies that create products to reflect hip hop culture. Successful rappers have linked themselves with alcoholic beverages, colognes, and other high-end commodities to perpetuate their image into daily American life. In short, hip hop is everywhere.

Rap Music's Influence on White Youth

"I think hip hop has bridged the culture gap. It brings white kids together with Black kids, brown kids and yellow kids. They all have something in common that they love." - DJ Kool Herc (Chang 2005: xi).

Rap music acquired national recognition not long after the Civil Rights Movement. Americans were learning to change their formerly racist ways, and were teaching their children to be accepting of all people. Regardless of race, America's youth embraced hip hop culture and rap music, incorporating the ideals learned in the classroom, that "all men are created equal." While the personal stories told through rap music did not always relate to adolescents from suburbia, the music gave a voice to the voiceless, and attracted listeners from all races and cultures. The music had a vast appeal

to the “5.5 million young people between 16 and 24 [that] were out of work, out of school and virtually dropping off the mainstream radar” (Kitwana 2005: xiv), because they were able to relate to the marginalization that the artists spoke of. “Many young Whites, facing bleak labor market prospects, were also eager for stories about fast money and authentic belonging to ward off a creeping sense of placelessness and dispossession” (Quinn 2005: 85-86). Today, teenagers vary from casual listeners to die hard fans to active participants rapping and breakdancing in their hometowns, but regardless of the type of fan, they have the ability to drive hip hop culture and break down racial barriers. Rap music’s consistent themes of political and social injustices can act as a source of information for adolescents. In an interview, Chuck D, an early pioneer in the rap movement said, “rap was the CNN of Black youth” (Wimsatt 1994: 14), informing them, and all listeners, of the current issues in America. In many ways, Chuck D was correct, because lyrics of rap music have the ability to inform the listeners of contemporary social and political issues, as well as the rapper’s opinion.

Hip hop music did not take over immediately after the release 1979 of “Rapper’s Delight.” The culture of hip hop was developing, but “outside of New York City, the hip hop nation was not yet born” (Chang 2005: 410). Noted magazine publications, like *The Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, began to print articles and features about the new genre of music. In 1988, two upper-middle class White, Jewish students from Harvard, David Mays and Jon Shecter, created a one page magazine about their favorite new rap songs. Mays and Shecter put together a mailing list to send to friends who wanted to discover new music, and quickly their magazine gained popularity across the country, with a following of 15,000 after two years. The magazine was called *The Source*, and

twenty-three years later it is one of the longest running and most well known hip hop publications. *The Source* reported on the hip hop culture and lifestyle, rather than just the music and entertainment, which was able to grab the attention of readers (Kitwana 2005). These two White Jews were so successful because they were not looking at hip hop from the outside; they were able to epitomize hip hop's attitude, because they saw themselves as "the only independent voice for the rap music industry" (Chang 2005: 414), and rap music was their lives.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, White youths were drawn towards the culture of hip hop. Hard rock and grunge music, like The Smashing Pumpkins and Pearl Jam, had been popular among White teens at this time, and was seen as a meaningful expression of rebellion (Blair 2002). Following the death of Nirvana's influential front man Kurt Cobain, grunge music began to decline, and teenagers looking for a new outlet turned to rap music. "Many viewed hip hop as an appealing antiestablishment culture" (Kitwana 2005: 26), that went against the culture of their parent's generation, and offered an exciting new way to rebel. Hard rock lost a lot of its defiant and rebellious fan base, and rap music became the replacement music of choice for many adolescents (Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley 2009). This was the first time that White adolescents had a significant representation in the audience of rap music. Magazines like *The Source* were able to reach thousands of readers and fans, who were very far removed from the ghettos of the South Bronx, but were interested in the lifestyle that hip hop offered. In addition to the White creators of that publication, some of the most popular rap music producers at the time, like Alchemist and Scott Storch, were White (Kitwana 2005). They were able to

draw upon their own backgrounds, and their love for hip hop culture, to reach the target audience which came from.

Rap music moved out of the inner cities and into the mainstream of popular culture. In the mid 1990s, hip hop was nearly impossible to ignore. The varying regional styles that emerged from New York and Los Angeles brought about a cross-country feud, that the media dubbed “the East Coast/West Coast war” (Kitwana 2005: 30). Notorious B.I.G and Puff Daddy of Bad Boy Entertainment represented the East Coast rappers and Tupac Shakur and producer Suge Knight of Death Row Records represented the West Coast rappers in this highly publicized duel (Keyes 2002). “The release of B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die* and Tupac’s two-volume CD *All eyes on Me* almost singlehandedly helped establish hip-hop as a staple of American culture. They would go on to become two of hip-hop’s most popular and best-selling artists of all time” (Kitwana 2005: 30). With the growing popularity of these rappers, and the constant media coverage of their cross-country rap battle, it was hard to ignore hip hop. Unfortunately, Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. were both murdered, six months apart, as a result of the violence stemming from their feud. Following their deaths, in 1996 and 1997, the East Coast versus West Coast war ended, but the national response was pervasive: they were infatuated with hip hop. Elite magazines and television programs began featuring rappers and hip hop stories, because they could no longer ignore the national news that hip hop was creating.

Beginning in the late 1980s, it was realized that middle-class White teenagers were an increasingly significant audience consuming rap music. In 2004, an issue of *Forbes* magazine titled “The Business of Hip Hop: A Billion-dollar Industry” reported

that the customer base of rap music “is the 45 million hip-hop consumers between the ages of 13 and 34, 80% of whom are White” (Watson 2004). Today, it is harder to gauge what percent of the consumer population is White versus Black, because of digital downloading from sources like iTunes, and illegal downloading from the Internet. Additionally, it is more common for a White listener to buy an album, and for a Black listener to share an album among all of his or her friends. The pass along rates of hip hop albums in primarily Black neighborhoods makes the exact breakdown of White versus Black record sales nearly impossible (Rose 2005). Regardless of the exact statistics, the hip hop industry has an incredible following in White, middle-class, suburban adolescents. This demographic has the disposable income and the desire to reject the culture of their parents that has made rap music a dominant genre in music today (Bennett 2000).

In addition to the sales of CDs and singles, other aspects of hip hop culture have benefited from the White adolescent consumer market. Television sitcoms such as the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and movies such as *Boys N the Hood* appeared as icons of Black culture and hip hop, marketed at mainstream America. Television networks, such as Black Entertainment Television, known as BET, were created to play rap music videos across the nation. MTV had once refused to play rap music but in the 1989 released a show, “Yo! MTV Raps,” which became one of its most popular programs (Rose 2005).

Fashion, in particular, has changed because of hip hop artists. Rappers have affiliated themselves with clothing lines, or created them as part of their media empire, such as FUBU, Rocawear, Ecko and Sean John. These brands succeeded as icons within the hip hop industry, however major fashion labels took note of their success and chose to

embrace the hip hop culture to expand their consumer market. “Black hip hop artists made brand names like Lees, Ralph Lauren, Pumas, Filas, Adidas, Timberland or Tommy Hilfiger must-have products for hip hop kids” (Kitwana 2005: 97). When a rapper mentioned one of these brand names in a song or wore one of these outfits in a music video, the effect was noticeable, and the boost in sales could not be denied (Kitwana 2005). Hip hop changed the style of dress across America, “which transformed sneakers and sweats from proletarian utility to high fashion” (Perkins 1996: vii). Overall, the presence of hip hop culture in music, television, movies, and fashion had an incredible impact on adolescents. The great success of rap music, and all of the mediums that hip hop culture has influenced, “convinced music industry executives that rap music, for all of its ‘Blackness’ in attitude, style, speech, music, and thematics, was a substantial success with White teenagers” (Rose 1995: 4). Hip Hop’s influence penetrated White culture, and impacted change in the youth culture of America.

One rapper that has a great influence on hip hop and White culture is Eminem. He grew up in one of Detroit’s working class neighborhoods, known as 8 Mile, with an inadequate mother and an absent father. He dropped out of high school after failing the ninth grade for a third time, and began rapping at the age of fourteen. The only difference between Eminem and the countless other aspiring rappers that share a similar background was his skin color: White. In 1997 Eminem was signed to Interscope Records, where he was linked up with Dr. Dre, a legendary rapper and producer. His first album, released in 1999, sold 300,000 copies in its first week. This was the first time that a White rapper was taken seriously and discussed for his “rap skills” (Boyd 2002: 23). His success was based on his “in-your-face confrontational rap style rooted in his freestyle rap battle

beginnings” (Kitwana 2005: 139), which only fueled the controversy that surrounded Eminem as an artist. Despite winning eleven Grammy awards throughout his career, Eminem is White, and “bound to be considered suspect by Blacks” (Kitwana 2005: 139). Eminem faced criticisms from the gay community about his homophobia and the American mainstream community about his lyrical themes of rape, murder, and incest (Keyes 2002). Eminem also faced critics in the parents of his fans, the Black community, and various other organizations that reject his message and his persona, but he is still one of the most successful rappers today. His paramount success can be seen in his record and movie sales, and the millions of fans that emulate his style and rap along to his lyrics. Although he is one of the few successful White rappers, his very existence perpetuates the influence of rap music on White youth culture, and many young aspiring White rappers look up to him and his success.

In regards to Eminem, and nearly all other rappers, parents of rap-loving youths have been concerned about the content and message that the lyrics, music videos, and lifestyles of rappers project on their children. Rap music began as an outlet for marginalized urban youths to project their dissatisfaction with the political and social order. Lyrics ranged in themes from drug sales and abuse to violence to sexual references, all of which are alien to the suburban white adolescents listening to the music. “Tipper Gore has repeatedly said that rap music appeals to ‘angry, disillusioned, unloved kids’ and that it tells them it is ‘okay to beat people up’” (Dyson 2004: 62). Parents tried to shield their children from the growing hip hop culture, but in many ways their efforts were useless. Hip hop was able to reach their children through radio, television, movies, the Internet and other media sources, as well as their children’s peers. Perry argues that

“part of the seduction of rap for mainstream America, particularly White young people, lies in its iconoclasm in relation to White American cultural norms. It is Other, it is hard, and it is deviant” (2004: 136). The influence of hip hop can be seen in nearly every aspect of youth culture, including language, mannerisms, fashion, style and attitude.

Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, and Reed (1995) examined the exposure of African American youths to nonviolent rap music, and its influence on teen dating violence. They viewed teen dating violence as a serious issue in America, and saw the “negative depictions and treatment of women in ‘rap music’ lyrics and videos” (Johnson et al 1995: 598) as one possible influence on adolescents. Johnson et al conducted an experiment with sixty African American males and females, ages eleven to sixteen, though the genders were separate. An experimental group watched eight rap videos that did not contain any violent imagery or lyrics. The experimental group and a control group were then combined to read a passage that depicted a situation involving a teen couple, and an act of dating violence. The adolescents answered a question about their attitudes towards the use of violence against women. Johnson et al found that “exposure to nonviolent rap videos affects perceptions of the acceptability of teen dating violence” (1995: 602). The female subjects in the experiment who were exposed to the videos, reported a higher level of acceptance of teen dating violence than the females in the control group. The male experimental and control group were found to have similar levels of acceptance, however the authors note that perhaps the nonviolent rap videos were not extreme enough to alter the previously held attitudes. I wonder how this study would have turned out if the adolescents were White rather than African American.

Rap and hip hop are still a relatively new subject matter among academics. The following study will look at information obtained from a number of interviews and surveys with Union College students, to gain perspective into the way that rap music and hip hop culture have affected their lives. This study will work to uncover the relationship between rap music and White youth culture. From these interviews and surveys, this researcher will gain insight as to the power that hip hop has which can influence the way one feels about race, gender roles, and other pressing topics that adolescents face on a regular basis. The themes and lyrics of rap music will be examined, to determine if the violence, sex, and drug use has an effect on the attitudes and opinions of adolescents. The presence of hip hop culture in fashion, style, language and other aspects of youth culture is pervasive, but in what way are the youths aware of its presence? This thesis and the interviews and surveys conducted will only scratch at the surface of the true effect of rap music on White youth culture.

Chapter Two: Research Methods

Most contemporary research on rap music focuses on those who create the music, however this thesis looks to the audience of the rap music. When writing this thesis, my goal was to uncover all that I could about the relationship between White youth culture and Rap music. In order to study this connection, I conducted interviews at Union College. The interviews asked participants thirteen questions pertaining to the subject of music and more specifically rap music. I chose to administer interviews, to gain insight into the opinions of a few individuals. Additionally, I administered a survey to Union College students that asked twelve questions pertaining to music and rap music. By using

a survey, I was able to ask a large number of people questions about rap music quickly and conveniently. This made it possible to have a pool of data in which I could compare answers and analyze the responses. By using surveys and interviews, I was able to have a large amount of data as well as in depth interviews about specific topics.

Through my research I set out to illustrate the ways in which rap music and hip hop culture pertains to the every day American citizen. There is a deep sociological and cultural significance, but I wanted that significance to be understood by those who are not interested in rap and are not fans of the music. I want my research to remain academic and educational, but when it comes down to it, music is entertainment, and I wanted this study to appeal to the entertainment side of rap music. Often times when reading academic research, we get lost in erudite verbose sentences that mask the true meaning of the study and hide the intentions of the researcher. I wanted to ensure that my research steered clear of such practices because I want it to be widely read and understood. Though some adults criticize rap music, much of their complaints focus on their inability to understand the lyrics and the message hidden behind the beats and the fast paced style that characterizes much of the genre. However, when stripped down, rap music is poetry in its most simple form, combining rhyme schemes and figurative language to provoke feelings and emotions (Perry 2004). Therefore, I think that it is most appropriate to approach rap music as a poetic form of entertainment, and to try to make it more widely understood by those who are critical of it. Additionally, I want to be able to relate to the fans of rap music, and provide them with an academic understanding, that they may not have previously thought to explore. I want my readers to walk away with a new outlook

on rap music, but also with new questions that remain unanswered, because that is how I am walking away from my research.

Population and Sample

I originally chose to focus on White youth culture, because it is the population that I am a part of, and the population that I find to be incredibly interesting. Additionally, the genre of rap music is relatively new compared to other musical genres, and over the course of my lifetime, as I developed into an adult, I witnessed the development of the genre into what it is today. College students are at the height of their independence, recently released from the protective care of their parents, and are in the process of exploring new opportunities en route to their adult lives. More specifically, the student body at Union College, a small, private, liberal arts college, is 84% White, primarily coming from suburban, upper-middle class backgrounds. Although this is not the audience that most people think of when discussing rap music, this is the population that I chose to study, because of their upbringings. Despite the diverse minority population at Union College, I only interviewed White students, because the White youth opinion on rap music is underrepresented in academic research, especially compared with the predominantly White audiences that rap music is able to attract. I also wanted the interviewees to examine rap music as a White individual, closely looking at the White involvement in rap music, and their own personal relationships with the Black community. The students that I chose to interview were not selected at random. Rather, they were selected because they are all White adolescents that are involved in rap music

in one way or another. The interviewees ranged from avid fans of rap music to rappers themselves, but they all share a common passion and a connection to the music.

