

UNDERSTANDING THE WHITE, MAINSTREAM APPEAL OF HIP-HOP MUSIC:  
IS IT A FAD OR IS IT THE REAL THING?

by

JANISE MARIE BLACKSHEAR

(Under the Direction of Tina M. Harris)

ABSTRACT

This study explores why young, White, suburban adults are consumers and fans of hip-hop music, considering it is a Black cultural art form that is specific to African-Americans. While the hip-hop music industry is predominately Black, studies consistently show that over 70% of its consumers are White. Through focus group data, this thesis revealed that hip-hop music is used by White listeners as a means for negotiating social group memberships (i.e. race, class). More importantly, the findings also contribute to the more public debate and dialogue that has plagued Black music, offering further evidence that White appropriation of Black cultural artifacts (e.g., jazz music) remains a constant, particularly in the case of hip-hop. While the findings are not generalizable to all young White suburban consumers of this genre of music, it may be inferred that a White racial identity does not help this group of consumers relate to hip-hop music.

INDEX WORDS: Hip-hop Music, Whiteness, Rap Communication Messages, Racial Identity Performance, In-group/Out-group Membership

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## DEDICATION

*To the strong and rich legacy of the Silas family;*

*Also, to my late grandmother, Emily Silas Blackshear*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
The History of Black Music .....	6
Hip-Hop Music Revealed .....	19
3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	30
Interpretivism .....	30
Whiteness as an Area of Study .....	31
Social Identity Theory .....	36
Purpose of Research .....	38
4 METHOD .....	40
5 RESULTS .....	48
Research Question 1 .....	48
Research Question 2 .....	62
Research Question 3 .....	70
6 DISCUSSION .....	80
Whites' Appropriation of Hip-Hop Music .....	80
Conclusion: Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research .....	94

REFERENCES .....	98
APPENDICES .....	104
A    INFORMED CONSENT .....	104
B    INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	106

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“Let’s be honest. All this fascination with hip-hop is just a cultural safari for white people” –Kevin Powell, Newsweek 2003 (quoted in Kitwana, 2005)*

Since its inception, hip-hop music has always been a cultural form of expression for marginalized racial groups, namely people of color (Kitwana, 2005). Even though hip-hop originally incorporated Latinos living in the South Bronx of New York, this art form is commonly known for documenting the experiences of African-Americans living within a racially hierarchical society where this group is seen as being at the bottom of the typology (Crossley, 2002; Cummings & Roy, 2002; Grant, 2002; Kitwana, 2005; Oliver, 2006). Hip-hop has been, and still is, a medium through which members of this racialized group can vent and discuss the struggles of being Black in America.

Cummings and Roy (2002) argue that hip-hop “...operates through both resistant and empowering voices to create a sense of unity in the African-American community against dominant and oppressive structures” (p. 71). At best, much like the hip-hop clothing line FUBU (i.e., For Us By Us), hip-hop can be summarized by African-Americans as an art form “created for us, by us.” Famous hip-hop writer Tricia Rose argues that hip-hop “is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins...From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” (as quoted in Grant, 2002, p. 5).

History has documented the strict in-group/out-group boundaries put in place by African-Americans to protect the group’s cultural music art forms (such as jazz and the

blues) from outsiders, namely Whites (Henderson, 1996; Ozersky, 2000). Hip-hop in particular, though, is the latest talked about African-American art form that has struggled with its in-group/out-group distinctions because of its broad fan base (Kitwana, 2005). To be specific, members within the hip-hop community have tried to protect the culture from being taken over by the White mainstream society. In-group members have had to closely monitor who gains entry into or membership in the hip-hop community so that its purpose of being a marginalized outlet of expression remains in-tact (Grant, 2002; Hess, 2005). While the roots of hip-hop can be traced back to specific racialized communities, its in-group and out-group boundaries are now being blurred more than ever. Hip-hop has expanded from the urban, inner-city neighborhoods to the once forbidden mainstream society. In fact, it has been noted by many scholars that over 70% of hip-hop's consumers (music purchasers) are suburban, middle-class Whites (Kitwana, 2005; Morgan, J., 2002; Yousman, 2003). Because of hip-hop's expansion, in-group members have had to deal with issues of granting admittance to White, suburban youths who have embraced the culture as if it is their own.

Many people within the hip-hop community strongly advocate that hip-hop is, and will always be, Black culture. Crossley (2005) contends that hip-hop is "...a modern response to the social and economic ailments of the collective African American community..." (p. 504). While this may be true, very few scholars have set out to investigate the new phenomenon of White hip-hop listeners, or to understand why suburban youths are attracted to this Black form of expression. This phenomenon is of particular importance since this genre of music, as well as others, is heavily grounded in a strong cultural and racial identity that gives voice to those experiences that are

marginalized from mainstream forms of musical expression. Thus, it is not known whether White listeners of hip-hop even adopt this cultural medium in an attempt to co-opt a Black identity or to represent Blackness. Furthermore, one has to also wonder what meaning is constructed from the hip-hop culture for White listeners, considering that it is the voice of people on the margins.

Since hip-hop's inception during the 1970s, many scholars have attempted to investigate the underpinnings of this art form, given that it is a cultural phenomenon that is specific to African-Americans. Most commonly, scholars have examined how hip-hop is a significant transmitter of Black cultural identity for African-Americans (Clay, 2003; Evelyn, 2000; Roach, 2004; Tyson, 2002). Some have looked at the ways in which hip-hop community members keep the art form specific to Black culture through the use of authenticity claims (Hess, 2005; Hess, 2006; McLeod, 1999), while others have studied hip-hop's misogynistic nature by exploring the degree to which women are objectified (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Morgan, 2005). A growing trend in this scholarship is for scholars to interrogate how White hip-hop artists negotiate their Whiteness within a racially specific culture that deems them as out-group members (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005; Ozersky, 2000). In terms of methodology, all of the aforementioned studies are content analyses that have only looked at meanings that are created within the lyrics of various hip-hop songs. Most of the studies in general focus on the rap artist themselves, the content (lyrics) of the songs, or both, and very few studies have critically and empirically examined how, through qualitative methodology, hip-hop's audience members are directly impacted by this culture. In addition, even fewer studies have

looked at the ways in which White consumers and audience members are affected by hip-hop.

As stated, there is a significant void in the hip-hop literature when it comes to the actual listeners of hip-hop, which is problematic given that over 70% of hip-hop's consumers are White, middle-class, suburban Americans (Kitwana, 2005; Morgan, J., 2002; Yousman, 2003). Thus, it is critical to understand how and why this demographic is attracted to a racialized art form that is specific to Black culture. It is also important to understand how White listeners of hip-hop use their racialized identities to understand the hip-hop culture that speaks to the margins. Such a study is important because it will help to shed light on how Whites understand their racialized identities, especially when contrasted with a culture that is explicitly rooted in African-American culture. In addition, the findings from this study will specifically benefit scholars because it will fill a void in the literature regarding the relationship between musical expression and the performance of a racial identity.

To date, there have been only two studies conducted that focus on White's consumption of hip-hop. In the first piece, Yousman (2003) argues that, "...the phenomenon of White youth identification with rap music [also known as Blackophilia] is linked with Blackophobia," which is the fear and dread of African Americans (p. 366). The author goes on to further argue that both Blackophilia and Blackophobia are both "interrelated aspects of White supremacy" (p. 366). Yousman asserts that Whites are attracted to hip-hop because it is used a socialization tool to fit in with peers (Blackophilia). He goes on to argue that these same Whites who consume Black culture also oppose ending institutional racism through programs like Affirmative Action, which

is how the Blackophobia and White supremacy ideas come into play. Even though Yousman makes very creative and interesting claims, the author fails to empirically test the assumptions through an investigation that directly involves White listeners of hip-hop. Nevertheless, Yousman's piece is a critical argument that solely focuses on the literature surrounding hip-hop. Kitwana (2005) offers a less critical approach to the study of this phenomenon in his book entitled, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*. While Kitwana's work is a great addition to the literature, it broadly and indirectly answers the conundrum of why Whites love hip-hop instead of other traditionally White musical genres like pop or country music. The book more-so speaks to how hip-hop can be used as a tool to bridge the racial divide between Blacks and Whites in America. As a context for exploring racial identity, the phenomenon of middle-class, suburban White Americans listening to hip-hop deserves direct, empirical attention that will aim to understand and accurately represent this demographic.