Interviews

The Union College Human Subjects Review Board approved all the questions asked in my interviews. Additionally, all interviewees were required to read and sign an Informed Consent Form [See Appendix A]. This briefed them on the subject matter of the questions and informed them that their participation in the study was voluntary, their responses would remain confidential, and they had the ability to omit any questions without penalty. I tried to keep the interview brief, however the questions were intentionally arranged to increase their level of thinking about the subject matter as the interview progressed. A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix B. I conducted the interviews in a casual setting to try to provoke candid and honest answers, rather than structured rigid responses that are often associated with interviews. I also gave the participants ample time to think about their responses and elaborate, rather than attempting to rush them through each answer. I wanted to make sure that during the interviews I passed no judgment and was completely unbiased. Also, with the consent of the interviewee, I recorded the conversation while jotting down notes, so that I would be able to fully listen to their answers rather than struggling to write down what they had just said.

Before asking any questions, I had the interviewee state their name, age, race, and gender, to provide a little background information. The first question states, “What is your favorite kind of music?” I left this question open ended, because although this study

focuses on rap, there are many other genres of music that these individuals may be more favorable towards. The next question asked, “What is your opinion of rap music?” Again, I left this question open to allow the individual to think about the genre as a whole and to see what information they wanted to divulge in these preliminary questions. The third question asked, “How often do you listen to rap music? And in what settings?” This question allows me to understand what kind of a fan they are, and how deeply involved in rap music the interviewee really is. I wanted these introductory questions to loosen up the individual, and allow them to start the process of uncovering their attitudes and feelings towards rap music. Next I asked, “Can you relate to rap music in regards to the lyrics and themes?” Although this question may seem blunt, I wanted to know if the interviewee felt a connection to the message that the music was addressing. Many White fans of rap music feel that they cannot relate to the recurring themes of violence and drug use found in the lyrics of rap music, however I wanted to know if the individuals being interviewed were able to see past the surface to the underlying message of the music. The next question asked, “Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?” This question gave me insight into the type of rap music that they prefer, whether it is old school, underground, mainstream, or any of the other subcategories that comprise the genre of rap. Also, it may be easy to think of one’s favorite artist or song, but when asked “why?” the individual needs really think about what it is that attracts them to that song or that artist and why they are a fan. This question was devised to expose the interviewee and make them delve further into their interest in rap. The sixth question closely follows the previous one by asking, “What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?” The purpose of this question is to

understand how they are able to relate to the music, and if they have internalized any of the themes of rap music. In my personal experience with rap music, there are lyrics that I have heard and consequently had to pause the music to think about. These are lyrics that have incredible meaning, and have remained with me because of their significance and because of their clever wit. I wanted the interviewees to reveal whether or not they had similar experiences with pervasive passages in rap lyrics.

In an attempt to delve even deeper, the next question asks the interviewee to reflect on themselves stating, “How do you think rap music has affected you?” This was posed to have the individual look at their lives and comment on the way that rap music has impacted who they are as a White youth. I also was curious to know whether or not the interviewees even realized the influence that rap music has had on their lives. The following question asks the interviewee to reflect on the influence of rap music as a whole. “All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?” There is no denying the controversy that surrounds the genre of rap music, and the negative way that rap has been portrayed. I wanted to see whether or not the interviewee could highlight both the positive and negative attributes of the genre. Also, I wanted to understand their point of view as fans of the genre, rather than the publicized opinion of the greater population.

I chose my interview population based on their involvement in some aspect of rap music. The next question asks, “What is it that you do that relates to rap music?” I wanted them to explain to me how they are involved in rap, what they do, how they do it, and how it relates to their interest in the genre. Some of these individuals are pursuing careers in music while others are just entertaining a hobby, but in all situations they are

involved in rap music first hand, and their participation is an integral part of hip hop culture. Some lyrics of rap music trace the progression of the artist from the street corner to the stage, but they are sending a message and encouraging their fans to try it too. The following question asks, “What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music?” This question allows me to look into the past of the individual and try and understand what it is that brought them to where they are today. All of the interviewees are participating in rap music, but I wanted to uncover what made them take that step from a listener to an active participant.

The following three questions make an attempt to address the issue of race in relation to rap music. It is no surprise that rap music is predominantly comprised of Black artists, but I chose to focus my study on White youths to see if race was a factor in rap music, or if it even mattered. First I asked, “Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the Black community? If so, how?” I wanted to know if their involvement in rap music has altered their outlook on the Black community and race relations. I also was curious to know if these individuals had multi-racial friend circles as a result of their passion for rap music. The next question asked, “It has been said that rap music has helped to mend race relations. Do you agree or disagree? Why?” Although this question is somewhat dense, I wanted to know if the interviewees saw an impact on race relations coming from rap music and the heightened presence of rap artists in the media. There is no doubt in my mind that rap music played a role in the election of America’s first black President, Barack Obama. Perhaps some readers may view this statement as too strong, but I would wonder if we would have a Black President in a world with no rap music. In the 1995 song “Changes,” Tupac Shakur rapped, “we ain’t ready to see a Black president,” but in

the last sixteen years some aspect of race relations changed to make his statement false. The final race related question asked, “A fair number of people are critical of the White involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize White involvement in rap music?” I asked this question to uncover their opinions on the White involvement in rap music, and to see if they had ever experienced any backlash due to their participation in rap. Also, I wanted to see if they would be able to compose an argument in favor of the need for White involvement in rap music.

The final question that I asked in my interviews was, “After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?” I purposely wanted to leave the interviewee thinking about rap music and even questioning their drive and their passion. I wanted to see if they had any final remarks about rap music, or if they had any different expectations of what the interview would entail. This question also allowed the interviewee to ask me, the interviewer, any questions or ideas that were on their minds. After each interview, I quickly debriefed the individual about their involvement in the study, and encouraged them to contact me if they had any further questions or comments related to the interview.

Through these interviews, I gained a new perspective and understanding on the importance of hip hop culture and rap music. After each interview, I found myself thinking about these questions, and coming up with new questions to be asked. I also made an effort to listen to rap music after each interview, to see if anything had changed in my own experience with rap music. For all of the interviewees, rap music is part of

their lives every single day, as a listener or as an active participant. Because of this, I took note of the language they used and the style of clothing that they chose. The insight that I gained from these interviews only furthered my beliefs that hip hop culture is everywhere. It also reinforced my theory that rap music creates a powerful connection, not only between the rapper and the audience, but on a personal level it is able to connect fans to each other.

Surveys

To administer the surveys, I contacted two sociology professors that I had previously developed relationships with. One taught Introduction to Sociology and the other taught History of Sociological Thought, an upper level course, required for all sociology majors and minors. The professors were emailed beforehand, and permission to conduct my research was granted. These two classes were chosen because of the large number of students in each one, to create a large enough sample size. The students enrolled in an Introduction to Sociology course have some background of knowledge of sociology, and the students in the upper level course would have an extensive knowledge of sociology. It was also considered that they might be more willing to participate in the survey, because the classes were in the same department as is this thesis. These classes also provided a sample population that varied in ages, comprised of Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors. While the students in the classes do represent Union College, they are both in the sociology discipline, and therefore the sample was restricted to this department, and did not include students that participate in a variety of other academic departments. It also is important to remember that students at Union College

are not necessarily representative of America's youth as a whole. Students at Union are highly privileged and come from a strong academic background.

The Union College Human Subjects Review Board also approved all the questions asked in my surveys. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix C. Additionally, the participants were briefed about the subject matter of the surveys. The top of the survey has a brief paragraph stating the purpose of the surveys and that the survey is confidential and anonymous. Also, the survey is optional and participants can stop taking the survey at any time and can omit any questions. I also gave my name and email address, if the participant has any further questions or comments regarding the survey or the subject matter. I tried to keep the surveys brief by making the majority of the questions multiple choice. The questions posed were arranged to gradually increase the participants' level of thinking about rap music as they progressed. Before handing out the surveys, a brief introduction was given, explaining the purpose of their participation and the topic of the study. Each participant was given the same survey, with the identical information, questions, and directions. The questionnaire was given to every student in the class, and they were allotted unlimited time to complete the questions. I allowed all participants to place their completed survey in a manila envelope to ensure the anonymity of all students involved in this study.

I am using the survey as a tool to collect data from a large sample of students, however I am trying to ask similar questions that I asked in the interviews. Although the questions are posed differently, they are related to the interview questions. Nearly all of the questions in the survey are multiple choice. The preliminary questions allow me to get an understanding of the participants' background. The first question in the survey

asks, “What is your class year?” with answer options of 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. This question allows me to analyze the breakdown of my participants by their year of graduation from Union College. The next question asks, “What is your gender?” with response options of male or female. This gives me insight into the gender of the participant and can help me to analyze differences in opinions based on gender. The third question asks, “What race/ethnicity are you?” with options of White, Black, Hispanic, Asian and Other (please specify). This allows me to analyze the answers provided based on the race of the respondent. Also, I can compare the racial breakdown of my participants to the population of students at Union College, to see if the sample is representative of the student body. Finally, although the interviews were only conducted with White students, the surveys were conducted in sociology classes, which are racially diverse. Therefore, this question allows me to open up my understanding of rap music to its influence on more than just the White student population.

The fourth question asks respondents about their opinions on various different genres of music. It states, “Describe how you feel about the following genres of music on the following scale.” The respondent must check the box next to one of the following options, Dislike a lot, Dislike, Neutral, Like, or Like a lot. These options are placed next to these genres of music: Pop, Rock, Rap, Country, Electronic, and Other (please specify). This question is asked to get a general idea of the participants’ opinions on different genres of music. Although this study focuses on rap music, many individuals enjoy different genres of music and may have more than one favorite genre. Also, I provide a space for the individual to write in their own response, if their favorite genre is not listed.

The following question attempts to uncover the participants' opinion on rap music in an unconventional way. It asks, "If you are sitting in a car listening to the radio, and a rap song comes on, what are you most apt to do?" The respondent can choose one of the following: Turn off the radio, Make the volume lower, Make the volume higher, or Sing along because you know every word. This allows the participant to imagine himself or herself in a situation where rap music is involved, and gives them the opportunity to take action. Their actions are another way for me to understand their true feelings about rap music. The following question asks, "What is your opinion of rap music?" with response options of, I like it a lot, I like it somewhat, I have neutral feelings, I dislike it somewhat, and I dislike it a lot. This is restating the previous two questions about rap music, to try and see if the respondent is consistent with their responses of their opinions about rap music.

Next, the survey asks, "How often do you listen to rap music?" The respondent can choose one of the following responses: At least several hours a day; Every day, but no more than an hour a day; A few hours a week; About an hour a week or so each week; Less than an hour a week; Never. This question gives me insight into the individual's habits about listening to rap music, and provides me with further understanding of what type of a fan they are. The following question asks, "If you do listen to rap music, where do you usually listen? (Mark all that apply)" The respondents can choose from the following: In the car, At the gym, At a party, In my room, In the library, Other (please specify). This question gives me perspective about where the individual is listening to rap music, and whether it is a public or private experience. Also, by allowing the respondent

to check as many answers as they feel necessary, I can gauge a better perspective about their listening habits.

The eighth question is the only question that is not multiple choice. Part A asks, “Who is your favorite rap artist, if you have one?” This allows me to understand what type of rap music they are most interested in, whether it is more mainstream, underground, old school, or any other variety of rap music. Part B asks, “What is it that makes them your favorite?” This question makes the respondent think about exactly what it is that draws them to rap music and to their favorite rap artist. There is ample space provided for the participant to give a well thought out yet concise response to the question.

The final three questions all relate to the influence that rap music has on its listeners. The first asks, “Which of the following describes rap music’s influence on its listeners?” The respondent can choose an answer from the following: All positive, Somewhat positive, Neutral, Somewhat negative, All negative. This question will provide me with insight about the respondent’s opinion about rap music and its influence. I want to try and uncover their true feelings, and understand their opinions on rap music. The next question asks, “What do you see as the most positive aspect of rap music?” The respondent can choose from the following: Freedom of speech, Mending race relations, Exposing the world to the struggles of the inner city, An outlet for disadvantaged youths, Other (please specify). These responses are similar to the responses that were provided in the interviews. I tried to touch upon various different positive aspects that people have cited in relation to rap music. I also allowed the respondent to write in their own answer if they see a different positive aspect of rap music. The final question in the survey asks,

“What do you see as the most negative aspect of rap music?” The respondent can chose their answer from the following: Themes of violence, Themes of misogyny, Commercialization, Themes of drug use, Other (please specify). In this question, I also tried to touch upon a variety of different opinions on the negative aspects of rap music. I drew some of these answers from the interviews that were conducted, as well as some of the negatives that are highlighted in the media. Additionally, I allowed the respondent to write in their own answer if they felt there was a different negative aspect of rap music.

The use of surveys has proven to be very beneficial in gaining insight into the opinions of rap music of a wide variety of Union College students. I was able to touch upon individuals from all classes, Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior as well as all genders and ethnicities. From the classes surveyed, 34.8% were Seniors, 24.2% were Juniors, 4.5% were Sophomores, and 36.4% were Freshmen. 89.4% of respondents identified themselves as White, 6.1% Black, 1.5% Asian, and 3% Black and White. Additionally, 30.3% were male and 69.7% were female. While the surveys reached a variety of students from Union College, the same cannot be said for the in depth interviews that were conducted. Therefore, a combination of both the interviews and the surveys was able to provide me with a great deal of data and information on the influence of rap music on White youth culture.

Analyzing the Data

The following chapters outline the analysis of the data that was collected through in depth interviews and surveys. They examine the similarities and differences of the answers provided by Union College students.

Chapter Three: Analysis of the Interviews

Overview of the Interviews

The interviews that I conducted as one part of data collection for this thesis were quite interesting and rich with information. The individuals that I interviewed were all students of Union College, between the ages of twenty and twenty-two, who are all fans of rap music. Each of these students were involved in rap music in one way or another: three male students worked on writing their own rap lyrics and freestyles, one male student had experience as a DJ, one female student was involved in hip hop dance, one female student used rap music to relate to inner-city youths, and one male student created a music blog that is updated several times each day. Additionally, all of these students are White. Through the use of interviews, I was able to gain insight into the lives and true feelings of these seven students. The following is a brief profile of each of the individuals that I interviewed and an overview of their responses. The names of all interviewees have been changed for confidentiality purposes. Transcriptions of the interviews can be found in Appendix D.

Jason is a twenty-year-old White, Jewish, male from the Upper West Side of New York City. Before attending Union College, he attended a private high school in the Riverdale area of the Bronx. Jason is involved in rap music as an avid fan and also as a freestyle rapper for personal enjoyment and entertainment. With an entrepreneurial spirit and mind, he was able to organize an Afroman concert for himself and his friends. He was also a part of the performance when he got on stage and rapped with his friend as the opening act. Jason's favorite rapper is Notorious B.I.G. and his favorite song is "Big Poppa." For Jason, the lyrics, and the meanings behind the lyrics, is the most influential

aspect of rap music. Listening to rap music and writing his own lyrics to freestyle has become a type of therapy for Jason. “For me it embodies my mind and psyche and how I feel now. And I know I’ll listen to them in the future and think wow I was a crazy kid. But I guess it’s my way of writing a diary.” Jason also explained to me that when listening to rap music, one needs to look beyond the surface of the lyrics to realize what the artist is really trying to say. He quoted a Notorious B.I.G. song, “Me and My Bitch,” when explaining that rap lyrics may have significant undertones that one may not understand when first listening to a song. This song discusses a woman that is comfortable around gambling, drugs, and guns, and Notorious B.I.G. can see himself falling in love with her because she is beautiful but also comfortable with his lifestyle. For Jason, rap music is a personal and individual experience but can also be an entertaining and social experience. Most importantly, Jason noted that rap music has “really influenced my values and who I try to become.”