In the remaining pages of this thesis, I will seek to investigate why Whites, as out-group members in this context, choose to embrace a highly racialized cultural art form that is specific to Blacks. I will first discuss the history of Black music, which will help to show how Whites have (throughout history) appropriated genres of Black music. Next I will discuss the history of hip-hop and detail all aspects of the music. Then I will discuss the theoretical perspectives informing this study, followed by the methods, and then the results. Lastly, I will conclude with a discussion of the results and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The History of Black Music

*“The music of my race is something more than an American idiom. It is the result of our transplantation to American soil and it was our reaction in plantation days, to the life we lived. What we could not say openly we expressed in music.” –Duke Ellington*

Before hip-hop music can be thoroughly discussed and understood, it is important to first look at the earlier Black musical genres that have influenced the hip-hop movement. Those earlier genres have not only influenced hip-hop music in countless ways, but they also parallel the history of hip-hop’s creation and evolution as a musical art form. It has been a consistent trend in Black music that the genres specific to this group (i.e., the blues and jazz) stem from the oppressive socio-historical contexts of African-Americans that directly speak to the music, which is also true for hip-hop. The most notable characteristic that is seen within most Black musical formats, including hip-hop, is the White appropriation of the music and a predominately White fan base. It is not yet known why Whites are fascinated with Black cultural art forms, but this has surely been a mystery since the Black slave era. As such, the process of understanding why whites listen to hip-hop music is a part of a larger dialogue that seeks to uncover why Whites have been in love with Black musical forms for many years. In order to truly get at this issue of hip-hop appropriation/assimilation being discussed for this thesis, it is important to first explore the history of Black music so that the significance of such a project can be best understood in its proper context. The history of African-American

music ultimately serves as the backdrop for understanding White youths' fascination for hip-hop music. The history of Black music detailed in this review will include the blackface vaudeville minstrel shows, the blues, jazz, and rock 'n' roll.

### *Blackface Minstrelsy*

Whites' appropriation/assimilation of Black art can be traced as far back as to the vaudeville blackface minstrelsy period in our country's history. It is believed that Whites' fascination and preoccupation with Black music began with the demeaning, exaggerated parodies of this era. Blackface minstrel shows, most notably popular during the antebellum period, explicitly dehumanized African-Americans through the White mockery of Black life and art forms. As Osborne (2006) notes, "throughout [minstrelsy] there was a gross caricature of black people: the creation of an 'other' that [ultimately] brought confidence to the white audience" (p. 16). Minstrelsy consisted of Whites dressing up in exaggerated blackface (either done with burnt cork or grease paint) to humor White audiences through the use of supposed southern, Black plantation humor, dance, and song. White audiences loved the shows and the nationally crazed minstrel music, including famed writer Mark Twain who has written extensively about the beloved "nigger show" (Weathers, 2004, p. 14). For added effects, White minstrel "actors" would paint on full lips, wide noses, and big-bulging eyes in order to "truly" capture the essence of the African-American "animalistic" appearance. Famous minstrel caricatures included Sambo, Mammy, Jim Crow, and Zip Coon (Weathers, 2004). Not surprisingly, Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass outright detested blackface minstrel performances and performers. This historical icon is quoted as describing the minstrel performers as: "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion

denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander the corrupt tastes of their fellow white citizens” (Hughes, 2006, p. 33).

From the minstrel shows, Blacks were depicted in an extremely derogatory manner as being ignorantly child-like, foolish, and inferior. Depictions of Blacks from minstrel shows served as some of the most negative, influential stereotypes of African-Americans that helped to define this group in the minds of Whites. Many scholars agree that minstrel shows were ultimately used in America to socially construct the hierarchical ordering of the races, with the Blacks being at the bottom of the typology (Hughes, 2006; Osborne, 2006). As Hughes (2006) explains:

Minstrel caricatures of slaves served not only to define African-Americans in the minds of the dominant culture, but their performances also contributed to the growing sense of ‘whiteness’ among an ethnically diverse population in the urban North ...In short, the minstrel tradition not only demeaned blacks, it helped define what was and, consequently, what is American (p. 29)

Osborn argues that Whites’ perception of Blacks as the ‘other’ stems from the question of: “if black people are to be set free, how can we now mark them out as being different from us?” (p. 16). In addition, some argue that the blackface minstrel shows began out of both fascination and dread of African-Americans. This explicitly racist form of Black exploitation was the most popular form of entertainment during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which ultimately helped to “normalize” White appropriation/assimilation of Black cultural art forms.

Songs from this period were equally influential, if not more than the shows themselves. Minstrel tunes were horrific parodies of Black spirituals and blues music.

Popular tunes commonly sang during performances included “Massa’s In De Cold Cold Ground,” “Sing for the White folks, Sing!”, and “Oh! Susanna,” which sold over 100,000 copies (Curry, 2002). Even though most White minstrel performers were middle-class northerners unfamiliar with the Black southern culture, audience members nonetheless accepted the acts as soundly true depictions and took the songs to represent a/the “real Negro atmosphere” (Hughes, 2006, p. 28; Osborne, 2006). Hughes (2006) argues that Americans cannot truly understand our country’s history and racial divide without critically examining the minstrel songs that helped to shape our culture. Osborne (2006) continues by further arguing that blackface minstrels opened the doors for Whites (or ‘white negros’ as he calls them) to appropriate and co-opt Black music, all while taking the credit as the originators. Osborn refers to these as modern minstrelsy performances, and uses the White music artist Moby as an example of a “white negro” who stole his primary hits from less-mainstream Black music artists. This author stresses that, “what we are witnessing here is a form of Romantic primitism, one in which the ‘authentic’ black music of the American South is (once again) being presented to the audience as an ‘other’” (p. 20). Weathers (2004) argues that Black musical forms that followed, like the blues and jazz, were an indirect response to the grotesque appropriations of Black music and art depicted in the exaggerated minstrel shows .

### *The Blues*

*“You’ve taken my blues and gone—You sing ‘em on Broadway And you sing ‘em in Hollywood Bowl, And you mixed ‘em up with symphonies And you fixed ‘em So they don’t sound like me. Yep, you done taken my blues and gone”—Langston Hughes (1943)*

The blues is a highly distinctive African-American musical genre that has roots that trace back to the slave era and the years following the Emancipation. As with the

blackface minstrel shows, this musical form has had its share of white artist appropriation and audience assimilation. The blues was first seen in the southern states of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi (Walton, 1972). Blues music has not been extensively researched as other African-American art forms, but it is known [common knowledge] that this genre stems from the ill social conditions and living conditions of African-Americans during the slave era. In fact, Walton (1972) contends that the blues is a derivation of “slave music,” which is coded music that was used among slaves to secretly communicate with one another without being detected by their overbearing masters. Harriet Tubman, among many others, most famously utilized the secretly coded slave music to plan slave escapes. An example of this music is:

*I'll meet you in the morning.*

*Safe in the promise land;*

*On the other side of Jordan*

*I'm bound for the promise land.* (Walton, 1972)

As the Civil War was underway, slave music was not as secretive as it originally was due to slave masters' growing ability to decode the rebellious messages found within the songs, and as a result, it became more melancholy in nature. Early blues music included songs and lines sung by slave muleskinners and teamsters to communicate messages to overseers. Walton notes:

In order to let the overseer know where he was, the teamster would sing or holler, his voice carrying from plantation to plantation...The African expressive vocal techniques such as falsetto, slurs and trills were employed in Hollers, with each

teamster developing and initiating his own particular melodies, style, methods of phrasing and emoting (p. 29).

The soul-stirring, highly charged, oppressive emotional musical notes lie at the heart of blues music. Some scholars argue that without oppression and racism, there would be no blues (Walton, 1972). Frederick Douglass is quoted as saying this about early blues musical forms: “The teamsters would make the wood reverberate with their notes. These were not always merry. In these bursts of rapturous feelings, there was even a tinge of deep melancholy” (Walton, 1972, p. 29).

The most common Western interpretation of blues music is that it is exclusively sad music, which Walton argues is “further from the truth” (p. 29). This author posits that blues music is a mix of the joys and pains of Black life. The music itself helped to make life’s oppressive structures livable for African-Americans. Just as with hip-hop music, the blues was a direct response to the social conditions of in-group marginalized memberships. Blues music went from being a cappella Hollers to instrumentally accompanied (usually the guitar) ensembles of Black rural singers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Walton (1972) notes that the importance of this music was to bind the early experiences of in-groups members (also known as collective representation), which is still a distinguishable quality of African-American music, which is even evidenced in hip-hop music.

Since blues music was primarily being sung as field hollers on plantations, it became popularized among the Whites through the minstrel vaudeville performances. The first “professional” Black blues singers included the likes of Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, and Bessie Smith. These women were the first to sing the now-popular 12-bar

blues format, also coined as 'classical blues,' in order to appease the growing White audience. The Western term "classical" added "legitimacy" to the music and separated it from the blues music performed at lewd minstrel shows.

Over the years following, the blues maintained a steady Black audience fan base until about the 1960s (Kinnon, 1997). Currently, the blues is known for having a predominately White fan base. Kinnon (1997) notes that "Whites buy the blues recordings. They throng the blues clubs. They buy the blues concert tickets" (p. 86). This author goes on to add that "blues legends are sounding the death knell, warning Black Americans to reclaim their musical heritage" (p. 86). Some of today's Black blues legends who have definitely taken notice of Whites' fascination with the genre include Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor, and B. B. King. Koko Taylor even notes that her fan base is 95% White all over the world (Kinnon, 1997). The infamous House of Blues chain was even started by a White southerner, Isaac Tigrett, in an effort to preserve the Black cultural art form. One theory on the dramatic racial shift in the blues audience given by some experts is that "Blacks are [now] ashamed of the blues, which reminds them too much of sharecropping and shanties, cornbread and corn whiskey, and Saturday night juke joints" (Kinnon, 1997, p. 88). Nonetheless, the blues is just another example of White appropriation of Black music that helps to inform the hip-hop generation. B. B. King makes a connection between blues music and hip-hop by noting, "blues is the granddaddy to rap, and just as grandchildren carry their grandparents blood, rap and hip-hop carry the genes of the blues" (Kinnon, 1997, p. 88).

## *Jazz*

Jazz music arrived on the scene during the popularization of the blues. Jazz is the successor of ragtime music, which is said to have been created by African-American musician Scott Joplin (Walton, 1972). Jazz itself, however, has roots that trace back to New Orleans, Louisiana. In fact, many of the early New Orleans jazz bands were first Rag bands. It is believed that jazz developed out of rag music from the intense racial and cultural tensions of New Orleans during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Walton, 1972). Louisiana had the highest population of freed African-American slaves, in addition to the already existing White, Native-American, and Creole populations. Creoles were of “mixed” French, Spanish, and and/or African-American descent. Some creoles were “mixed” with African-American and French, while others were “mixed” with Spanish and African-American heritage. There were also some who were “mixed” with all three: French, Spanish, and African-American. The identity of Creoles ranged from White Creoles to Negro Creoles based upon skin complexion. Groups desperately tried to create distinct group identities in order to distinguish between the races/cultures; however, due to miscegenation and other forms of cultural and racial mixing, establishing distinct groups became difficult. Walton (1972) sums up the identity crisis experienced by the different groups as follows: “the question [ultimately] becomes one of who is white and who is black in this city of polyglot racial and ethnic mixtures...it is out of this status anxiety that Jazz developed” (pp. 47-48). This author goes on to note that, “Jazz helped to create a sense of common cultural identity and uplift of morale in Afro-American communities where conditions had been made ripe in intra-group conflict” (p. 50). Before jazz came on the scene in New Orleans, the music of the Black New Orleans residents primarily

consisted of the blues, spirituals, and ragtime piano; however, none of the musical genres were adequate for the alternating racial memberships of Creole and non-Creole Blacks due to respective members being able to identify with one or more racial/ethnic group. Jazz functioned as a social catalyst for change and provided the medium through which all Blacks of this city could come together, despite social classes, and celebrate being Black in America. Famous New Orleans jazz greats include Louis Armstrong, Joe “King” Oliver, and Buddy Bolden, and their form of jazz was considered to be “Dixieland jazz”.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, jazz gained popularity as it moved into the Black nightclubs of New York, Chicago, and St. Louis due to people like Armstrong and Oliver who moved North with many other Blacks (Aaberg, 2006). African-American jazz greats who contributed to the jazz era once it expanded beyond New Orleans included Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and John Coltrane among countless others. The music known for the improvisations of its great musicians ironically moved into recording studios to capture the essence of tunes that were usually only heard once due to the spontaneity of the music. Once the music was recorded on tape, it then opened up the door for Whites to appropriate the jazz musical tunes that Blacks had created with their creative genius so effortlessly (Barlow, 1995; Walton, 1972). From this, record companies gave preferential recording deals to the White jazz artists who copied the styles and music of Blacks; and as a result, the latter then became “sidemen” while the White performers took the credit (Walton, 1972). In addition, radio stations usually only played the White “canned” versions of Black tunes, subsequently popularizing jazz on the backs of Black performers. Out of the many, the two most

famous examples of White jazz artists who appropriated the music of the Black musicians include the *Original Dixieland Band* [emphases mine] and Paul Whiteman who ironically is regarded as the “King of jazz”. As a result of the popularity of White jazz performers, Walton (1972) notes that “Black musicians would then be obligated to adopt the character of white performer models in order to justify their professional competence” (p. 61). Black performers who chose to adopt the “whitewashed” jazz style were considered “sell-outs” (Bernard-Donals, 1994). Walton goes on to compare the appropriation of jazz music to that of the blackface minstrel shows where Whites would co-opt Black cultural art forms for their profit in an effort to please White audiences. Young, White Americans loved the jazz craze that was sweeping the nation and it was well-known that jazz was a Black cultural art form at heart. To combat its popularity among innocent White youths who were in love with jazz music, critics would demean the genre and only consider it “acceptable” when performed by a White artist. Anderson (2004) contends that “many jazz critics publicized their dislike of jazz music in order to express their dislike of African-Americans...[to critics], jazz was dangerous, unhealthy, or, even worse, a form of bayou voodoo” (p. 135). Critics oftentimes believed and argued that jazz caused harmful psychological deficiencies and learning disorders for Whites who listened to it since it was originally the music of “the savage Blacks” (Anderson, 2004). One White critic, Anne Faulkner, is cited as saying in the August 1921 issue of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* that, “America is facing a most serious situation regarding its popular music [jazz]. The serious situation is the plight of whites, especially white American youth becoming too black...the blame is laid on jazz music and its evil influence on the young people of to-day” (as quoted in Anderson, 2004, p. 142). When

Whites, such as Paul Whiteman, performed the music, it was accepted as “true” art and tolerated; however, when Blacks played jazz, it was considered to be “jungle noise” that would rot the brains of rebellious Whites who dared to listen to it. Despite these absurd claims, Whites (both artists and fans) could not get enough of this “contagious New Orleans voodoo” music.