Tyler is a twenty one year old White male from Scarsdale, New York, a wealthy suburb of New York City. Tyler attended public high school, and now he plays on the Union College men’s soccer team and is a die-hard fan of rap music. Tyler’s older brother, a DJ, introduced him to rap music, and got him involved in DJing as well. While helping his brother DJ, Tyler was able to forge a strong relationship with rap music and his older brother. Tyler’s favorite rappers are Big L and 50 Cent, and his favorite song is “Put It On” by Big L. Similar to Jason, Tyler also finds the lyrics and meanings of rap music to be incredibly important and influential. He noted that many rappers talk about their lives and past experiences, and how it influenced them to become who they are today. Their pasts may include criminal lifestyles such as drugs, gangs and violence, but

it has shaped who the artist is and what message they are trying to get across to their listeners. When discussing lyrics, Tyler also highlighted the freestyle lyrics and “punch lines” of rap songs that made him laugh and put him in a good mood. “Just a bunch of those lines that you hear them and you’re like holy shit how did you come up with that?” Tyler is also very interested in the lives of the rappers, outside of just their music and lyrics. He has read autobiographies of his favorite rappers, and keeps up with their blogs and twitters to stay involved. Although Tyler says he cannot directly relate to all of rap music, he feels that without the presence of rap music in his life, “I would be a lot different of a person.”

Brandon is a twenty one year old White male from Providence, Rhode Island. He attended a private Quaker high school, and has played on the Union College tennis and lacrosse teams. Brandon was initially introduced to rap music by his older brother, but latched onto the raw talent, the flow of the beats, and the rhymes of the lyrics. Brandon’s favorite rappers are Obie Trice and Tupac but his favorite song is “My First Song” by Jay-Z. He was attracted to Eminem because “when I was growing up if I was angry at my parents or angry at something you could always relate to what he was saying, ‘cause he was just an angry White kid too.” Although rap music is still one of Brandon’s favorite genres of music, he dislikes where the genre of rap music is today. He is critical of the commercialization of rap and the artists that discuss money and cars rather than lyrics that are creative or of substance. To combat this issue, Brandon and a few friends created a music blog where they upload new songs every day from artists that are mostly unknown or underground. “It allows artists to get exposed [and] in the process, everyone else gets to explore new music.” The website features rap music as well as electronic;

mash ups, a genre of music created by blending two or more previously recorded songs; dubstep, a type of electronic dance music that is known for its overwhelming bass; and other up and coming genres. Revenues are brought in through advertisements as well as promotional parties that Brandon and his friends put together to spread excitement about the music that is featured on their website. Brandon is also writing his senior Economics thesis on music, something that stemmed from his love of rap. When I asked Brandon about how rap music has affected him he replied, “I am a lover of music because of it. I probably want to make a career in music.”

Ryan is a twenty one year old White, Jewish, male from Scarsdale, New York, the same hometown and public high school as Tyler. Similar to Brandon, Ryan plays on the Union College men’s tennis team. Ryan’s favorite rapper is Jay-Z, and his favorite song is the same as Brandon’s, “My First Song,” by Jay-Z. Ryan was introduced to rap music by his childhood best friend, Peter, who loved the sounds and the beats that came from rap music. Peter introduced Ryan to the intricate details of the music, and what set some producers, like Dr. Dre or Pharell Williams, apart from the rest. As an English major who has experimented with writing his own rap songs, Ryan values the lyrics of rap music and compares the poetry of Jay-Z to that of William Shakespeare and Alan Ginsburg. He finds that rap music is able to tap into his emotions, and there is always a song to match what he is feeling. When writing his own rap music, Tyler finds that he is able to release all of his feelings and emotions, and tell everyone exactly what is on his mind. “It teaches kids to speak out when other people, really when society as a whole, might tell you what you have to say is not appropriate.” Unfortunately, Tyler does not believe his voice or “swagger” are on par with the successful rappers of today, which keeps his involvement

in rapping as more of a hobby rather than a potential career. However, Ryan will continue to pursue this hobby because of his love for rap music and the feeling that comes from the emotional release of freestyling and creating lyrics.

Sam is a twenty two year old White male from New Haven, Connecticut, who attended private high school and plays on the Union College men's soccer team. Sam's favorite rappers are Notorious B.I.G. and Common, but his favorite songs are "Lights" by Ellie Goulding, and "This is Life" by Jim Jones. Similar to Brandon, Sam is critical of the commercialization of rap music. He feels that everything being played on the radio sounds the same in an attempt to attract a mainstream audience, and "the things that are most popular are not going to be the most creative." Like Ryan, Sam writes his own rap lyrics, which has led him to produce three mix-tapes of his original rap, and he is in the process of creating one more. Sam views writing rhymes and freestyles as a mental exercise that helps him to express his feelings. Because he writes his own lyrics, Sam values lyrics within songs that are trying to get across an underlying message. "There's things that they say that I maybe wont even grasp the first time but after a couple listens you'll actually find meaning, or even just make meaning to your own life from it. So I think it's important to try and gain something from the songs and the lyrics." Overall, Sam feels that rap music has helped him to shape his priorities. It has also introduced him to a new version of the American Dream. He finds that many rappers discuss their dreams and things that they hope to accomplish, and many of them have been able to make their dreams become a reality. "It's almost like saying it into existence." The drive for success found in rap music has allowed Sam to relate to many of his favorite artists, and has helped him to reach his own goals.

Mackenzie is a twenty one year old White female from Montclair, New Jersey, who attended a private high school prior to Union College. She became exposed to rap music through popular media channels like radio and television. Mackenzie's favorite artist is Dr. Dre and her favorite song is Dr. Dre and Eminem's "Forgot About Dre." In high school, Mackenzie was involved in a hip hop dance company in Newark, New Jersey, an inner-city nearby but vastly unlike her suburban hometown. Most of the other dancers in the company were African American, and were all avid fans of rap music. "That opened my eyes up to a lot of new songs that I hadn't heard on the mainstream radio and TV stations. I was able to learn new styles of dance through this experience...there are so many dances that stem from hip hop music." Mackenzie views rap music as a common link that can connect people from different economic, social and cultural backgrounds, and introduce people to different lifestyles. "Music and art don't discriminate. Anyone from any race can get involved." Unlike most of my other interviews, Mackenzie listens to rap music for the beat and the music, paying little attention to the lyrics and themes; Perhaps this because of her extensive background in dance. Mackenzie primarily listens to rap music for entertainment purposes, but "most of what these rappers are saying just isn't on the same level that I am on."

Laura is a twenty two year old White, Jewish, female from Livingston, New Jersey. She attended public high school before coming to Union College. Although Laura is not directly involved in creating rap music, she is a passionate fan, and she has used rap music while volunteering in inner-city schools. She used her interest in rap music to try to connect to the girls that she was working with, because they did not have many commonalities to relate over. Laura's favorite rapper is Lil Wayne and her favorite song

is “Renegade” by Jay-Z and Eminem. Laura is drawn to rap music by the honesty found in the lyrics and the courage that it takes “to get in front of an audience and share your innermost feelings.” Laura feels that she can relate to the underlying message found in some rap songs, but “sometimes it takes a few times of listening to the same song over and over again before you really get what they are trying to say.” Similar to Mackenzie, Laura was exposed to rap music by watching MTV music videos in second grade while her parents were not around. One of Laura’s favorite hobbies is to create a great playlist of rap music; “It just has the ability to change my mood and calm me down.”

Analysis of the Interviews

By using qualitative in-depth interviews, I was able to study the impact of rap music on White youth. Throughout the seven interviews, I found some commonalities, and some disparities. For example, while all of these individuals are involved in rap music and are fans of the genre, the way that they were introduced to rap music differs. The following is a discussion of the overarching themes that were discussed in some or all of the interviews conducted, and the sociological theories that can help to explain the responses.

Nice to meet you, Rap Music

For many people, it is hard to pin-point the exact moment that they were first introduced to a new genre of music; however, this task was simple for Laura. “My family was moving the summer before second grade, so I was left alone a lot. I just remember watching MTV, because no one was around to tell me I couldn’t, and Notorious B.I.G.

came on with his video for ‘Hypnotize.’ I loved the beat. I loved the song. I was like dancing alone in my living room. I think that got me hooked.” For Laura, this first interaction with the genre of rap music has stayed with her, because it was a new experience that introduced her to something that would soon become her favorite genre of music. Because of the strong influence from the media, one can use the theory of postmodernism to explain Laura’s first experience with rap music. Postmodernism is a theory of sociology that highlights the aggressive expansion of capitalism, technology and mass media. This focuses on the role of advertising in society. Postmodernism can help to explain the impact that media channels had on Laura and other interviewees. Similarly, Jason experienced rap through media influences. “I started delving into rap...when I saw *Hardball* (2001) in the movie theatres and I heard the song ‘Big Poppa’ because that just made me think ‘Wow this is incredible.’ And then I immediately did research. And Biggie Smalls to this day is like still by far my favorite rapper.” Sam’s first experiences with rap music also began with Notorious B.I.G. “I guess by being introduced to the best from the start you want to emulate [him]...if you’re around someone whose really talented, you’re hopefully going to pick up something.” Although Mackenzie did not specify an exact memory, she too became infatuated with rap music by listening to the radio and watching television shows. Brandon felt that he was “submerged in the culture” of hip hop: “I would go home from school and watch BET (Black Entertainment Television) every day. Freestyle Fridays, 106 and Park, Rap City Basement.” In this postmodern society, rap music was able to influence these individuals at an early age through popular media channels, including radio, television and movies.

Another way that individuals can be introduced to rap music is through sibling or peer-to-peer relationships. Tyler was introduced to rap music by his older brother, who was working to become a DJ. Together, they would go to the record store to get new music, and “he would let me scratch with him on the turntables. I wasn’t that good but he let me do whatever I wanted to do.” This was a way for Tyler and his brother to become closer and spend time together, while bonding over their shared interest in rap music. Similarly, Brandon was introduced to rap music by his older brother. “He’s the one that got me into rap music. And then I just loved listening to stuff with him when I was younger.” The influence of an older sibling on a younger sibling is incredibly powerful during adolescence. One can look to Herbert Blumer’s *Society as Symbolic Interaction* (1969) to explain the way that Tyler and Brandon were each influenced by their older siblings. Blumer says “each individual aligns his action to the action of others by ascertaining what they are doing or what they intend to do” (1969: 82). A younger sibling is likely to witness the actions of their older sibling, and attempt to mimic or copy their actions. The idea of imitation could also be related to Georg Simmel’s “Fashion” (1957), that argues, “fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation” (453). Simmel believes that the individual of the lower class, or in this case the younger sibling, would try to copy the actions or fashions of the upper class, or the older sibling. In turn, this would further reinforce the power that the older sibling has in their relationship.

Ryan was introduced to rap music by his best friend, Peter. “He’s exactly as you’d describe me. A Jewish kid wearing khakis who decided, ‘I love making hip hop beats, I love producing these songs, I love putting these sounds together to do these incredible

things.” Peter helped Ryan to break down rap music and listen to the intricacies within the beat that allowed him to differentiate the great rappers from “your average guy in the business whose just throwing out...any of the bullshit you hear.” Ryan’s newfound understanding of rap music combined with his interest in poetry and writing, allowed him to embrace rap music and take on the challenge of creating his own rap music. Additionally, Jason credits one of his Black friends from elementary school with helping to introduce him to rap music. He would always sing random songs and Jason recalled, “I think one of the first songs I ever learned was like, ‘Stop. Drop. Shut ‘em down open up shop.’ Only because he would sing it... I thought it was cool.” Peer-to-peer relationships are quite influential in the development of a youth’s identity, and these individuals attribute some of their interest in rap music to their peers. Simmel’s theories can also apply to the influence and imitation that peers can have on one another. The fashion, rap music, was introduced to the individual from an outside source. “Because of their external origin, these imported fashions create a special and significant form of socialization which arises through mutual relation” (Simmel 1957: 545). Ryan and Jason were each introduced to rap music through an external source, a peer, which caused the genre to peak their interest and maintain a lasting impact.

For both Ryan and Jason, and Tyler and Brandon, the influences upon them come from another individual, whether it was a sibling or a peer. George Herbert Mead’s theories can help to explain these social interactions; “After all, what one does is determined by what other persons are doing” (Mead 1962: 181). This identification between the self and the other can be described as teamwork. Tyler and his brother acted as a team when they performed as DJs. Peter helped Ryan to understand the breakdown

of rap music, and as a team they were able to appreciate the complexities together. Regardless of the exact way in which these individuals were introduced to rap music, the influences that come from rap have proven to be long lasting.

Lyrics of Rap Music

Nearly all of the individuals interviewed mentioned the importance of the lyrics of rap music. It can be said that the lyrics of rap music are what make the genre so successful (Rose 1994). Rap music is a way for artists to explain themselves, their past experiences, their future dreams, and this can open listeners to a new understanding of an artist. Rap songs are laced with personal stories and anecdotes that help to give their audience insight into their lives. Boyd describes rap lyrics as “a poetic soundtrack to contemporary Black life” (Boyd 2002: xvii). Throughout lyrics, one can find themes of violence, sex, substance abuse, gangs, marginalization, misogyny, and many others. While many of these themes have negative connotations, they are a depiction of reality in the lives of most rappers. At the heart of rap music is the ideas of freedom of speech and freedom of expression. During my interviews, I wanted to know if the individuals were able to relate to the lyrics and themes presented in rap music. Jason replied, “I think a lot of the things people are talking about are everyday feelings so as a human being I can relate.” He is able to connect to the feelings and emotions that rappers are trying to convey. Similarly, Laura replied, “I haven’t had the majority of the experiences that these rappers are discussing in their music. But on the flip side, under the hard exterior of guns, drugs, and violence, I can relate to the underlying message.” She is able to see past the themes of violence and substance abuse to the heart of the message that the artist is trying

to convey. Standpoint theory from the postmodern era can be used to interpret the importance of the lyrics of rap music. Standpoint theory explains that, “when individuals share a particular social status or social location, they often share meaningful experiences, which can generate shared knowledge about the social world” (Harnois 2010: 68). Because of this, individuals view certain social situations from different vantage points, and each vantage point provides only a partial understanding of the society as a whole. Rap lyrics give listeners an insight into a different perspective, or standpoint, when viewing society. This theory can help to explain what Jason meant when he said that rap music “has really influenced my values and who I try to become.”

Tyler feels that he can “sort of” relate to the themes and lyrics of rap music, “I obviously don’t know from personal experience, but... it makes sense why they are doing it, just because they are rapping about their life and what influences them.” When asked if he could relate to the lyrics and themes of rap music, Brandon said, “I think that initially the reason a lot of White kids got into listening to rap because it was a completely different dimension of music. And people, at least White kids when we were growing up, didn’t understand where this was coming from initially. And then we like really embraced how raw it was or living a different type of lifestyle was.” Brandon was attracted to rap music because of the raw emotions portrayed in the lyrics and the differences that he saw between his suburban life and that of an inner-city rapper. Additionally, rap music gave him a new standpoint, or way of looking at society through the viewpoint of the rap artists. Ryan attributes Jay-Z with the ability to take “inner-city ideas and really put them onto a global scale, in allowing fans, who aren’t maybe as urbanely cultured as one might expect, to still relate to a lot of his lyrics.” For Ryan, rap

music and Jay-Z helped him to expand his views and gain insight into a different standpoint. When listening to a song, Sam looks for “people who are trying to get across an underlying message in their music... I’m also into what they’re actually saying... I expect them to be able to write of a certain quality.” Laura appreciates the lyrics by saying, “Its just so refreshing to hear an artist say that they are being completely honest and putting it all out there.” The freedom of expression and straightforward style found in the lyrics of rap music help to attract fans and give them a new outlook.

The responses gained from these interviews can additionally be related to W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of Double Consciousness. This refers to an individual whose identity is divided between different facets of society. For example, a Black man is American, Black, African, and male. He also argued that a Black man has to see himself through the eyes of a White man. DuBois believed in valuing the differences between the races, and preserving the Black culture (1903). The lyrics found in rap music are able to do just that. Through stories and anecdotes, the lyrics share the experiences of the Black community with their audience. Cutler (2009) argues that in the world of hip hop, the theory of Double Consciousness is reversed. The White man has to see himself through the eyes of the Black man, “to try and measure up to the standards of authenticity, achievement and knowledge established by the collective of individuals who make up the Hip Hop Nation” (Cutler 2009: 80). Rap music is a modern way for individuals to express themselves, and allow their audiences to gain insight into their personal histories. Nearly all of the individuals who participated in these interviews commented on their increased knowledge of Black culture and their ability to relate to other fans of rap music over the themes presented in these lyrics.

Negative Themes of Rap Music

When asked about the most negative aspect of rap music, five of the seven interviews conducted mentioned the controversy that stems from the negative themes portrayed in the lyrics of rap music, which include, but are not limited to, substance abuse, violence, and gangs. Tyler felt that many of the negative themes were related to, “these rappers lives before they started rapping which usually involved criminal lifestyles; selling drugs, being in gangs...and that’s what the basis of their rap music consists of.” He did not think that this negative aspect personally affected him, but that listeners who are not necessarily fans of rap music may misconstrue the message within the lyrics. Jason felt that the violence was the main downside that he saw in rap music. “It’s very interesting to hear in song though, but when it actually comes out in practice, the impact it can have is an issue. I don’t take it to heart when people are talking about killing and stuff but I know any kind of violence that is caused by it...that is bad.” Mackenzie felt that a negative aspect “would be the promotion of violence and violent behavior. I don’t personally believe that rap music is dangerous, but some people may interpret the themes of the songs differently than I do, and may see this as a rapper telling them its okay to carry a weapon or its okay to live a life involved in gangs and drugs.” However, Ryan felt differently than Mackenzie. He believes that “a lot of people think they inspire drugs, they inspire violence, but honestly this is more to me a process of free speech, of these people telling you their stories. They’re not telling you to go do this drug or go kill this person. They are telling you maybe this is what I’ve done and you should learn from this, this is what you shouldn’t be doing. They’re telling you how they’ve grown from their experiences and how they formed really individual personalities based

on these set experiences.” Ryan interprets these stories as a lesson being taught to the audience of how not to act rather than emulating and imitating the actions of rappers. It is impossible to determine how each listener will interpret the message that rap music is working to portray. However, while many listeners are quick to identify these negative themes, from the interviews conducted I feel that the majority of rap music fans do not act upon the negative themes discussed in rap music.

In addition to the negative themes of violence and substance abuse, misogyny is often found in the lyrics of rap music. Gender plays a large role in rap music, as many males work to portray their masculinity through rap. While there are some songs that praise females in the lives of rappers, there are countless songs that degrade women and negatively portray women. Women have become objects in hip hop culture, which can partially be attributed to the lyrics, but more so to the depiction of women in rap music videos. There are numerous rap music videos where women are scantily dressed or almost naked, placed in sexual positions or sexual settings in order to please a rapper. There are rap songs are dedicated to discussing body parts and sexual positions. One would be hard pressed to find a rap music video without the presence of some form of misogyny. In the study conducted by Johnson et al, it was found that exposing youths to music videos containing images of women in sexually subordinate roles has “profound effects on subsequent judgments of male-female interactions” (Johnson et al 1995: 598). While this thesis does not attempt to confront the issue of misogyny found in rap music, I was surprised to find that only two individuals interviewed mentioned this as a negative aspect of rap music. Jason mentioned it as an afterthought, saying “And you know the whole degrading to women thing probably isn’t good.” Laura listed misogyny as one of

three negative themes presented in rap music and said, “I don’t like the way that women are represented in some rap songs.” I was surprised that despite all of the controversy that stems from the negative depiction of women in rap music, these were the only comments about the subject that were gained from the interviews. Perhaps this could be attributed to the genders of the individuals who participated in the interviews, five were male and two were female.

Race Relations through Rap Music

Rap music and hip hop culture are an important aspect of Black history and culture in America. Conversely, White, middle class, suburban males are the primary consumer of rap music. This could be attributed to the growing popularity of rap music in American popular culture. However, according to Boyd, “hip hop and basketball are spaces where Blackness has been normalized and Whiteness treated as the other” (Boyd 2002: 23). Through the research conducted in this thesis, I wanted to explore the way in which race played a role in the influence of rap music on White youth. Topics discussed in the interviews included the use of the N-word in rap music, the way the audience is privileged into information about a different race and culture, White rappers from college campuses to Eminem, and the overall question: does race matter in rap music?

Today, rap lyrics are laced with the n-word and some African Americans use it in everyday conversation. Boyd (2002) describes the way that Black culture has redefined the n-word as an all-purpose word used in every day African American conversation, despite being one of the most controversial words in the English Language. He believes that as language changes over time, the word has become desensitized (Boyd 2002).

Similarly, Cutler argues that through rapping and freestyling, the n-word has developed into a way of addressing another individual, that may be used by Whites to sound “cool, urban, usually male, and streetwise” (Cutler 2009: 89). However, this term is racist and was commonly used from the time of slavery through and beyond the Civil Rights Movement. Personally, I find the word offensive and inappropriate. It should be treated the same way as the tragedy of slavery or the Holocaust - remembered for its painful history but not repeated. To gain an understanding of how individuals felt about race in regards to rap music, I posed the question, “It has been said that rap music has helped to mend race relations. Do you agree or disagree and why?” In response, Sam brought up the issue of the n-word and the way that some White individuals repeat it after hearing it in rap music. He felt that Black people are comfortable using the word but uncomfortable hearing it used by Whites. This double standard ultimately creates a gap between the races and can bring about racial tensions. Similarly, Brandon commented that one problem is when White people “hear the N-word so much in rap songs, sometimes they let it slip when they know they shouldn’t but it’s an accident.” Brandon and Sam were the only two individuals who commented on the use of the n-word in rap music and its repetition in the White community. As Brandon said, it may be an accident, but overall it should not be used in common conversation, or in my opinion, ever. I believe that if rap artists eliminated the word from their lyrics, eventually the word would become obsolete. Over time, the n-word would fade into a distant memory from the past, and would no longer be used inappropriately.

One positive aspect of rap music is the insight that it gives listeners into the lives of the artists, and of the Black community as a whole. Some songs give the audience a

voyeuristic look into the intimate details of these rapper's lives. This includes, for example, Tupac's relationship with his mother in "Dear Moma," Kanye West's struggle after a car crash in "Through the Wire," and T.I.'s recent incarceration in "Remember Me." Each of these songs provides the audience with an account of personal feelings and experiences. Ryan and Brandon both said their favorite song was, "My First Song" by Jay-Z. This song gives listeners an inspirational look at how he began dealing drugs but always kept his mind focused on being successful and famous one day. The chorus says, "It's my life - it's my pain and my struggle," because Jay-Z wants his listeners to gain insight into his history, and learn about how his past helped to shape who he has become. Jay-Z is successful enough to discuss the "Hard Knock Life" that he came from while driving a Bentley (Boyd 2002) and co-owning the New Jersey Nets. The history of these rappers, however, is vastly different than the lives of most of the listeners of rap music. Mackenzie felt that rap music gives "general society a view into a different kind of lifestyle," providing a look into a way of life that most Americans do not experience. Ryan said that even though he can't relate the "urban facts that are presented in these songs, after listening to them so many times I actually feel that I've started to understand them and I feel like I have a better knowledge of urban culture, and that really makes me feel good." It is important for people to understand cultures and lifestyles that are not their own. Sam felt differently about rap music presenting a picture of African American culture. He said, "I think what it does is it puts out this certain image of what the Black community is, and that's not exactly what the Black community is, its almost a skewed version. Especially for people who come from the suburbs and don't know any different." This is also true. Not all Black Americans live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and not

all of them grew up experiencing gang violence, drug use, or many of the other issues presented in rap music. However, rap music is giving the perspective from one individual and providing their personal histories, and is not claiming to define the experiences of the entire Black community. I believe that rap music gives listeners an understanding of something that they may never personally witness or experience, similar to a movie or a book. I have never been to Afghanistan, but after reading *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, I have an understanding of his personal experiences and some insight into Afghani culture. While rap music does not characterize an entire race, it provides examples of personal troubles or successes through song.

Within hip hop culture, Black is the norm and White is the other (Boyd 2002). However, this has not hindered the penetration of White rappers into the sphere of hip hop. I wanted to understand how my respondents felt about the issue of White rappers. Some people feel that White rappers or Whites involved in rap music are infiltrating a sphere of Black culture. Because of this, I posed the following question in my interviews, “A fair number of people are critical of the White involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize the White involvement in rap music?” In response, I learned that almost all of the individuals that I interviewed felt similarly on this issue. Brandon replied, “It doesn’t matter if you’re White or not. Its just if you’re a good rapper.” Mackenzie stated, “Music and art don’t discriminate. Anyone from any race can get involved.” Similarly, Laura said, “It just seems ridiculous to say that you can’t be involved in a certain genre of music because of your skin color.” Jason felt that “its more about the talent than the skin color” when it comes to rappers. Tyler stated that if White involvement has had any impact on rap music

it would be positive, because it helped to expand the genre beyond the confines of the Black community. Sam said that he was able to understand some of the hostility towards White individuals in rap music, because of the infiltration on their culture and music. He followed that by saying, “but think about rock, or every kind of music. Ultimately its all thievery from stuff before usually created originally by Black artists.” Sam is making reference to the origins of rock and roll music, which began with Black artists and quickly shifted into White society. Black artists originally recorded some of Elvis Presley’s early songs, but never received the credit that they were due. Sam and Brandon both pointed out the White rappers that are imitating the experiences of Black artists that these White rappers may not have actually gone through. “I think that a lot of people are trying to hop in, in ways that are not their own. They are trying to mimic and imitate what’s going on instead of just being themselves.”

More recently, however, there has been a surge of White college age rappers gaining some credibility. Brandon gave Asher Roth as an example, a White rapper who began his career while attending Duke University. “He talks about what he knows. He’s not talking about like guns and stuff, he’s talking about ‘I Love College,’ growing up in the suburbs, and stuff like that. And if you can rap about what you know, and other people can relate to it, and you have some sort of good rhyming abilities, I don’t think [race] matters.” Other examples of up and coming White rappers are Sam Adams who attended Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Trinity College, and Chris Webby, who attended Hofstra University and came to Union College in January to perform for students. Although Chris Webby was unable to participate in the interviews for this thesis, he participated in a similar 2009 interview with “The State of Hip Hop.com.” In

that interview, Chris Webby was described as the following: “He's sincere, he's smart, he's cocky but still a bit humble, he's simple, he's hustlin', he's a little grimy...and he's White. What?! The guy reps Ninja Turtles and has A.D.D...he is this generation” (“Chris Webby Interview” 2009). Although many fans of rap music are skeptical of Chris Webby, his interview provided me with great insight into the mind of an up and coming White rapper from suburban Connecticut. He started listening to rap music in 4th grade, and he attributes Eminem as the reason he began rapping and writing his own lyrics. His message and his lyrics are clear; “When I start writing a song, I just try and show you who I am. A goofy kid with some ridiculous skills...I'm not your typical White kid trying to act Black” (“Chris Webby Interview” 2009). In regards to critics of the White involvement in rap music, Chris Webby replied, “I've really only met a few people throughout the many years I've been rapping who really didn't give me a chance because I was White. The world is changing; there are plenty of sick White rappers out there. People respect what I do because I'm true to myself. I don't talk about guns, violence, and hustling crack, because I don't know that life. I rap about getting fucked up, chillin', girlies... basically the stuff an average 20 year old is into” (“Chris Webby Interview” 2009). Perhaps some of his success could be attributed to the way his fans can relate to his message, because it is not about violence, guns and drugs. Chris Webby is part of a growing movement of college-aged White rappers that are gaining credibility. They grew up with rap music and were influenced by rappers like Eminem to start rapping themselves and pass along their message. However, the subject matter of this type of rap music is vastly different than what most rap fans are used to hearing. Chris Webby, Sam Adams and Asher Roth fall into the same category of rap music as Sam, who produced

three mix-tapes, and Ryan and Jason who each write lyrics and freestyle for pleasure. It will be interesting to conduct further research, and look at these up and coming rap artists in a few years to see how they have progressed in the genre.

In his 2005 book, author and sociologist Bakari Kitwana attempts to uncover the truth about why White adolescents love hip hop. One answer that he offers in *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wangstas, Wiggers, Wannabees, and the New Reality of Race in America* is the desire to fit in and be deemed “cool” by peers. This could be related to the ways in which Jason and Ryan were introduced to rap music. However, the White infatuation with hip hop culture is more complex than social acceptance. The current generation, which grew up with rap music, never experienced segregation, whether de facto or de jure. The youth of America only know segregation from textbooks, rather than from personal experience. Furthermore, this generation is fully accepting of social change. Although Kitwana is unable to provide one concrete answer as to why White kids love hip hop, he provides readers with a better understanding of this phenomenon.

In nearly every interview conducted, one individual was mentioned repeatedly as a pioneer of the White involvement in rap music: Eminem. He has been a controversial figure since he began attracting fans in the late 1990s. Eminem has been credited with being the reason that Brandon and Chris Webby first became attracted to rap music, because as Brandon said “he was just an angry White kid” too. Tyler believes that because of how successful Eminem has become, he has “built a bridge” between Whites and Blacks. Ryan felt that Eminem initially received backlash from the hip hop community solely because he was White, “but if you ask any hip hop fan White or Black right now, they’d be very fast to tell you how amazing hip hop has become because of

Eminem, [and] how many strides the genre of music has come forward because of Eminem's talents." Ryan goes on to explain that, "he's also one of these guys that is just so smart that people don't understand because of the image that he puts up. And the truth is, if he didn't put up this front of abuse, of poor background, if he didn't have the same crummy upbringing as a lot of these poor urban guys, then he probably wouldn't have even been taken seriously at the beginning." Thanks to the immense impact that Eminem has had on the rap community, White rappers like Chris Webby, are being taken more seriously, regardless of their background or upbringing.