### *Rock ‘n’ Roll*

*“Even though over time rock music has amazingly become a white bastion and whites have attempted to put their stamp on it, Blacks created rock”—Quincy Jones*

Rock ‘n’ roll was originally referred to as just rock music when its earlier pioneers such as Little Richard, Big Mama Thorton, Chuck Berry and Big Joe Turner created the Black musical genre. Big Mama Thorton first sang her hit “Hound Dog” long before Elvis Presley became popular; Chuck Berry was known for his hit song “Roll Over Beethoven” that became internationally known when The Beatles recorded it; and the White group Haley & the Comets popularized Big Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle & Roll”. Chappell (2001) argues that “it continues to be the biggest lie in the music industry that Whites created rock ‘n’ roll” (p. 145). This author continues by asserting that “lost is the reality that rock ‘n’ roll was actually born out of the belly of Black blues music and raised by Black artists in the 1950s” (p. 145). Rock music was originally played in Black nightclubs in cities like Memphis, Harlem, and Chicago. It was renamed “rock ‘n’ roll” by (White) disc jockey Alan Freed when White teenagers all across the country began to fall in love with the “race” music (Chappell, 2001). Race music like rock was stigmatized by white conservatives as being music that would corrupt White youth; and to move the music away from its negative, race stigma, Freed felt it necessary to rename the music to signify something “new” and “harmless” so that White teens

could continue to enjoy it. As a result, rock 'n' roll became the "pure" version of rock music that whites could openly dance to and enjoy in their homes.

Once rock was transformed into rock 'n' roll, White artists were then able to appropriate and perform the hits that Black artists had originally sung. Little Richard is extremely vocal about the appropriation of rock music by White performers and audience members. His hit song "Tutti-Frutti" was re-recorded and performed by White artist Pat Boone. In an interview with Ebony magazine, Richard (2001) angrily asserts, "They want to call me the Black Liberace. I was doing this before Liberace knew what was going on. I am the originator, the creator, the architect...Liberace copied me, and he made millions of dollars. The system wasn't fair then, and it's not fair now" (p. 145). Radio disc jockeys and racist record labels are blamed for encouraging the stealing of Black rock music through the use of payola strategies in order to appease White conservatives. Payola is an illegal practice of paying money to radio stations in exchange for the broadcast of records. Record companies saw the popularity that Black artists had with White audiences, and thus, decided to profit even more by bringing White artists into the mix to "legitimize" the genre.

While White Americans have generally denied the Black influence on rock 'n' roll, Chappell (2001) notes that the White rock artists themselves have never truly denied this fact. For example, Elvis made it known that he developed his soulful style by visiting southern Black churches and participating in all-night sings. Some quotes taken from the walls of the famous Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Ohio, thus illustrating for the masses the influence of Blacks on White rock artists. Here are few examples:

*“The Rolling Stones were influenced so much by Muddy Waters that they named their band after his hit song “Rolling Stones”.*

*Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead is quoted as saying, “When I took up the guitar, I wanted to play like Chuck Berry more than anything in the world”*  
(Chappell, 2001).

The late, great John Lennon expressed in an interview to *Ebony* magazine in 1972 that, “Chuck Berry is the greatest influence on earth. So is Bo Diddley, and so is Little Richard. There is not one White group on earth that hasn’t got their music in them. The only White person I ever listened to was Presley...and he was doing Black music” (p.146). Today, there are many variations of rock music that all derived from Black rock music. Rock ‘n’ roll is now considered to be a White-dominated musical industry with a predominately White fan base.

#### *Summary of Black Music History*

Musical genius Quincy Jones (1995) passionately explains that “a simple musical scale of 12 notes has given Blacks power no other medium has” (p. 178). It is through the power of music that African-Americans were able to find their voice through oppressive structures. It is for this very same reason that African-American scholars argue that Black music has been misused by the White general public who do not truly understand the socio-cultural contexts from which the music derives (Natambu, 1999). Many critics have historically argued that Whites who listen to the different forms of Black genres are rebellious against their culture and find refuge in African-American music (Barlow, 1995). This claim has never been empirically confirmed, even though it is most often cited. Jones (1995) asserts that “the crossover appeal of Black music was

largely accidental. Black artists were making music for Blacks, but Whites were digging it too. That's the way it's always been" (p. 180). Ultimately, the history of Black music has shown how African-American musical traditions have been marginalized art forms that have been pushed to the center by Whites. It is this historical backdrop of Black music that informs the hip-hop culture and music.

### Hip-Hop Music Revealed

*Rap [a.k.a. hip-hop music] brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society—Tricia Rose, 1994.*

Just as with earlier Black musical genres, hip-hop music has moved from the margins into the center through commercial, mainstream popularity. Hip-hop music is also known as “rap music,” which is just one cultural element of the hip-hop movement. Hip-hop is a cultural art form that started during the mid 1970s and can be traced back to the South Bronx, New York (Kitwana, 2005; McLeod, 1999). During that time, the South Bronx was heavily populated by African-Americans and Latinos. Hip-hop emerged as a cultural outlet for the youths of these two ethnics groups. Hip-hop historian Tricia Rose (1994) points out that hip-hop also emerged out of the socio-cultural conditions that affected its population, just as this was the case for the other aforementioned musical genres. To be specific, hip-hop grew out of the ill social conditions from the deindustrialization of New York in the 1970s. Rose sums up the horrific social conditions of New York (and other northern cities) during this era by asserting that:

cities across the country were losing federal funding for social services, industrial factories were being replaced, and corporate developers were buying up real

estate for luxury housing, leaving the working-class residents with limited affordable housing, a shrinking job market and diminishing social services (p. 27). This social condition was accompanied by a decline in available jobs and high unemployment rates. The economy of New York was severely hurt by the deindustrialization that it was compared to a Third World city. This significant effect most notably affected New York's poor minority populations. One of the most significant effects was that 30% of New York's Latino population and 25% of the African-American population lived at or below the poverty level as a result of the prevailing social conditions (Rose, 1994). In the midst of the state's economic woes, a statewide blackout (power outage) occurred, followed by major looting and violence. The scene was disastrous with the South Bronx being one the hardest hit cities. The effects of a failing economic system and power blackout were so significant for the South Bronx that President Jimmy Carter took a personal a visit to the site to survey the damage, and from this, the South Bronx became "the primary symbol of America's woes" (Rose, 1994, p. 33). Rose asserts that "depictions of black and Hispanic neighborhoods were drained of life, energy, and vitality. The message was loud and clear: to be stuck here was to be lost" (p. 33). It was from these horrendous social conditions that the hip-hop culture (as well as hip-hop music) was birthed. The teens of the South Bronx used hip-hop as a form of entertainment as well as a medium to vent about their social conditions and marginalized position within the American society (Kitwana, 2005; McLeod, 1999).

Hip-hop is comprised of four different elements, all of which helped to forge a new identity for the South Bronx teens during the destabilization of their communities.

The four hip-hop elements include: graffiti-writing, breakdancing, DJing, and rap music. Graffiti-writing is when individuals spray-paint artistic symbols on public buildings (i.e., the artist name, crew (or posse), and other symbolic images) (Rose, 1994). Graffiti-writing is also known as “tagging,” and the New York subway system was considered the most desirable canvas due to its visibility through and across many neighborhoods and cities. Tagging subway trains posed dangerous risks, however, status was achieved if an individual was able to successfully tag his/her identity despite the labor (e.g., physical dexterity) and strict time constraints involved with such a task. Breakdancing, the second element, developed between the end of the disco era and the beginning of the hip-hop movement. The term breakdancing derives from the type of dancing that would occur at parties when songs would be changed by the DJ and there was a *break* in the music. During these breaks in between songs, dancers would perform dance moves that imitated the rupture heard in the music. Rose (1994) describes this hip-hop element as, “competitive, acrobatic and pantomimic dance with outrageous physical contortions, spins and backflips which are wedded to a fluid circling body rock” (p. 47). DJing, the third element, is a significant aspect of the hip-hop culture because it provides the instrumental soundtrack and “beats” for breakdancers, graffiti-writers, and rappers. The hip-hop DJ is responsible for “spinning,” or playing records, in addition to scratching the records. Rose explains that scratching is “a turntable technique that involves playing the record back and forth with your hand by scratching the needle against and then with the groove” (p. 53). The fourth and last element is that of rap music, also known as hip-hop music or MCing. Rap music is the hip-hop element under discussion for this project due to its appeal for the White, suburban youth. Although rap music was the last element to

emerge, it is considered to be the most prominent due to its global popularity. Rapping is a Black cultural form of rhymed storytelling and toasting, with messages being communicated in a creative, poetic way, very similar to the blues. Originally considered to be just “noise” for the Black, ghetto underclass, rap music was taken more seriously when the first nationally successful song, “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang, sold more than two million copies during the years of 1979-1980 (Bernard-Donals, 1994). Rap music has followed other Black musical genres by originally being at the margins and slowly finding its way to the center through White appropriation/assimilation. Nonetheless, rap music continues to be an integral part of hip-hop, just as the other three elements are. In fact, it was the combination of all four elements that allowed hip-hop to be a powerful force in helping the South Bronx teens to have a voice. As the years passed for the teens, hip-hop was no longer a form of entertainment but a way of being (Kitwana, 2005).