To fully understand the impact that rap music has on White youth, one must understand the role that race plays in rap music. In the last few decades, rap music has transitioned from being an expression of marginalization and oppression in the South Bronx to one of the most successful forms of entertainment on a global scale. The overall strides that the genre has made take this genre from Black popular culture to popular culture in general. From the information that I gained through research and interviews, I do not believe that race plays a role in today's rap music. Race may have been a defining factor in rap music of the past, however in more recent years rap music has become entertainment for all. In the world of rap music, skin color is insignificant and the talented will prevail.

Chapter Four: Analyzing the Survey

The survey conducted for this thesis was distributed in two Sociology courses, Introduction to Sociology and History of Sociological Thought. When analyzing the survey responses, I coded each class separately. The survey was completed by a total of

66 individuals, 31 or 47% from the introductory course and 35 or 53% from the upper level course. This is an almost even breakdown, where approximately half of the respondents come from each class. The first question on the survey asks respondents to identify their class year. 34.8% of respondents identified themselves as Seniors, 24.2% as Juniors, 4.5% as Sophomores and 36.4% as Freshmen. This distribution is almost equal among Senior, Juniors and Freshmen, but there is a disproportionately small number of Sophomore respondents. This could possibly be because of the classes that were surveyed, as many Sophomores could have already taken Intro to Sociology as Freshmen, but are not yet able to take the upper-level History of Sociological Thought course. The second preliminary question asked respondents to identify their sex. 30.3% of respondents identified themselves as male while 69.7% of respondents identified themselves as female. This is not representative of the Union College student body, which is 51% male and 49% female. However, this statistic can also be attributed to the courses that were surveyed, because Sociology courses at Union College are often disproportionately female. The final preliminary question asked respondents to identify their race. 89.4% of respondents identified themselves as White, 6.1% Black, 1.5% Asian, and 3% Black and White. Union College has about 15% minority students, which includes Black, Asian, Bi-racial, Hispanic, and all other minorities. The sample population is not an exact picture of the Union College student body, however it provided me with the population that I was looking for when examining White youth and rap music.

Before directly asking respondents questions about rap music, I wanted to get an idea of what kind of music they liked overall. I surveyed their opinions about some of the

more popular genres among adolescents, which included Pop, Rock, Rap, Country and Electronic. The results for this question are displayed in Table 1. While all of the responses are interesting, this study's main focus is rap music, therefore the other responses are somewhat irrelevant for this research. When looking at rap music, 33.3% of respondents selected "like a lot," 33.3% selected "like" which means that two thirds, or 66.6% of my sample population has positive feelings about rap music. Rap music also had the highest number of "like a lot" responses, compared to 30.3% for pop music and 22.7 for rock music. 6.1% of participants selected "dislike a lot" for rap music, and 1.5% selected "dislike," which means that 7.6% of my sample population has negative feelings about rap music. Finally, 25.8% of respondents have "neutral" feelings about rap music. I also allowed participants to write in their own genre of music, just to get an idea of different genres that youths are interested in. The write-ins included, R&B, solo mellow artists, jam bands, heavy metal, hardcore punk, alternative rock, jazz, blues, international rap, mixes and mash-ups, classical and techno. While this information is interesting, it is not necessarily relevant to this study. The only write-in genres that are related to rap music are international rap, and mixes and mash-ups.

Table 1: Respondent's Feelings on Different Genres of Music

	Dislike A Lot	Dislike	Neutral	Like	Like A Lot	Total
Pop	0%	7.6	19.7	42.4	30.3	100%
Rock	0%	1.5	22.7	53	22.7	100%
Rap	6.1%	1.5	25.8	33.3	33.3	100%
Country	13.6%	21.2	22.7	22.7	19.7	100%
Electronic	6.1%	33.3	27.3	30.3	3	100%

In an attempt to gain perspective into the actions of the respondent when confronted with rap music, the next question asked, “If you are sitting in a car listening to the radio, and a rap song comes on, what are you most apt to do?” 12.1% of respondents said that they would turn off the radio, 18.2% said that they would make the volume lower, 53% said they would make the volume higher, 15.2% said they would sing along because they knew every word, and 1.5% or one respondent failed to answer this question. From these responses, 68.2% of respondents have positive actions when listening to rap music on the radio. This is consistent with the 66.6% of respondents who had positive feelings about rap music in the previous question. 30.3% of respondents have negative actions when rap music comes on the radio, while only 7.6% of respondents in the previous question had negative feelings about rap music. This could be explained by the 25.8% of respondents with neutral feelings about rap music.

The next question, “What is your opinion of rap music?” is another way of asking respondents about their feelings on rap music. 36.4% of respondents said that they like rap music a lot, and 37.9% said they like rap music somewhat. That means that 74.3% of respondents have a positive opinion of rap music. This is greater than the 66.6% that have positive feelings about rap music, and the 68.2% who have positive actions when confronted with rap music. 15.2% of respondents had a neutral opinion of rap music, 4.5% dislike rap somewhat, and 6.1% dislike it a lot. This means that 10.6% of respondents have a negative opinion of rap music, which could be compared to the 7.6% who have negative feelings about rap music, and the 30.3% who take negative actions while confronted with rap music. Table 2 compares the responses of participants when asked their feelings of rap music and their opinion of rap music. There were 66

participants, and I wanted to make sure that people were consistent with their responses. There were some respondents who indicated neutral feelings and then when asked their opinion they indicated that they liked rap music. However, overall respondents were consistent with their feelings and opinions of rap music.

Table 2: Respondents Opinions and Feelings About Rap Music Compared

		Respondent's Opinion of Rap					
		Like A Lot	Like	Neutral	Dislike	Dislike A Lot	Total
Respondent's Feelings About Rap Music	Dislike A Lot	0	0	0	0	4	4
	Dislike	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Neutral	0	6	9	2	0	17
	Like	6	15	1	0	0	22
	Like A Lot	18	4	0	0	0	22
Total		24	25	10	3	4	66

The following question asked respondents to indicate how often they listened to rap music. 10.6% of respondents indicated that they listen to rap music at least several hours a day and 24.2% indicated that they listened every day but no more than an hour a day. This means that 34.8% of respondents listen to rap music every day. 25.8% of respondents listen to rap a few hours a week, 18.2% listen about an hour a week or so each week, 13.6% listen for less than an hour a week, and 7.6% never listen to rap music. This question is another attempt to gauge how people really feel about rap music. I compared the responses from respondent's opinions of rap music to how often they listen to rap music, which is shown on Table 3, below. This shows that of the 24 respondents who like rap music a lot, 25% listen at least several hours a day, 37.5% listen every day but no more than an hour a day, 29.2% listen a few hours a week, and 8.3% listen about

an hour or so each week. As expected, those who have a positive opinion of rap music listen to rap music often, and those who have negative opinions about rap music listen infrequently.

Table 3: Respondents Opinions of Rap Compared to How Often They Listen to Rap

	How Often Respondent Listens to Rap							Total
		At least several hours a day	Every day, but no more than an hour a day	A few hours a week	About an hour a week or so each week	Less than an hour a week	Never	
Respondent's Opinion of Rap	I like it a lot	25%	37.5	29.2	8.3	0	0	100%
	I like it somewhat	4%	28	40	20	8	0	100%
	I have neutral feelings	0%	0	0	50	40	10	100%
	I dislike it somewhat	0%	0	0	0	100	0	100%
	I dislike it a lot	0%	0	0	0	0	100	100%

The following question asked respondents to specify where they listen to rap music. Respondents were able to select all options that applied. 62.5% of respondents specified that they listen in the car, 68.8% listen at the gym, 89.1% listen at parties, 45.5% listen in their room, and 12.1% listen at the library. Respondents were also able to write in their own location, and write in responses included at practice, in the locker room, and while walking. Because of the similarity between listening to rap music at the gym, in the locker room, and at practice, I included those responses with those who responded at the gym. Two participants did not respond to the question. Table 4, below, provides a more detailed look at where the sample population listens to rap music. The

most common place to listen to rap music is at a party, which could be explained because rap music is easy to dance to and is usually upbeat. Also, at a party, individuals are usually not able to select the music that is playing, so this could be a location where individuals who don't necessarily like rap music are listening to rap music. The percent of individuals listening to rap music at the gym and in the car is similar to the percent of those who have positive feelings about rap music. These are settings where the individual would be likely to select the music that is playing. Those who listen to rap music in their room are listening in a private personal setting; therefore those who are listening in their rooms are probably fans of the genre. Most respondents are not listening to rap music in the library, which indicate that most individuals are not willing to listen to upbeat party music while trying to get work done.

Table 4: The Location Where Respondents Listen to Rap Music

	In the Car	At the Gym	At a Party	In my Room	At the Library
No	36.4%	30.3	10.9	51.5	84.8
Yes	62.5%	68.8	89.1	45.5	12.1

Next, I asked respondents to identify their favorite rap artist, if they have one, and explain what it is that makes them their favorite. This was the only question on the survey that was not multiple choice, but asked participants to write in a response. This question was omitted by 24 respondents, which means 36.4% of the sample population chose not to respond and 63.6% chose to answer the question. Individuals identified 16 different rappers as their favorite, and wrote in a variety of responses as to what made them their favorite. The most common rappers specified were Kanye West with 7.6%, Eminem with

13.6%, Lil Wayne with 10.6% and Notorious B.I.G. with 9.1%. Nicki Minaj, Nas, and Tupac all received 3% or two respondents specified them as their favorite rapper. Drake, Wale, Chiddy Bang, P.O.S., Kid Cudi, Lupe Fiasco, Jay-Z, Akon, and Big L were each mentioned by one responded, or 1.5% of the sample population. The reasons why respondents like each rapper varied as well. The following looks at the responses from participants who indicated Kanye West, Eminem, Lil Wayne, and Notorious B.I.G., the four rappers that were indicated the most as a participant's favorite rapper. When looking at Kanye West, respondents replied, "not as hardcore as some other rappers," "his lyrics are meaningful and creative and his songs are diverse," and "his music pumps me up when I am working out or at a party." Those who identified Eminem as their favorite replied, "I like that I can actually understand the words that he is saying," "unique, fast, all songs have a meaning," "I respect him because he writes serious lyrics and they are never about sex and drugs. I still hate the genre of music," "he is real, raw, so talented, so unlike me, emotional," "can jam to it," "creativity and the ability to elicit positive and negative emotions and feedback from people," "I just like a bunch of his songs" and "very passionate about his lyrics, more than solely objectifying women." While these responses offer various opinions about Eminem, they provide me with some insight into the type of fans that these respondents are. Those who specified Lil Wayne as their favorite rapper replied, "I love his lyrics, they are real and heartfelt," "his lyrics and tattoos," "the guy's real good," "good to listen to, to relieve stress," and "his ability to create such complex verses and create beats that just catch everyone's attention." Respondents who identified Notorious B.I.G. as their favorite rapper replied, "he was a 90's rapper and is a throwback," "lyrics are amazing and great beats," "rags to riches

story and influential in the industry,” and “he revolutionized the game, no one has more flow.” While all of these responses are different, they each provide insight into what attracts individuals to rap music, whether it is the lyrics, the beat, or the emotions that the music is able to provoke.

The final three questions ask respondents about the positives and negatives of rap music. First, participants were asked to indicate what they saw as rap music’s influence on listeners. 3% replied that the influence was all positive, 12.1% replied somewhat positive, 51.1% replied neutral, 28.8% replied somewhat negative and 4.5% replied all negative. From these responses, I can understand that many of the participants were unsure of how rap music influenced its listeners, with the vast majority of respondents indicating neutral, somewhat positive or somewhat negative. Very few respondents were willing to indicate that the influence of rap music was all positive or all negative.

The next question asked respondents to indicate what they felt was the most positive aspect of rap music. Although respondents were indicated to choose only one response, many selected more than one, or wrote in their own answer. 66.7% of respondents indicated Freedom of Speech as the most positive aspect, 7.6% indicated mending race relations, 19.7% indicated exposing the world to the struggles of the inner city, and 13.6% indicated an outlet for disadvantaged youths. The participants who chose to write in their own answer indicated, “making people feel good,” “creative expression,” “good music and beat, not necessarily the lyrics,” and “its fun and catchy.” One participant refrained from answering the question. The majority of respondents selected Freedom of Speech, which is representative of the respondents who answered lyrics when identifying why they liked their favorite rapper.

The final question asked respondents to identify what they saw as the most negative aspect of rap music. Again, although respondents were instructed to select only one response, many selected multiple responses or wrote in their own answers. 69.7% of respondents indicated themes of violence as the most negative aspect, 33.3% indicated themes of misogyny, 21.2% indicated commercialization, and 36.4% indicated themes of drug use. The participants who chose to write in their own responses indicated, “degrading to women” which I included with themes of misogyny, and “multiple sex partners.” The majority of participants indicated themes of violence as the most negative aspect of rap music, which is one of the most publicized complaints about rap music.

The data collected from the surveys provides additional information about a sample of Union College students’ opinions on rap music. About two thirds of the sample population indicated that they have positive feelings and opinions about rap music. The results from this survey confirm that the majority of the sample population, White students at Union College, have positive feelings about rap music. Rap appeals to a broad range of young listeners and is, therefore very much part of a common popular culture among college students. However, the results also suggest that the majority of students are unsure of whether the influence from rap music is positive or negative. The majority of students highlighted the most positive aspect as Freedom of Speech and the most negative aspect as themes of violence. While the data and results from this survey provided confirmation that White adolescents like rap music, the sample population is slightly flawed. Students participating in Sociology courses are usually more open minded and more accepting than students from some other disciplines. The survey was only administered to 66 students, which is quite a small sample population. Also, this

sample population comes from students attending Union College, which is not representative of America's adolescent population as a whole. Further studies would need to be conducted at other colleges and universities to gain further insight into the feelings of adolescents. Additional studies would need to be administered to reach adolescents who are not privileged enough to attend institutions of higher education. The quantitative information gained from these surveys provides supporting evidence for the interviews conducted for this thesis as well as confirmation that White youth do like rap music.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Rap music occupies a controversial position in the sphere of popular culture. It has been described by some as a cultural response to marginalization and discrimination, and condemned by others as a negative influence on adolescent development. Regardless of one's personal opinions on rap music, the infiltration of rap music is undeniable. For all its popularity, and for all of the academic attention that the genre has received, the question of how audiences might be influenced by the music has not previously been extensively detailed. This study set out to explore the impact that rap music has on White youth. The results of the present study confirm the relationship between rap music and White adolescents.

I was able to conduct interviews with seven adolescents at Union College, all of whom have a connection to rap music. Each individual explained to me how they were introduced to rap music, their feelings on the genre, what they have gained from the music, and what they are doing that is related to the music. Through their stories and anecdotes, I was able to clearly see the connection that they have with rap music, and the

way rap music has helped each of them to develop into adulthood. The passion and excitement that each interviewee showed when discussing rap music proved to me that they have an understanding of how important the music is to them, and how it has influenced each of their lives. The surveys conducted helped to reinforce some of the students' opinions provided in the interviews. From the surveys, I gained insight into how students at Union College felt about the genre and influence of rap music. These proved to me that about two-thirds of students have positive feelings about rap music. Additionally, students were able to identify the most positive and negative aspects of rap music, but were unable to classify the influence of rap music as positive or negative. However, the surveys are not able to fully capture the feelings and emotions of the respondents in the same way that the interview does. The surveys provided me with evidence to support the interviews conducted.

After having conducted two intensive terms of research and data collection about rap music, if one were to ask me about the impact of rap music on White youth I would argue that it has been positive. Participants in the survey identified the most positive aspect of rap music as Freedom of Speech, protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The message presented by rap music is raw and harsh, however, the students that I interviewed with were able to identify the underlying message behind the rough exterior. They felt that behind the negative themes of violence and misogyny were positive messages for listeners to learn from. Those who identified themselves as fans of rap music showed a much better understanding of the significance of rap lyrics. Perhaps those who criticize rap music and fear the violence and negative themes are those who are not fans and are not willing to take a chance and listen to the

meanings. Their ignorance might be perpetuating the negative reputation that is associated with rap music.

A principal limitation of this study is that its findings may pertain only to a particular place and time, Union College in 2011. The students interviewed all have a relationship with rap music. The students who participated in the survey were all enrolled in a sociology course, which suggests that they may be more open minded than other students. I have provided a snap shot profile of the audience for rap music among White youth that may not represent other American colleges, or adolescents not attending college. Quite obviously, more research is needed to determine just how universal these findings really are, perhaps with a larger, more diverse population. Additionally, throughout this study, rap music was referred to in the abstract. Perhaps if specific songs, artists, or lyrics were featured and discussed in interviews and surveys, results could have differed.

The overall message that I have gained from creating this thesis is that rap matters. Rap music is an important cultural aspect of America in the twenty first century. The controversy associated with rap music is part of its appeal. Rap music is able to expand the cultural diversity of its listeners and expose them to different aspects of society including race, politics, and gender. The freedom of expression employed through rap music has opened the eyes of many fans to the intimate histories of rappers. Rap music and hip hop culture have an important story to tell, and will continue to shape American society and popular culture for years to come. A pioneer of rap music, Doug E.

Fresh, said it best when he explained that “hip-hop is supposed to uplift and create, to educate people on a larger level and to make a change.”¹

¹ ¹ This quote is widely circulated on the Internet, but I have been unable to find a definitive source for where and when Doug E. Fresh said it.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

My name is Freddie Dantus, and I am a student at Union College. I am inviting you to participate in a research study, which is required as a part of my senior thesis in Sociology under the direction of Professor Janet Grigsby. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. A description of the study is written below.

I am interested in learning about rap music and the influence that it has on White youth culture. You will be asked to participate in an interview. The length of the interview will take approximately 15-20 minutes. The risks to you of participating in this study are giving one's true opinions towards rap music. Making every question optional and all responses confidential will minimize these risks. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

All of my questions have been answered and I wish to participate in this research study.

Signature of participant

Date

Print name of participant

Name of investigator

Date

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Preliminary: Name, age, race, gender

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
3. How often do you listen to rap music? And in what settings?
4. Can you relate to rap music?
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music? (ex. DJ, rapping, music website).
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the Black community? If so, how?
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
13. A fair number of people are critical of the White involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize White involvement in rap music?

14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?

Appendix C: Survey

Rap Music Survey

Hi! My name is Freddie Dantus and I am a senior Sociology major at Union. I am writing my thesis on the ways that rap music influences youth culture. I would very much appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to complete this survey. It is completely anonymous and will be used for research purposes only. You can stop at any time, or omit any questions, however any information that you provide is greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions or comments please feel free to contact me at DantusF@garnet.union.edu. Please take your time when filling out this survey. Thank you so much for your help and participation!

Directions: Please check the boxes according to your answers, and briefly explain when instructed.

1. What is your class year?
 - 2011
 - 2012
 - 2013
 - 2014

2. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female

3. What race/ethnicity are you?
 - White
 - Black
 - Hispanic
 - Asian
 - Other (*please specify*)_____

4. Describe how you feel about the following genres of music on the following scale:
 1. Pop
 - Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

 2. Rock
 - Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

 3. Rap
 - Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

 4. Country
 - Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

 5. Electronic

Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

6. Other (*please specify*) _____

Dislike a lot Dislike Neutral Like Like a lot

5. If you are sitting in a car listening to the radio, and a rap song comes on, what are you most apt to do?

- Turn off the radio
- Make the volume lower
- Make the volume higher
- Sing along because you know every word

6. What is your opinion of rap music?

- I like it a lot
- I like it somewhat
- I have neutral feelings
- I dislike it somewhat
- I dislike it a lot

7. How often do you listen to rap music?

- At least several hours a day
- Every day, but no more than an hour a day
- A few hours a week
- About an hour a week or so each week
- Less than an hour a week
- Never

8. If you do listen to rap music, where do you usually listen? (*Mark all that apply*)

- In the car
- At the gym
- At a party
- In my room
- In the library
- Other (*please specify*) _____

9. a. Who is your favorite rap artist, if you have one? _____

b. What is it that makes them your favorite?

10. Which of the following describes rap music's influence on its listeners?

- All positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neutral
- Somewhat negative
- All negative

11. What do you see as the most positive aspect of rap music?

- Freedom of speech
- Mending race relations
- Exposing the world to the struggles of the inner city
- An outlet for disadvantaged youths
- Other (*please specify*) _____

12. What do you see as the most negative aspect of rap music?

- Themes of violence
- Themes of misogyny
- Commercialization
- Themes of drug use
- Other (*please specify*) _____

Thank you!

Appendix D: Interview Transcriptions

Jason

Age 20

White male

From New York, NY

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
 “My favorite kind of music is rap hip hop and reggae. I think its pretty much a tie between those two kinds.”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
 “I think it’s awesome. I think for me it’s obviously very different than any other kind of music. And I guess growing up I never had like a favorite band, if you had asked me I wouldn’t have been able to answer because I wasn’t really into that. For me it was all about rap. And I just like that it’s lyrical and its peoples minds and thoughts and its awesome.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
 “I listen to rap music everyday, whether its me home alone just listening to music or with friends. Pretty much every day in all types of settings. In my room, whether I’m walking to class or I have my iPod or my phone on me. Whenever I can I’m listening to rap.”
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
 “I think so. I think that, I mean I don’t know that its necessarily aimed at like me and my profile but I find ways to relate to it. Also its like human nature, I think like a lot of the things people are talking about are like everyday feelings so as a human being I can relate.”
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
 “Well, this kind of leads me into how I discovered rap but, um when I was in elementary school one of my Black friends would sing like random songs. I think one of the first songs I ever learned was like ‘Stop Drop shut em down open up shop...’ only because he would sing it and I thought it was cool. And then I think when I started delving into rap was when I saw ‘Hardball’ in the movie theatres and I heard the song ‘Big Poppa’ because that just made me think wow this is incredible. And I immediately did research. And Biggie Smalls to this day is like still by far my favorite rapper. And I think for me he embodies the rap game and what I like about it. Biggie Smalls and ‘Big Poppa’ is my favorite song, although there’s tons of others too.”
6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
 “I think all of them. I mean influential is a tricky word. I don’t know. It kind of has a certain connotation that goes along with it. But even lyrics that most people don’t find meaningful that are kind of stupid or don’t have that much meaning, I think those can still be influential. I’m trying to think of specific cases. I just know like the values, for example that Biggie Smalls puts out there, it’s a lot about doing drugs, selling weed, killing, but the other kind of things, the actual undertones that he gets at, like I mean, this is a bad example but like in the song

- ‘Me & My Bitch’ he’s talking all about a girl that he can see himself with and that he loves. He gets to the real stuff even though what they say is offensive. ‘I wanna bitch that like to play celo, and craps. Packin’ gats, in a Coach bag steamin’ dime bags’ I mean he’s looking for someone that he can relate to, and even though this is about drugs and guns, it’s also about a girl that he can fall in love with.”
7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 “Yeah. I think it has been something that is almost like a consolation for me for music. Music for me is just something that I can rely on in times of need. And even if its just like getting me pumped up, I just think that it has really influenced my values and who I try to become.”
8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
 “I think for me the positives much more than any other kind of music is the quick wit and like I don’t know for me like lyrically rapping and freestyling in general is a whole different ball game. You’re not playing an instrument and I just love it and its awesome. And I think the same kind of values that reach me reach other listeners. I can say too much about the positives. Its definitely easier to separate out the negatives though. I think the controversy and conflict with violence is probably like the main downside for me. Its very interesting to hear in song though, but when it actually comes out in practice and the impact it can have is an issue. I don’t take it to heart when people are talking about killing and stuff but I know any kind of violence that is caused by it or just a violent culture, that is bad. And you know the whole degrading to women thing, probably isn’t good.”
9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
 “I think for me more its just listening than actually making music but like I love freestyling for fun. I do like make my own rap songs but its purely for fun. I have no aspirations from that or anything coming from it. But yeah that’s a big way. I think it started senior year of high school when I did a senior project on it. And since then it kind of became therapy. For me it embodies my mind and psyche and how I feel now. And I know I’ll listen to them in the future and think wow I was a crazy kid. But I guess it’s my way of writing a diary. And also I think, especially when I’m with certain friends who like to freestyle, and when we do that its like a social fun thing. I love having a couple drinks, sitting down over a nice beat with one of my friends and just freestyling, its fun you know.”
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
 “I think there’s no like people. Not like anyone close to me. Well actually, I think like my friends. I grew up in a different subculture. For me it was all about like New York hip hop and 90s hip hop and I think the era and the time and the environment. I did go to like a private school in Riverdale, so its not like my environment, it wasn’t super hard or anything. But that’s what I was about. I know a lot of people who are shaped by where they grew up, for example my roommate Todd grew up and just loves Phish and those kind of like funk and that music and its just so different from where I grew up and I think my values definitely reflect my upbringing and came from really listening to rap and these ideals. I may have lost track of the question haha.”

11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
“I don’t think so. I mean that’s a hard question, because I guess I did grow up with the hip hop culture in my mind and influencing my upbringing. But yea, I can connect in terms of music with friends who are African American and I have friends who are trying to be rappers and I definitely can relate to them over the music and hip hop culture. Like this kid, Jordan Loony, whose a good friend of mine, performed when I hired Afroman for a concert, I hired him as the opening act. I was just trying to do him a favor and get his name out there. But I rapped with him on one song. It’s a hard question but its definitely given me something to connect to black people on that level, well black people who are into hip hop. Its not like everyone is.”
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
“I don’t think it necessarily has been used to mend race relations. I don’t feel that. Just cause I feel that it’s a very individualized thing. I think its definitely something that connects people in general but I don’t see it as a source to mend race relations. If a Black guy likes hip hop we can relate. But I can also relate to a White guy who likes hip hop. But I don’t know. I really don’t know that much and I’ve never thought about that.”
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?
“I mean I think for me its music and everyone should be able to enjoy it. If a White person is good enough to be a popular rapper then you know. Eminem can still kill it even though he’s White. So its more about the talent than the skin color, in my mind.”
14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?
“I don’t know. I definitely do think about rap a lot. I just think its definitely characterized me. It’s hard to explain this. But for example I’m referencing back to Todd my roommate, cause me and him are very similar but we’ve grown up with very different influencing factors, in terms of music, and you can see a clear difference in our personalities almost and in our core values, that relates back to the music.”

Tyler

Age 21

White male

From Scarsdale, NY

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
“Um I’d have to go with rap music on that one. I listen to a lot of different music. I’d say like mid nineties to late nineties to early two thousands rap music is my favorite genre”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?

- “Well, my opinion is probably a lot different than any other people’s opinion. Um, I think its pretty influential towards a lot of different people, especially today. A lot of college students are using rap music as a way to kind of stray away from the norm and do actually what they want to do. You have a lot of college students just making their own music and pretty much just rapping about whatever is going on in their life. Whether it be influential on their lives or on anyone else or if its just like the stupidest thing in the world. I mean, it kind of just gives a good outlook to other people.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
 “I’d say all the time, every day. In the morning, when I’m driving to school or I’m driving home from school. If I’m taking a break in the library, I’m listening to rap music. Mostly in the car just cause the speakers are good.”
 4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
 “I guess yeah sort of. I mean not from personal experience but like I definitely see where they are coming from and the reason why they are rapping, the rappers I’m taking about mostly basically you know uh the rap genre basically I’ll give examples, Nas, Tupac, Biggie, just pretty much the godfathers of rap pretty much. I obviously don’t know from personal experience but from how they are rapping it makes sense why they are doing it just because they are rapping about their life and what influences them.”
 5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
 “Well, my favorite rap artist I’d say was Big L. I thought he was the most lyrical rapper I’ve ever heard um and his music just struck me the most. He unfortunately wasn’t able to put out that much stuff just cause he died pretty early. Other than him I listen to a lot of 50 cent actually. A lot of people just don’t like his music because they think he went to mainstream and he’s all about money and whatnot but I just see him as kind of a businessman and he took himself out of the streets and now he’s basically a billionaire. Favorite song, let me think. “Put it on” Big L.”
 6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
 “You know what I guess its not really like influential on my life but like definitely just like gets me in a good mood and humors me. I’m just thinking more of like punch lines sort of. Cause like I said a lot of it doesn’t really like effect my life personally. So I’d say like, uh let me think. Um, I’ve got some funny lines. There’s a Big L line where it’s a freestyle, he’s got a bunch of them. ‘step to this and get shanked up. I knocked out so many teeth the tooth fairy went bankrupt.’ Let me think. ‘I’m far from broke, I got enough bread. And mad hoes, ask Bevis, I get nothing butthead.’ Best line ever. Just a bunch of those lines that you hear them and you’re like holy shit how did you come up with that?”
 7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 “Yea, I’d say so just cause like um in my opinion I think I would be a lot different of a person if I didn’t listen to rap music. Just because like I guess it really puts a whole new perspective on things in your mind. If I wasn’t listening to it I would just have like a whole, not a false representation of like how these people feel, but

- like it wouldn't really trigger me the same way as if I did understand the music and listen to it."
8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?

"Well, the positives are definitely, it definitely allows people to express themselves in a way that they feel most comfortable, you know just saying what they're doing where they come from whatever. And its definitely positive just cause like it gives definitely like youths an outlet. Especially, you know obviously I'm not saying this from first experience or anything like that but I feel like a lot of kids that do live in poor communities they look at rap music as an outlet a way out instead of resorting to things like selling drugs and committing crimes and whatnot. And I think, I mean obviously a negative is the connotation of the rap music. A lot of it has to do with um, you know, these rappers lives before they started rapping which usually involved criminal lifestyles; selling drugs, being in gangs, things like that, and that's what the basis of their rap music consists of. So I mean obviously me listening to the rap music and hearing that and understanding where these people are coming from, I guess you could say. I don't see it as that negative but a person that doesn't listen to rap music and just sees those negatives, they're obviously going to think it's a problem and it's not good."
 9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?

"Well, my brother used to be a DJ and that was a real good influence on me. I loved being around him while he was DJing. He would let me scratch with him on the turntables. I wasn't that good but he let me do whatever I wanted to do pretty much. I would always go to the record stores with him to get new records and it was just a fun thing to do. Definitely kept you up to date with the music. Especially when my brother was DJing it was at a time where like downloading wasn't that popular and people relied on buying music as their main source of getting their music. Just like being, him being a DJ and getting all that new music like right when it came out, I don't know it kept you like in the game sort of, I don't know. Yeah it was fun. That was definitely a cool experience."
 10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?