As hip-hop proved to be a successful outlet for the South Bronx teens, the powerful effects of the music, being an expression for youths of color, began to move the phenomenon into predominately African-American inner-city neighborhoods across the United States. Cities that caught on to rap music through their predominately Black populations include Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Newark, Trenton, Philadelphia, and Oakland. Most notably, however, hip-hop music had a very strong presence in the poor, gang-ridden communities of Los Angeles, CA (Grant, 2002). From the Los Angeles communities derived what is known as “gangsta rap.” Gangsta rap is a rougher, rawer version of rap music that is known for specifically documenting the experiences of black, urban males trying to survive in a physical environment where they

are viewed as already having two strikes against them: being Black and being a male. Just as it did for the South Bronx community members, hip-hop emerged in L.A. as a voice for the voiceless when their concerns were not being addressed by the political systems, specifically the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Hip-hop music was a true and genuine way for the poor Black teens to depict and discuss the struggles of being Black and finding one's place within a White society. Cummings and Roy (2002) assert that, "for African-Americans youth, rap music is a symbol of hope, increased pride, and self-esteem at a time when any other evidence of all three has been eroded by prevailing social conditions" (p. 60).

For many years hip-hop music remained a "private" cultural art form that solely represented Black life in America, and only in-group members could truly understand the experiences being communicated in the songs due to their shared (or similar) social position with the artist (Kitwana, 2005). In fact, hip-hop was seen by many mainstream political forces to be the rebellious medium that ought to be feared by the "average" White American, which was also the case for other previous Black musical expressions. According to Cummings and Roy (2002), "[critics] believe that rap music provokes violence, especially against police and Whites" (p. 60). This belief was especially common after the L.A. rap group NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) made a song entitled "*Fuck the Police*" in response to the horrific Rodney King police beating. Rose (1994) notes that Blacks endure racial profiling, harassment, and beatings at the hands of the police, and a common message communicated in rap songs revolves around the fact that Blacks do not have anyone to *protect them from the police*. Many believed that hip-hop music turned Black people into criminals, gang-bangers, and unlawful citizens, when in

fact it was used by these inner-city youths to tell stories of how they survived America's most oppressive social structures. During this time (during the early to mid-1980s), very few Whites dared to be a part of the hip-hop culture because of the highly negative connotations that were associated with it. White listeners who did take the risk of immersing themselves (as much as they could) into the hip-hop culture were "called out" as rebelling against parents, which was also the same rationale given for Whites who listened to earlier forms of Black music (Kitwana, 2005; Yousman, 2003).

In the 1990s, hip-hop music began to gain more attention from the mainstream media, yet remained a unique Black cultural art form with strict in-group/out-group boundaries. These boundaries were preserved in response to the historical legacy of Black music being appropriated by Whites (McLeod, 1999). In-group members were African-Americans and out-group members were White Americans. If Whites were allowed "membership" into the hip-hop culture, it was primarily because these individuals had experiences with a life of similar low socio-economic status, usually in urban areas that paralleled the experiences of many African-Americans (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005). Despite this shared standpoint, the hip-hop community was still very cautious about the admittance of Whites into their racial and cultural community. One of the first mainstream media outlets that contributed to hip-hop's diverse mass appeal, however, was a television show entitled *Yo! MTV Raps*, which debuted in the fall of 1988. The TV show paved the way for hop-hip and its music, which was once seen as a privatized society, to be open to the general public, including those who were not Black (McLeod, 1999). Bernard-Donals (1994) contends that *Yo! MTV Raps* allowed White listeners to eavesdrop on the private inner-city conversations that were originally

intended solely for African-American audiences. From this television exposure, print media outlets began to also take notice of hip-hop music, and it became a regularly criticized feature of *The New York Times*. Bernard-Donals (1994) notes that rap music began to move in the same direction as jazz did with its extreme popularity and highly publicized White criticisms. *Yo! MTV Raps* placed hip-hop music in a compromising situation: the rappers wanted to have their music widely recognized, but they did not want to “sell-out” to the White, mainstream audience as so many Black artists in the past were forced to do decades before.

After *Yo! MTV Raps* made its debut, the hip-hop culture skyrocketed and is now regarded as a niche of popular culture that is representative of American youths in general, regardless of their racial identity (Ozersky, 2000). Neal (1997) believes that the White commodification of hip-hop music is due to Whites being enticed by the sense of Black “otherness” being presented in the music. Crossley (2005) states that “Within 20 years, from 1980 to 2000, rap music went from underground cult status to the number one top selling musical format, complete with Grammy awards and mainstream corporate support” (p. 503). In fact, hip-hop’s appeal did not stop with America. Years since its inception, countries across the world were seeing the powerful effects of the hip-hop culture and music on people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This widening international appeal is also referred to as the hip-hop movement (Terry, Jenkins, LaFranchi, Prusher, & Kim, 1999). Hip-hop is now being used to market everything from cellular phones to fast food (McLeod, 1999), thus indicating its crossover appeal and marketability. While hip-hop has significant mass appeal for the younger American society, creative ownership remains squarely in the hands of African-

Americans, and it is perceived as representing Black life in America as it once did almost 30 years ago. In an effort to not repeat history, hip-hop community members have desperately tried to protect the music from the same pitfalls of White appropriation/assimilation that previous Black musical genres experienced. Crossley (2002) adds that "...for better or worse, rap music is [still] one modern response to the social and economic ailments of the collective African-American community, which include joblessness, disempowerment, and poverty" (p. 504).

When discussing the mass appeal of hip-hop and how it has permeated mainstream culture, famed critical scholar Cornel West coined this movement as "African Americanization" (Keels, 2005). This mass appeal has led to over 70% of Hip-Hop's consumers being outside of the African-American and Latino cultures from which this genre of music first derived. But how/why hip-hop, as a Black cultural expression, is loved and adored by many who are deemed racially as out-group members (primarily White Americans) remains unknown. Many scholars have posed their hypotheses about the phenomenon, but none of them have been empirically tested. To further complicate this conundrum, scholars note that hip-hop has consistently remained a true and authentic expression of Black culture over the years, privileging those Black in-group members.

#### *Claims of Authenticity Within Hip-Hop*

With the global appeal of hip-hop, in-group members have struggled to make sure that the art form did not drift too far away from its urban, inner-city roots as jazz and rock did. Oliver (2006) argues that "the significance of rap music is that it is a music that expresses views about the conditions, experiences, and aspirations of Blacks living in urban ghettos" (p. 925). McLeod (1999) notes that because of hip-hop's move into

mainstream culture, “hip-hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation...: being ‘inside’ a mainstream culture they had, in part, defined themselves as being against” (p. 136). This identity dialectic for hip-hop has made authenticity central to the culture in order to mark clear boundaries between it and the White mainstream culture.

Claims of authenticity within hip-hop have always centered on staying “true” to Black culture by not repeating the same mistakes of past Black musical genres (Grant, 2002; Hess, 2005). Put simply, hip-hop community members often make mention of “keeping it real.” Staying “true” and “keeping it real” are both central ideas to hip-hop that clearly define the boundaries between in-group and out-group members, or being Black versus being non-Black (Grant, 2002; Hess, 2005). With hip-hop representing Blackness, the authenticity benchmark has consistently been whether one is representing Blackness, or crossing the distinct membership line by representing Whiteness, typically seen in mainstream media. Hess (2005) notes that “MCs [rappers] market themselves through narratives of their place as ‘other’ within mainstream commercial culture” (p. 298). Authenticity claims seen within the hip-hop community acknowledge Blacks’ marginalized “other” position, while also helping to create a sense of hope and strength for this racialized group. In order to be deemed as an authentic hip-hop community member, one must consistently make explicit claims about the struggle of the Black experience despite the popularity of the music among Whites (Hess, 2006).