"I guess nothing really. It was kind of like a hobby I'd say. More of his hobby. Definitely something that anybody brings up DJing and I'm always gunna say oh well I was always around my brother who would be DJing and I definitely helped him out a little bit and whatever."
 11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the Black community? If so, how?

"Yeah I guess when you put it like that. I do not think I'd be, you know not to sound like I don't care but I don't think I'd be too interested in the lives of these rappers if it wasn't for what they are doing and I wouldn't be reading like 50 cents autobiography, reading their blogs, following what they are doing, following them on twitter, things like that. I really just wouldn't I actually wouldn't know how their lifestyles really are and how they grew up and things like that. So I definitely think rap music has opened me up to that and opened my eyes."

12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 “I don’t know. I wouldn’t say mend. But I guess maybe in the mainstream it has. On top of the surface. You see rappers like Eminem who are just so big and so popular amongst like just everybody. And I guess in a way you could say a rapper like Eminem is definitely like built a bridge or however you want to put it. But I would say that there is definitely you know just like racism in the world like its never gunna go away. You’re obviously gunna see that divide between the cultures. Yeah.”
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?
 “I mean I don’t think it’s a problem at all I think its, I don’t think its something, rap music isn’t really something that is directed directly towards the black or Latin community. I think it should be and is directed towards you know everybody. And uh even in the 80s when like rap music was first started, it didn’t just involve rapping, which the culture basically revolves around right now. It had like dance in it, breakdancing, graffiti art, all that type of stuff. And I mean from that you can definitely see that the black community wasn’t the only community involved in that. It was definitely just a wide range of different people. Yeah I wouldn’t say that the white community has a detrimental impact on rap music at all. I think if anything it has helped.”
14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?
 “No not at all. But, whose your favorite rapper?”

Sam

Age 22

White male

From New Haven, Connecticut

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
 “Um, I’d say right now I’m really into dubstep and electronic influenced music but I’m also in between that and music that heavily samples 70s and 60s soul samples.”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
 “I think its moving in a pop direction where it kind of over the past few years is on a downgrade in the sense that everything really sounds the same on the radio, that is. Everything sounds exactly the same and there really is not that much distinct creativity involved. They’re all using the same type of style and sounds so they sound similar. And I think its lacking popularity, well the things that are most popular are not gunna be the most creative.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?

- “I’d say most often would probably be in my own room by myself. Every day. But, the most ill hear of the popular music is at parties and on the weekends, when other people are choosing the music to play.”
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
 “Some. I don’t think I’ve ever been able to relate to selling crack or shooting people or even a lot of aspects like that but its more what you get from that is the drive for success, to overcome odds. But um, lately most of the stuff that’s on the radio is talking about stuff that you maybe can more relate to which is just like partying and girls essentially. And its kind of moving away from the drug selling. I think its because its becoming more commercialized, and I also think that the genre and the people that they are looking attract now is a different crowd than it used to be. Like with rap influences its looking to attract the white crowd who is partying and if they cant relate to your music you have less of a chance of attracting them. So its now attracting more of a fan base of girls, I feel like.”
 5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
 “I mean, just one person? I cant pinpoint one. I’d have to say I started off by listening to Notorious B.I.G. and I just was the hugest fan and everything with that. That was probably in tenth grade. And then it just kept moving on to try to expand my rap genres in all different areas but mostly along the lines of people who are trying to get across an underlying message in their music rather than just the beats. I’m also into what they’re actually saying and whether good rhymes, since I write my own. I expect them to be able to write of a certain quality. Right now my favorite song, I’ve been playing a lot of “Lights” by Ellie Goulding but it’s a dubstep remix. I’ve also played um, a lot of Flux Pavilion dubstep and this one Jim Jones song, This is life. Those are kind of my most recent favorite songs and I’ve just been playing them over and over.”
 6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
 “I’d say a lot of Common is pretty intellectually driven where I mean, ‘the chosen one from the land of the frozen sun where drunk nights get remembered more than sober ones’ like I think that’s a pretty powerful line that has a lot of truth value to it so I mean just a ton of songs. I mean on a lot of levels there’s things that they say that I maybe wont even grasp the first time but after a couple listens you’ll actually find meaning, or even just make meaning to your own life from it. So I think its important to try and gain something from the songs and the lyrics.”
 7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 “I think its made me more, um, maybe its changed the priorities in my life. I wouldn’t say on that drastic of a level but I think it introduces you to a new concept of, while the American dream is making yourself into the best you can, a lot of what rap is about is about bragging about yourself and while I don’t totally agree with that I think there’s an important message involved with like being proud of who you are and trying to show that to the world.”
 8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
 “Well, I think one positive thing about it, and I was watching an interview a while back, and they were talking about how when they come from the ghetto, they are

- rapping about things they don't have so essentially they are dreaming up these things that they want to accomplish and they're saying them in words. And by them saying it, its almost like they are making their own reality come true. I think that's a really positive aspect of it, that if you dream it you can achieve it and its almost like saying it into existence. So I think that's one of the positive things I think. A negative would be that on a lot of levels its very ignorant, and I find myself at times just laughing at the content of it just being like really I cant believe that this is actually a song on the radio that people are dancing and singing along to. But um, that would be one negative aspect of it. But I think another positive its that its helped me to hone my skills because I like to write rhymes and by doing that its almost like a mental exercise and I can express my feelings in writing whether its rap or poetry it doesn't really matter. They're essentially the same thing just in different forms. So its all about being able to express your ideas in a fluid way."
9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
 "I started by just making music with garage band. I just stumbled upon it. So I was making music and eventually I had like 15 or 20 songs and 9 of which I put lyrics on. And then I made another album after that which had all lyrics and then that had all my own beats. This past album I'm working on is a mix between stuff that I've created and stuff now that im taking that's already out there, almost like a mixtape version where you take instrumentals that are online and go over that. So I'm more working into just the writing part now. So I've put out three mixtapes and I'm working on one right now."
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
 "I'd say it has to start with Biggie being the first person I ever listened to and how he's the best if you go back and listen to him. So I guess by being introduced to the best from the start you want to emulate and I would never try to be him cause that's not something I could be but its like if you're around someone whose really talented, you're hopefully gonna pick up something."
11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
 "I think what it does is it puts out this certain image of what the black community is and that's not exactly what the black community is, its almost a skewed vision. Especially for people who come from the suburbs, and don't know any different. Really, were getting this 5% of what its about but we really don't know entirely, I think were only getting glorified aspects, either glorified negatively or positively."
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 "Well I agree in the sense of different races can like the same music and were getting I guess a little bit of knowledge of whats going on about communities that we don't know and don't come from but at the same time, I think it could almost like, say the n-word. If were saying it repeated from songs that they're putting out but they don't want us to say it then its ultimately creating like a little bit of a gap if you think about it in that sense."

13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?

“Eminem. Enough said. But really, I think he’s an outlier. And I think that a lot of people are trying to hop in and in ways that are not their own. They are trying to mimic and imitate what’s going on instead of just being themselves. And I think more white artists are coming out where they’re talking about what they know and not trying to be something that they’re not but I can see why there’s a hostility towards white people in rap because its almost like an infiltration on their culture and their music. But think about rock, or every kind of music, ultimately it’s all thievery from stuff before, usually created originally by black artists.”

14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?

“Um, I think it just makes me think about it a little bit deeper than on the every day level. I try to not get thinking about it too much because a lot of the time it does make me angry that there are certain things that are popular that I actually cant believe that they are really what is the popular standard. That level needs to be raised to a more creative level.”

Mackenzie

Age 21

White Female

Montclair, NJ

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
“I would have to say classic rock and electronic dance music are my favorites, but I am a music fan in general and I like to listen to all kinds of music”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
“I am a big fan of rap music. I usually listen to it for the beats and the background rather than the lyrics.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
“I listen to rap music on a daily basis. I am usually in my car driving around or at the gym to keep my heart pumping. I also like to listen to rap music at parties because it is great to dance to.”
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
“Um, not really, not completely. Like for example there might be some rap music lyrics about growing up in a very bad area, shootings, gangs, stuff like that. I don’t really relate to that. I have never had experiences in my life like the ones that most rappers discuss in their songs.”
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
“My favorite artist is Dr. Dre. He just has such a great talent for creating music, whether its his own music or the music of Eminem, 50 Cent, and other rappers on his record label. My favorite song is “Forgot about Dre” featuring Eminem. To be

- honest I listen to rap for the background beats and I just think this song has such a great flow and a great beat.”
6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
“I don’t really pay attention to the lyrics that much. Most of what these rappers are saying just isn’t on the same level that I am on.”
 7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
“I don’t think it has had a major impact on my life. I listen for entertainment. I don’t really take it seriously. I guess some of it could be considered poetry, but I don’t think it has influenced my life one way or another. I just enjoy listening to it.”
 8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
“Positives, I think it gives like general society a view into a different kind of lifestyle and every genre of music makes everyone culturally diverse and knowledgeable about different areas of life that they may not have first hand experiences with. I think that’s a positive aspect. And then a negative aspect, I guess would be the promotion of violence and violent behavior. I don’t personally believe that rap music is dangerous, but some people may interpret the themes of the songs differently than I do, and may see this as a rapper telling them it is okay to carry a weapon or it is okay to live a life involved in gangs and drugs. The negative messages may be seen differently to a conservative mother listening to the music, or to an impressionable teenager.”
 9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
“Well when I was in high school I was a dancer in a dance company in Newark, New Jersey, which is very different than the suburban town that I come from. More than half of the dancers were black and the majority of the songs were hip hop or rap songs, with hip hop dances. All of the girls were avid fans of rap music, and that opened my eyes up to a lot of new songs that I hadn’t heard on the mainstream radio and tv stations. I was able to learn new styles of dance through this experience, because I had not previously known what krumping or clowning were. There are so many dances that stem from hip hop music. Teach me how to dougie. Soulja Boy. Lean back. The Bernie.”
 10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
“I think I just took an interest from what I saw on tv and heard on the radio. I guess I just picked it up on my own. I just heard beats that I liked and became a fan”
 11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
“Um, not really. I guess I already had a view of the black community from my own personal interactions. I see the music as something to connect over, a common ground, but it hasn’t really had an impact on my views. If anything, I’d say tv had an impact on my opinions.”
 12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
“I agree. Because, it allows different people from different economic, social, or cultural backgrounds to relate to one another and to get an insiders perspective on

- a lifestyle that they may not have been privileged to see. People are all able to enjoy the music, because it is entertainment. Its just a common link that different ethnic cultures can relate over.”
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?
 “I think the white involvement shouldn’t be an issue at all. Rap music kind of has its own message that it is trying to share with the world, but that shouldn’t be related to race whatsoever. It’s a different way of expressing yourself through rhyming and kind of poetry. It’s a different kind of music. You might think classical music is only for stuffy old white men, but that’s not true. Music and art don’t discriminate. Anyone from any race can get involved.”
14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?
 “No I don’t think so. I just see rap as music and entertainment. I don’t think these issues occurred to me, because I just want to listen and enjoy the music.”

Brandon

Age 21

White male

From Newport, RI

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
 “Hip hop is one of my favorites but I like a lot of electronic music, I listen to a lot of dubstep. But when you mix genres together I think it turns out to be very well in some cases”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
 “The beginnings of rap music, I thought it was great. When I was growing up I loved rap music, there were a lot of great artists putting out really good material. But now, I can’t even stand listening to rap music on the radio. Its become commercialized and the rapping has no emotion, its not raw, its all basically talking about nothing. Its talking about how rich I am or what kind of cars I drive. Its not talking about the kinds of things that Biggie and Tupac used to talk about or even Eminem in his early career. There’s nothing really new that’s coming out anymore, at least that you hear on the radio.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
 “Every day. On the website we post songs every day. So I’m listening to rap every day. But usually its not mainstream rap. It’s a lot of rap that’s found mostly on the internet. You’re not gunna hear it as much on the radio unless it becomes popular.”
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
 “Yeah. Well here’s the thing. I think that initially the reason that a lot of white kids got into listening to rap because it was a completely different dimension of music and people at least white kids when we were growing up didn’t understand where this was coming from initially. And then we like really embraced how raw

- it was or living a different type of lifestyle was. That's what attracted me. It depends what kind of rap music you're talking about. If you're talking about, I mean no I don't think I'm a gangster, no I don't think I'll be shooting up anybody any time soon. But something about the way that rap flows and the way that people can rhyme different words together, its poetry its nice it sounds great, when its done right."
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
 "I used to love Eminem in the beginning. Its kind of different for me now. His newest albums pretty good but the one Relapse was terrible. I think my favorite rapper is Obie Trice to be real with you. But I was a huge Tupac fan. Even more so, I like Tupac way better than Biggie even though Biggie's flow is probably better than Tupac's. Tupac had a lot more to say and I think that's what I liked about him. Favorite song is hard. It depends on the artist. My favorite rap song, I really like Jay-Z's "My First Song" There's a lot in that song that I liked. I like the beat. I liked the flow. I like how when he was young. All that was good."
 6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
 "I don't know if I could think of a specific lyric, but a lot of Eminem's stuff when I was growing up if I was angry at my parents or angry at something, you could always relate to what he was saying cause he was just an angry white kid. Just like a lot of a lot of other angry white kids that are pissed off at their parents or pissed off at their teachers and whatnot."
 7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 "Its made me love music. That's one genre that I grew up listening to. All the way through high school I listened to basically only rap. And then in the later years of my high school I started to realize that what I was hearing on the radio kept getting worse and worse and worse and it kind of turned me away from it. Which kind of sucks. But my brother got me into it. He was all about the west coast rappers like Snoop Dogg and Corrupt and its probably influenced my life in the fact that I'm a music lover because of it. I probably want to make a career in music. Probably not in the production side."
 8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
 "The positives of rap music is that it allows people to express themselves, well good rap music, on a level where a lot of people can understand it. But some of the negatives stem from the fact that it gets commercialized, and once it gets commercialized the creativity is taken away. Its completely taken away from it. You hear a lot of rappers, their best stuff is usually when they're younger because that's when they are most creative and they are not influenced by other people. I mean some people that have been able to escape that are like Jay-Z. He's been able to constantly bring up great stuff but even he's had downfalls at some points."
 9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
 "Last year Will Mahoney and I were pretty much fed up with listening to music on the radio and we realized that there were a lot of artists and a lot of music coming from people that just don't get their name out. So last March we started a

- website, a music blog, where we could put up music every day, stuff that you probably wouldn't hear on the radio, and it allows artists to get exposed. In the process, everyone else gets to explore new music, whoever goes to visit the site. Every day we get tons of emails from artists and we follow a lot of artists on twitter. Basically we are following different types of people on SoundCloud. You can follow tons and tons of artists and it immediately tells you when their new stuff is coming out. We get money through ads, and were having parties starting soon."
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
- "I mean honestly through my older brother because he's the one that got me into rap music. And then I just loved listening to stuff with him when I was younger. And then when that all faded away basically in high school I kind of wanted to bring my life back to a place where I could still listen to good music. In the end of high school I wasn't really listening to music that much because I just thought it was bad."
11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
- "No. I mean, its funny. This is how it affected me when I was younger. When I was in seventh or eighth grade I used to have velour suits, I used to wear air force ones, headbands. I completely forgot about this. I had like Cash Money Records and Ruff Ryders chains. And I was going to an all white, boys private school, in Greenwich, Connecticut. So like I would be going to school with a blazer and tie during the day and then on the weekends or when I got home from school I would just turn into an idiot. I really was just submerged in the culture. I just liked it. My parents didn't really care. I would go home from school and watch BET everyday. Freestyle Fridays. 106 and Park. Rap City the Basement."
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- "I agree. I agree. There's one problem though. I think for white people because they hear the N-word so much in rap songs, sometimes they let it slip when they know they shouldn't but its like by accident. And that is not helping mend race relations. But I think it has helped mend race relations because all types of people love rap music, its not just black people. And for a lot of artists, and rap shows that I've been to its been a lot of white people there, maybe the majority are white people."
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?
- "It doesn't matter if you're white or not. Its just if you're a good rapper. I think that 50 cent put it pretty well, and he hates on just about everybody. 50 Cent loves Asher Roth because he talks about what he knows. He's not talking about like guns and stuff, he's talking about I love college, growing up in the suburbs and stuff like that. And if you can rap about what you know and other people can relate to it and you have some sort of good rhyming abilities, I don't think it matters. I mean you have tons of these college white boy rappers that are coming

- out that suck at rapping its different. Everyone hates on Sam Adams, because they personally know him which a lot of us do.”
14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?
 “Its brought up, I mean, the thing about it is like rap music for me isn’t what it used to be, which sucks. But um, what there seems to be I guess there are new genres breaking out. I’ve been listening to a lot of UK rap from England and stuff and they’re rapping over a lot of electronic beats, a lot of dubstep, and what I’ve noticed from that is even though their sound is completely different, cause they’re not usually that mainstream, it kind of brings me back to what I used to like listening to because its raw, and it talks about things that people are living. Its not talking about nonsense.”

Ryan

Age 21

White male

From Scarsdale, NY

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
 “Hip hop”
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
 “I believe rap music is an expression of one’s inner most thoughts similar to a poet, in the way that they put rhymes together, they cross reference different ideas, whether political, whether social. And well, in general I’d say they really are our artists and that’s my single favorite form of artwork.”
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
 “I listen to rap music close to thirty minutes a day, whether its in my car traveling here to there, whether its in my room before I go to sleep or during my downtime during the day.”
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
 “Some of them. And I honestly can’t say that I can relate to all of them. A lot of hip hop music is based around the urban culture that I can’t honestly say I’ve been opened up to throughout the course of my life. On a lot of songs, that lyrically include these themes that I can’t relate to, I still appreciate them for the melodies, for the rhythms, for the artists’ ability to flow through the song, and rhyme while keeping pace with a sometimes very difficult beat.”
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
 “My single favorite artist is Jay-Z. I believe he is an absolutely flawless example of a man who can take these inner city ideas and really put them onto a global scale, in allowing fans who aren’t maybe as urbanely cultured as one might expect can still relate to a lot of his lyrics and he just sounds so beautiful the way he moves through a beat it really is tremendous what he can do with his words. No different than any, like I said, a great poet, William Shakespeare, Alan Ginsburg, Sean Carter. Favorite song, I’d say that changes. Probably really from month to

- month, it really depends on what you're in the mood for. And there's so many different styles of hip hop that you can't really focus down on just one. It really taps down into a lot of emotions and really what you're feeling there's always a song to go with it. Somebody who can relate somebody who can put it into words and put it on a melody that is really satisfying to the brain.
6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?
 "Hmm, lets see. That's a tougher one to answer. I'd say, and if I had to answer the last question as well, I'd tell you that my favorite song is called 'My First Song' by Jay-Z. Where he really just lays it out for you, tells you exactly what he's about, how he's going to succeed, where he comes from, and really just kind of puts it out there in a time when he was already pretty big but nowhere near as big as anybody thought he would possibly be. And he was really just letting the community, all of his fans, anybody who would listen, he was letting them know how big he was about to become. And that really inspires me to be I guess the most I can be."
 7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 "Well I can tell you while I can't relate to the urban facts that are presented in these songs, after listening to them so many times I've actually feel that I've started to understand them and I feel like I have a better knowledge of urban culture and that really makes me feel good. I've been able to develop relationships with inner city kids who I normally wouldn't have anything in common with but who I've bonded with through hip hop, through Jay-Z, through a lot of other artists. And I've met a lot of really nice people who I probably otherwise would have nothing to relate over."
 8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
 "Well, I'm gunna start with the negative just because that's the one that people are so quickly to point out. A lot of people think they inspire bad things. A lot of people think they inspire drugs, they inspire violence but honestly this is more to me a process of free speech, of these people telling you their stories. They're not telling you to go do this drug or go kill this person. They're telling you maybe this is what I've done and you should learn from this, this is what you shouldn't be doing. They're telling you how they've grown from their experiences and how they formed really individual personalities based on these set experiences. I think that's a great positive. It teaches kids to speak out when other people, when really society as a whole, might tell you what you have to say is not appropriate. And I think that's very important."
 9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
 "I've tried rapping myself a little bit. And I'm gunna be completely honest with you, I really just don't have the voice for it. I don't have the sort of I don't know swagger. I don't have the swagger, I don't have the flow, and I'm gunna tell you I don't have the talent to become someone respected in this field. I can do it as a hobby, it makes me feel good. It allows me to release the same emotions I can tell exactly whats on my mind and if I can send it right into this beat that is just as complicated as anything my favorite artist would do that makes me feel good. And I very much enjoy allowing my friends and family to listen to what I have to

- produce just so they get a better sense of me and so they can I guess that's really about it."
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
- "I have to credit my best friend Peter from home. He took on this endeavor. He's exactly as you'd describe me. A Jewish kid wearing khakis who decided I love making hip hop beats, I love producing these songs, I love putting these sounds together to do these incredible things. And he started to point out these little things in specific hip hop songs that I already knew the songs but he would point out specific parts of the beat that separated them from others. That's where I started to realize how guys like Dr. Dre or guys like Pharell Williams are really so far and beyond your average guy in the business whose just throwing out this kind of any of the bullshit you hear. This waka flaka guy, who else. I'm also thinking all the rest of these clowns, whoever they are, just don't measure up. But he really showed me how I guess intricate and detailed these songs can be and I started listening to songs for the beats and once I got into the beats it just happened to be the same time I was getting into poetry and big time writing and I really just saw this correlation right away and just wanted to see so much more of this stuff. Hear these people who are stereotyped as thugs or you know ghetto guys who are just as smart as the most brilliant people this world has seen. The guys that can, the Albert Einsteins, the Sigmund Freuds, I would put Jay-Z on a level with both of those guys, just in raw intelligence."
11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
- "Hmm. Well its altered it for the better I guess. In a way that maybe I was without being ignorant or naïve, probably more naïve than anything, I just didn't understand black culture and this really helped me. I really don't see them as any different I always see people as people and that hasn't changed since I was a little kid. I guess its more of an understanding for parts of their culture that otherwise wouldn't have made sense to me. For example the hairstyles the baggy clothes, its not a ghetto thing that makes these people do this, it's a culture and it's a way of life and people really don't get to see that on a regular basis."
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- "I both agree and disagree. I agree that it has brought the sort of mixed culture between two different types of people because of this bond that we can share as far as great music goes, we absolutely. Like I said I come from an area that doesn't have very many African Americans and I came to a school that has a few more and just because of my knowledge of hip hop and my appreciation for the same music that these kids do I've made some really some of my best friends are African American now and I can sit and listen to music with them all day and just laugh about it even if they cant talk with me on the golf course, they're really still my friends. But at the same time the people who wont take the time to understand the music, the people who have no interest, these people that are stuck in this older generation of music that has been dominated by white society has been forced up the African American community just by the outlets in the radio and the media and these people really refuse to even try and listen to hip hop because of

- these stereotypes that society has already given them. Its really the older generation that really is even appalled by what's going on in this world of freedom of speech that they continue to ride as such a great thing, meanwhile they're all degrading it even just by denouncing hip hop as a legitimate form of art. And I think over the years that will change as these people sort of grow out and a new younger generation of kids comes up. And really I think in the long run there will be a lot more connections between white and black cultures and we'll see a lot changes for the better."
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?
- "I would say they're terrible people. They're just as terrible as the white racists. They are just as racist as your run of the mill black guy who calls a white guy a cracker on the street. They should have the same ideas that we have that it should be about freedom of expression, that it should be about being yourself that it who you are. I mean a lot of this has been thrown onto Eminem for being the first really successful white rapper and I think at the beginning a lot of black culture and the rest of the hip hop community sort of laughed at him just for being white. But if you ask any hip hop fan white or black right now, they'd be very fast to tell you how amazing hip hop has become because of Eminem. How many strides the genre of music has come forward because of Eminem's talents. He's also one of these guys that is just so smart that people don't understand because of the image that he puts up. And the truth is if he didn't put up this front of abuse of poor background if he didn't have the same crummy upbringing as a lot of these other urban guys then he probably wouldn't have even been taken seriously at the beginning, and that's really a shame. I think all fans of hip hop should support the up and coming artists white or black."
14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed?
- "Well this is really a topic that a lot of people don't think about and it has made me think a lot. I probably will go home and listen to a little Jay-Z and a little Eminem, get both perspectives. And the truth is I already know that I'm not gunna be swayed whatsoever by it, I'm just gunna see two unbelievable artists, and gunna hear their unbelievable rhymes and just incredible ability to move through a song. And I just hope a lot of other people can see hip hop for what it is, see the art form and I really just have a lot of respect for these guys for putting themselves out there. Maybe I'm gunna try a little bit harder to produce a little bit more of my own music. And hopefully in the near future even if nobody wants to listen to me maybe they'll take my lyrics and somebody with that beautiful deep voice will just spit my lyrics out and produce a hit."
15. Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?
- Maybe one question. I definitely see more of a difference in styles based on geographic location as opposed to white or black. If you listen to Eminem and Dr Dre, another guy, they both have this west coast sort of swagger, even though Eminem is from Detroit he did the majority of his hip hop work out in California and you can hear the sort of west coast style that doesn't really have anything to do with White or Black. And if you listen to Jay-Z whose an east coast guy from

New York you;ll definitely hear that Eminem and Dr Dre are a lot more similar to each other than either of them are to Jay-Z even though Dre and J are both black and Eminems white. Like dirty south rap, Lil Wayne is about to be the biggest thing this world has ever seen, if he's not already. And likewise Dre and Eminem are both much more like each other than either of them are to Lil Wayne. And that is it."

Laura

Age 20

White female

From Livingston, NJ

1. What is your favorite kind of music?
"Definitely rap music."
2. What is your opinion of rap music?
"Well I think its an impressive genre of music. It is relatively new compared to other genres, yet it gains more attention and creates more controversy than any other genre of music. I just have to give a lot of credit to the people that are making rap music their lives. Its not easy to rap. It takes a lot of courage to get in front of an audience and share your innermost feelings. Rappers are putting their lives out there for the world to see. Its impressive."
3. How often do you listen to rap music and in what setting?
"Every day. I am always listening to rap in the car or when getting dressed. But also when I'm writing a paper in the library, I'm listening to rap music. In that sense it calms me and helps me to get my words out."
4. Can you relate to rap music, ie the lyrics and the themes?
"Well not necessarily. I haven't had the majority of the experiences that these rappers are discussing in their music. But on the flip side, under the hard exterior of guns, drugs, and violence, I can relate to the underlying message. So I guess it depends what song. Sometimes it takes a few times of listening to the same song over and over again before you really get what they are trying to say."
5. Do you have a favorite rap artist or song? Who is your favorite artist, or what is your favorite song, and why?
"I think my favorite artist right now would have to be Lil Wayne. Some people criticize him for being too commercial, but I think he puts out great songs consistently. And he's just really an entertainer. I also like the way he helps to get new artists started like Nicki Minaj or Drake. He has done so much for their careers in the last year alone. Its incredible. Favorite song would have to be 'Renegade' by Jay-Z and Eminem. I just love the juxtaposition. They are addressing their critics and throwing it back in their faces. Its just a big fuck you. I also just love to hear the differences in the voices of Eminem and Jay-Z. They are two of my favorites as well, so its great to see them collaborate on such a great song."
6. What rap songs or lyrics have you found influential in your life?

- “Well the chorus of ‘Renegade’ says, ‘Never been afraid to say what’s on my mind at any given time of day cause im a renegade. Never been afraid to talk about anything.’ Its just so refreshing to hear an artist say that they are being completely honest and putting it all out there. They want their fans to hear their thoughts. That’s the beauty of rap music right there.”
7. How do you think rap music has affected you?
 “I think it has opened my eyes to a different demographic of people that I previously was unable to relate to on a personal level. It just allowed me to see the world in a different way. I don’t know exactly what I’m trying to say, but I think the world would be drastically different without rap music.”
8. All genres of music have positives and negatives. What do you see as the positive aspects of rap music? The negative?
 “I guess the positives are just the way it allows people to express themselves. Freedom of expression. Rappers are not afraid to put it all out there. The negatives for me are of course the negative lyrics that are highlighted in the media. The controversy is blown out of proportion, but I don’t like the way that women are represented in some rap songs. And like killing is just unnecessary. Biggie and Tupac didn’t have to die because of music. That’s such a waste of talent! So yeah, negatives are violence, misogyny, drugs, etc. But its all really not as bad as the negative media makes it seem.”
9. What is it that you do that relates to music and rap music?
 “Well I would just have to say that I am an avid fan. And I guess from some of my work experiences in inner city schools, I’ve used my interest in rap music to try and relate to the girls that I am working with. But its not like I’m trying to become a white female rapper. God, that would be funny.”
10. What or who influenced you to become involved in rap music in regards to your DJ, rapping, website etc.?
 “I don’t know if anyone really influenced me. But I remember my first experience with rap music. My family was moving the summer before second grade, so I was left alone a lot. I just remember watching MTV, because no one was around to tell me I couldn’t, and Notorious BIG came on with his video for ‘Hypnotize.’ I loved the beat. I loved the song. I was like dancing alone in my living room. I think that got me hooked.”
11. Has the culture of hip hop altered your view of the black community? If so, how?
 “I don’t think I would say it altered my view, but maybe it gave me a little more exposure to the black community. I guess its just a culture that I find very interesting.”
12. It has been said that rap music has helped mend race relations? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 “Well I don’t know. I think maybe, because it allows a lot of white people to have a view into the lives of certain black individuals, and allows them to relate to one another. But I don’t really know. This is a hard one.”
13. A fair number of people are critical of the white involvement in rap music. What is your opinion on that issue? What would you say to people who criticize white involvement in rap music?

“I just think that is stupid. Rap is music. Music and entertainment don’t discriminate based on race, or at least they shouldn’t. It just seems ridiculous to say that you can’t be involved in a certain genre of music because of your skin color.”

14. After having this conversation have your thoughts about rap music changed? Were there any questions that I did not ask but you would like to address?

“Um I don’t think my thoughts have changed. But this makes me want to go put on a long playlist and just get lost in the music. I think its going to start with ‘Renegade’ maybe followed by some Common and Tupac. I’ll just see where it goes from there. That’s a favorite of mine. To make a great playlist. It just has the ability to change my mood and calm me down.”