*Authenticity.* Authenticity is so significant within the hip-hop community that it helps to establish credibility among its members (Hess, 2005). Some MCs “keep it real” by rapping about the Black experience of systemic racism and poverty (Hess, 2006).

McLeod (1999) discovered over 800 “keeping it real” or “staying true” claims while empirically investigating the ways in which the hip-hop community steers clear of any attempts at or appearances of assimilation into White, mainstream culture. McLeod analyzed texts from rap lyrics, hip-hop magazines, and hip-hop Internet discussion groups and found that authenticity through the representation of Black culture was at the heart of the culture. She noted that the authenticity claims found were used to measure the credibility of in-group members, and “by dissociating oneself from ‘blackness,’ a hip-hop artist opens himself or herself to charges of selling out” (p. 141).

*Social location.* Another major part of the Black authenticity claim is related to social location (inner-city versus the suburbs). Social location is critical because “true” hip-hop comes from the inner-city dwellings, also referred to as “the streets.” According to Oliver (2006), “...for many Blacks...the streets is a socialization institution that is as important as the family, the church, and the educational system...” (p. 919). In addition, it is important to mention that the “the streets” function as a social site where the Black identity and struggle are learned, as well as a place where status and respect are given. “The streets” are starkly contrasted to life in suburban America. Again, this makes a clear distinction between hip-hop’s boundaries as a racialized culture and mainstream society. In order for hip-hop community members to be validated, one must come from the “streets” and have the rough lived experiences to match. Hip-hop artists oftentimes rap about their “street” struggle that is situated within the Black culture. Crossley (2002) notes that “African Americans in rap remain strongly segregated from their White counterparts in neighborhoods that are ripe with criminal gangs, drug abuse, violent crime, inferior schools, and poverty” (p. 505); therefore, one has to wonder even more

why White, middle-class suburban young adults listen to hip-hop music, and more importantly, how they position or situate their White racial experience, which is in direct opposition to Black culture as expressed through hip-hop.

Additionally, Hess (2005) suggests that a large part of authenticity claims for hip-hop relate to the audience as well. Hess argues that there is an audience dichotomy within hip-hop that separates “authentic” rappers from rappers who are seen as not having much credibility. Authentic MCs who “keep it real” rap to the “ghetto” or the “street,” while counterfeit MCs rap to mainstream, White suburban American. Since authenticity has proven to be of great important to the hip-hop community, it must be noted that the majority of the hip-hop artists do choose to rap to and about the “streets” in order to establish credibility (Hess, 2005). In fact, according to Grant (2002), “hip-hop provides a cultural space for African-American youth to question and interpret [their] social and economic conditions” (p. 6). As such, it is important to understand how hip-hop’s primary consumer base of White, suburban Americans situates itself within a Black-centered cultural art form. To be more specific, it is important to understand what meaning White middle-class Americans take from the messages and cultural/racial experiences existent within hip-hop, since it is recognized as an art form whose creators are expected to remain “true” and authentic by relating to Black culture and the poor, inner-city “streets”.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Interpretivism

As noted throughout this thesis, out-group (read White) identification with hip-hop is a fairly new phenomenon that has not yet been explored in social science research. It is for this very reason that the current study sought to understand the underpinnings of this inquiry of a socially significant cultural phenomenon affecting multiple audiences and racial/ethnic groups. This study was attempting to seek understanding from this study, this research is informed by a qualitative, interpretivist methodology. Interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed through the language, symbols, and norms of individuals. As Crotty (1998) explains, "...interpretivism attempts to understand and explain human and social reality" (p. 67). He also goes on to add that "the interpretivist approach, looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p. 67). In addition, scholars within the interpretivist perspective conduct research from an "inside" perspective versus an "outside" perspective (Crotty, 1998). This means that interpretivists engage in research and ask questions to fully understand phenomenon, not just to explain it. This methodology allowed me to investigate the "racialized" lived experiences of suburban, middle-class Whites in an attempt to understand how this group constructs meaning from a Black cultural art form such as hip-hop. So, to truly derive meaning from this study, I sought to understand the racialized standpoints of Whites who are avid listeners of hip-

hop music. As such, an interpretivist approach for this project was the only logical and appropriate methodology from which strong and significant data could be rendered.

In addition to using an interpretivist methodology, this study was also informed by two very specific theoretical perspectives: Whiteness and the social identity theory.

### Whiteness as an Area of Study

*“Whiteness is omnipresent yet invisible because it is everywhere and nowhere all at once. Contradictory difficult. Invisibly present unless we draw attention to it: white. Ubiquitously silent.”—Thomas West, 2005, p. 386*

One of the primary goals of this study was to understand the process by which Whites allowed their Whiteness as a racial standpoint to influence their interpretation of and identification with hip-hop music as a musical genre. Whiteness is a fairly new phenomenon to academia that seeks to explain the racial identity and lived experiences of Whites (Martin & Davis, 2001). Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe (2005) define “race” as “...the socially constructed ‘common-sense’ attitudes and actions associated with different races of people” (p. 363). Although the White racialized identity itself has been around since race was socially constructed, the language to describe the White identity has been void from the literature for many years due to the position of power that Whites have held in the U.S. (Miller & Harris, 2005). It is this position of power that Whites have had which leads Black youth to find their voice in hip-hop music. Many scholars contend that the idea of race and whiteness within this country models itself after racist hierarchical racial classifications that deem Whites to be the superior, ideal race with other races being inferior derivations thereof, even though there is no scientific grounding for this belief (Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliffe, 2005). In fact, many studies have argued “humans are 99.9 percent similar and that, indeed, there is only one race, the

human race” (Kennedy et al., 2005, p. 364). While this may be true, it has been noted throughout the race literature that racial classifications within the U.S. have primarily been based upon the politics, emotions, and history of this country, ultimately privileging the agendas of Whites Americans, causing Black Americans, in this case, to turn to music as their refuge. Kennedy et al (2005) argue that racial classifications within this country “emerged to justify the existence of slavery as well as the oppression of slaves, Chinese immigrants, American Indians, Jewish people, etc... ‘white people’ were presumed to be the superior race, thus deserving of freedom” (p. 365). The racial privileging of Whites was considered to be “the norm,” thus making the White race “invisible” and exempt from critical investigation and study over the years. Since White is considered to be the “norm,” how can members of this group *truly* understand the experiences of others who are considered to be derivations of the norm located on the margins (i.e., Blacks)? Prendergast and Shor (2005) contend that “White is the color of domination, unmarked and unacknowledged (by whites mostly) because domination works best when less is said about it and because dominance confers protection from scrutiny” (p. 379).

Famed African-American writer Toni Morrison is credited for being one of the first scholars to bring attention to Whiteness studies with her published book entitled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliffe, 2005). Kennedy et al. (2005) argue note that “in this highly influential book, she [Morrison] clarified that whiteness studies is not about individual white people per se; rather, it is about how whiteness as a cultural and racial category functions within U.S. language use and haunts U.S. people, literature, and institutions” (p. 360). It is also important to add that the study of whiteness is not an attack on white culture, but rather

an attempt to make the “invisible” visible through critical critiques. One of the critiques made within recent years is that Whiteness ultimately represents the ability to have power within society along with many other unearned privileges simply afforded because of one’s White skin color (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996; Martin & Davis, 2001; Miller & Harris, 2005). These are the very privileges and unfair injustices that Blacks indirectly (and sometimes explicitly) speak to in rap music. Peggy McIntosh (1988) refers to White privilege as a metaphorical invisible knapsack that she carries around with her all the time. She also goes on to add that, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 167). Due to the privileges associated with being White in America, whiteness has become a subject matter that has been looked upon as being an impolite topic of discussion among conservative Whites, thus buying into its ‘invisibility’ (Kennedy et al., 2005).

Another aspect of Whiteness is that it represents the “norm” by which all other groups are measured and judged, which implicitly makes the White racial identity the “standard” identity (Martin & Davis, 2001). This has ultimately caused all other racial groups to be looked upon as “different” and “ethnic,” while the White racial group is normal, neutral, and unmarked. One of the benefits of Whiteness studies is that it adds the White culture to the conversation of race instead of having it as oppositional or optional. As such, this study is able to point out distinct White cultural traits that are consistent among White hip-hop listeners instead of looking at each White hip-hop fan on an individual basis. It is believed that whiteness does influence the ways in which Whites are socialized into this world, just as this is the case with all other racial groups.

Kennedy et al (2005) further posit that “we should never talk about race without talking about whiteness since one would not exist without the other” (p. 366). Another significant claim of Whiteness studies is that a person’s Whiteness is made visible when contrasted to something that it is not. In other words, Whiteness has been made valuable due to the marginalization of blackness, as well as other racialized identities. Collins (1991) best describes this concept as dichotomous, either/or thinking, which she believes dominates Western thought. Lewis (2003) argues that, “One cannot determine who one is without determining simultaneously who one is not and in some manner, at least metaphorically, drawing a boundary” (p. 136). This claim is significant because as Asumah (2004) put it, “it is a truism that White Americans constantly fail to acknowledge their race as a group phenomenon,” unless in a context when directly contrasted with the other. Lewis (2003) even makes the case that “racialization processes are often easiest to see and identify at the borders between categories” (p. 134). These boundaries that are in place ultimately show distinct differences between who is “in” versus who is “out”. Put simply, the White racial identity is only recognized when White individuals are around other cultures that are non-White (i.e., Whites listeners of hip-hop should recognize Whiteness when listening to the ‘Black music’). Warren and Twine (1997) even argue that, “Blacks, more than any other racial group, serve as the defining other [for Whites]” (p. 207). Since Blackness serves as an anchor for Whiteness, it can be argued that White listeners of hip-hop recognize the societal power and privilege afforded them when listening to a musical genre that clearly represents a Black culture on the margins. It can be further argued that the power and privileged White racial identity of White hip-hop listeners can potentially prevent the members of this group from *truly*

understanding and relating to the lived Black experiences presented within hip-hop music.

Whiteness is a phenomenon that has primarily been studied within educational contexts. Scholars have mostly looked at how to incorporate Whiteness into pedagogical practices (Cook, 2004; Harris, Miller, & Trego, 2004; Harris, 2003; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003; Miller & Harris, 2005). Very few studies have steered away from whiteness as it relates to academia, and even fewer studies have examined whiteness within the context of hip-hop (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005; Kitwana, 2005; Yousman, 2003). Two of the hip-hop and Whiteness studies that do exist focus on how the White rapper Eminem makes claims of authenticity while negotiating his out-group racialized identity status within the hip-hop community (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005). In short, the studies demonstrate that although Eminem is White, his authenticity claims are supported by his low socioeconomic upbringing and inner-city dwelling, which closely relate to the Black culture depicted in hip-hop. Nevertheless, one still has to wonder how *suburban*, middle-class Whites negotiate their identity, which is in complete opposition to the hip-hop culture. As was noted earlier, only two studies have attempted to relate the study of Whiteness to the consumption of hip-hop music by Whites (Kitwana, 2005; Yousman, 2003), and neither of which addressed how White listeners use their racialized identity to construct meaning within this context. When attempting to understand why Whites embrace the hip-hop culture, it is critical to examine their racial positionality as out-group members. To be more specific, it is critical that we understand how one's whiteness informs the meanings created from listening to hip-hop music, hence the question, "How

does a person's White racialized experiences help in understanding a cultural art form that speaks specifically to the Black experience?"

### Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) is a social-psychological theory that was developed by Henri Tajfel during the 1970's to explain in-group and out-group identities and distinctions. The major premise of SIT is that identities are based upon social categorization (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). According to Hecht et al., there are three basic elements of SIT: (1) categorization, (2) identification, and (3) comparison. Firstly, categorization occurs when individuals place themselves in social group memberships such as racial categories. In fact, Knowles and Peng (2005) assert that SIT theorists have oftentimes used race as one of the criterion of social identification. Secondly, identification is when individuals use their in-group position to relate to others within that same category. Lastly, individuals tend to compare their social group to others in order to gain favorable biases for their social memberships.

Considering that race is a socially constructed categorization tool, SIT can best be used to explain the strict in-group/out-group boundaries that racial groups create, as with the boundaries put in place by the hip-hop community to distinguish itself from White, suburban, mainstream America. Similarly, Bartsch and Judd (1993) note that "...ingroup members should see their group as more homogeneous when confronted by a large and presumably dominant outgroup" (p. 471). This observation can potentially explain why hip-hop community members have desperately attempted to keep their Black racialized identity intact in spite of its overwhelming appeal to White listeners.

As previously noted, SIT posits that individuals create internalized identities based upon memberships within social groups. According to Hecht et al. (2005), “Social identities, in turn, connect individual to society through group memberships influencing individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in their relationships with members of other social groups” (pp. 259-260). Therefore, racial memberships bind people together, thereby helping to create a sense of group cohesion, as well as esteem. In addition, one’s racial position and standpoint will largely influence perceptions and interpretations. Thus, Blacks can understand and construct accurate meanings from hip-hop because there exist commonalities exist among African-Americans that stem from experiencing race in America, despite varying differences within the group. This notion alone creates boundaries around hip-hop, thus making it a racialized community that can best be understood through in-group membership.

In addition to the other fundamental assumptions of SIT, the theory has also broadened to include the study of Whiteness. With SIT, even though Whiteness has been marked as the “invisible” race, Whites still experience a group identity that is made clear when compared to the visible. According to SIT, it can be argued that White listeners of hip-hop *should* recognize their privileged racial social identities when observing the urban, inner-city, Black struggle that is inherent within the hip-hop community. In addition, members of the hip-hop community recognize their Black marginalized social identity by comparing it to the “center,” or White, mainstream America. Based upon SIT, both groups (Whites and Blacks) have created strict boundaries that can only be understood in relation to the other. In addition, the experiences that stem from each can only be felt and understood through membership in each respective group.

As the literature on Whiteness and SIT suggests, both theoretical frameworks help to inform the relatively new phenomenon of Whites listening to hip-hop, or White appropriation of hip-hop music. In fact, based upon the assumptions of each theoretical framework, understanding *why* Whites choose to listen to hip-hop and *how* this group constructs meaning from this Black cultural art form is now even more significant. Such inquiry is imperative because a language system has been created by social scientists and the like that facilitates true understanding and interpretation such a phenomenon. Based on SIT, racial identities are created and maintained through in-group and out-group distinctions. Whiteness theory contends that the White racial identity is marked by both societal power and privilege (McIntosh, 1988), which is in stark contrast to the Black social identity that is created within the hip-hop community. With both theoretical frameworks guiding the research, the complexities of this phenomenon can best be understood through an empirical study that speaks directly to White hip-hop listeners.

#### Purpose of Study

Considering the void within the hip-hop literature regarding identity and out-group status, the purpose of this study was to understand (1) why Whites choose to embrace the Black racialized culture of hip-hop, (2) to understand the connection Whites make between hip-hop music and Black culture, and (3) to understand how Whites create meaning from hip-hop music in light of their racialized and privileged position and membership within American culture. This study will be a great contribution to the hip-hop literature because it is important to understand how hip-hop's primary consumer base (suburban, middle-class Whites) position its racialized identity of power and privilege

within the context of a cultural phenomenon that gives voice to the Black American struggle reflected in the music. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Why are Whites attracted to hip-hop music, considering it is a Black musical art form?

RQ2: What relationship do White consumers of Hip-Hop music believe exists between hip-hop and expressions of Black identity?

RQ3: How do White listeners negotiate/position their Whiteness as consumers and listeners of Hip-Hop, where Black identity is central to this art form?

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

#### *Focus Groups*

This study was conducted from a qualitative perspective using methods that are commonly cited in other qualitative works. This study sought to answer the research questions by using focus groups as the informed method of inquiry. With focus groups, Marshall and Rossman (2006) mention that the groups can include 4-12 people "...who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study's questions" (p. 114). Focus groups also allow researchers to obtain quality data with more subjects than other qualitative methods like in-depth interviewing. The focus group method was a significant choice for this study because participants were grouped and interviewed based upon their White, racialized social identity. It has been shown throughout the literature that Whites do not usually think of themselves as belonging to a White racial group (sources); therefore, talking about whiteness (which can be a sensitive/controversial topic) within a group setting was used to help make the participants feel more comfortable. Also, the principal investigator of this research did not want to make participants feel as if they were being "singled-out," so the focus group method was the most viable choice. Interviewing participants within their racialized social group has also proven to be a significant factor according to SIT. Since SIT also posits the social memberships influence values and beliefs, using focus

groups helped participants to articulate meanings that are specific to their White racialized experience.

### *Participants*

For this study, four focus group sessions were conducted, with each group having 4-6 participants. There were 19 participants total who participated in this study. To be specific, there were a total of six male participants and 13 female participants. All participants were self-identified hip-hop listeners and consumers recruited through the Speech Communication (SPCM) research participant pool who claimed to have bought at least three hip-hop CDs within the last year, as evidenced by demographic information collected from students. By participating in the study, students fulfilled their research requirement, which is a part of all basic-level Speech Communication courses. With this method of recruitment, SPCM instructors announced the study in their respective classrooms and encouraged students to sign up if eligible. Specific eligibility criteria for all participants were that students self-identify with being White (i.e., recognized themselves as avid listeners and consumers of this musical genre), reported hip-hop to be one of their favorite musical genres, and reported to having bought at least three hip-hop CDs within the past year. The criteria requirements were highlighted with a marker on the sign-up sheet and students knew to only sign-up if they met the criteria listed. To ensure the accuracy of the criteria, demographic sheets and consent forms (Appendix A) were distributed to all participants at the start of the focus group sessions. The principal investigator reviewed the demographic sheets and it was found that all of the participants met the specific criteria necessary for participation. It was also the intention of the principal investigator to have at least 24 participants, but due to a surplus of other

research opportunities that were simultaneously offered, only 19 of the 24 students who signed-up actually came to their respective focus group session.

### *Focus Group Sessions*

The first focus group session had four participants; for the second session there were six participants; the third session had five participants, with the fourth and final group having four participants. Each session lasted between 1-2 hours. It is also important to mention that the principal investigator did not serve as the facilitator due to the decision to have same-race facilitators to help the participants feel more relaxed when talking about their whiteness in relation to hip-hop music. Abernethy, Shoemaker, and Tomolillo (2004) recommend using a same-race moderator for race related studies because participants may feel more comfortable talking about the phenomenon under discussion. In addition, these scholars contend that with a same-race group and moderator, participants are more likely to reveal genuine implicit biases towards out-group members, which helps to inform the data. Since the principal investigator self-identifies as being Black, two White male facilitators were chosen to moderate the focus groups instead. Both facilitators were highly qualified and had previous experience with leading and moderating group discussion among college-aged students due to their positions as university instructors. In addition, both facilitators were personally trained by the principal investigator in regards to group moderation for this project.

### *Focus Group Goals*

With the three aforementioned research questions in mind, the primary goals of the focus group sessions were to understand: (1) why participants choose to listen to hip-hop music; (2) the messages participants believe are being communicated from hip-hop

music; (3) whether participants believe hip-hop to be a Black cultural form of expression through authenticity claims; and (4) how participants relate to the music considering their White racialized group membership. To answer the research questions through the aforementioned focus group goals, an interview guide was created by the principal investigator. The interview guide had a total of 19 questions, all of which helped to inform this study and better understand the participants' perceptions of hip-hop music through their White racial identities (see Appendix B). In order to address the first goal of understanding why participants choose to listen to hip-hop music, several questions were asked that prompted participants to discuss their frequency of and motivation for listening to hip-hop music. The following questions were asked.

- (1) How often would you say you listen to hip-hop music?
- (2) Why do you listen to hip-hop music? Is this your favorite kind of music to listen to?  
(PROBE: What about hip-hop appeals to you?)
- (3) How did you first get involved with listening to hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: What prompted you to listen to hip-hop music?)
- (4) In what settings do you listen to hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: When doing homework? Driving in the car? At parties? With a certain group of friends? Etc)
- (5) How do you use hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: As a source of motivation or strength? To make you happy when your down? To vent frustrations?)

In order to address the second goal of understanding the messages participants believed to be communicated through hip-hop music, several questions were asked that prompted participants to discuss common themes communicated through the music. The following questions were asked:

- (6) What are some of the messages within hip-hop music that are usually communicated to its audience?

- (7) What is the name of one or two of your favorite hip-hop songs that “speak” to you or tell your story?
- (8) What messages are being communicated in these songs?  
(PROBE: What is it about the song that causes you to closely identify with it?)

In order to address the third goal of understanding whether participants believe hip-hop to be a Black cultural form of expression, several questions were asked that prompted participants to make connections to the music and Black culture. The following questions were asked:

- (9) Who are some of you favorite hip-hop artists? Why?  
(PROBE: What is it about these artists that appeals to you?)
- (10) How many of you have heard the term “authentic” in relation to musical expression? What do you believe it means to be “authentic” within the hip-hop community?  
(PROBE: What does it mean to “keep it real” within the hip-hop community?)
- (11) How do you believe the artists you just named “keep it real”?

In order to address the fourth and final goal of understanding how participants relate to the music through their White racialized group membership, several questions were asked that prompted participants to make connections to the music and their White culture. The following questions were asked:

- (12) What does it mean to be White in America?  
(How would define White-American culture?)
- (13) Statistics show that over 70% of hip-hop consumers are White, suburban, middle-class Americans. Why do you think Whites are attracted to, or like, hip-hop?
- (14) How does hip-hop speak to your lived experiences, if at all?  
(PROBE: How does hip-hop music relate to your life?)
- (15) How does hip-hop speak to your lived experiences as a White-American, if at all?  
(PROBE: How does hip-hop reflect/speak to your White racial identity, if at all?)
- (16) How does hip-hop represent White culture in America, if at all?

(PROBE: How does hip-hop reflect/speak to “American” culture?)

(17) How does your race or socio-economic status help you to understand or relate to hip-hop culture, if at all?

(PROBE: Does being a White, middle-class American help you in any way in relating to hip-hop and your favorite artists?)

(18) How has your life paralleled what it means to be White in America, if at all?

(PROBE: How is White-American culture a part of your life?)

(19) What are your thoughts about Whites who say they can relate to the experiences and messages expressed in/through hip-hop music?

The questions implemented in the interview functioned as conversation guides in trying to understand the phenomenon under discussion.

### *Data Collection*

The focus groups were conducted in reserved classrooms of Terrell Hall, home of the Speech Communication department. The sessions took place over a two-week period in the month of February 2007. Each focus group session was audio-recorded to ensure the accurate reporting of participants’ experiences relating to hip-hop. In addition, facilitators engaged in mental observational note-taking during the discussions. After each session, facilitators immediately met with the principal investigator to share their observations. The observations were then recorded by the principal investigator and used as a tool to help add meaning, understanding, and a more accurate description of the data collected.

### *Analyzing Data*

After the data were collected, audio-recorded tapes of the focus group sessions were transcribed by a hired, professional transcriber to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were completed three weeks after the last focus group session ended. To interpret the data, a thematic content analysis of the transcripts was done. With a

thematic content analysis, no priori coding themes are used. Instead, coding categories are created using consistent themes that are prevalent within the data. Thematic coding categories emerge after the researcher has spent a prolonged amount of time immersed within the texts. Marshall and Rossman (2006) mention that:

the process of category generation involves noting patterns evident in the setting and expressed by participants...the researcher does not search for the exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories of the statistician but, instead, identifies the salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting (p. 159).

Since the goal of this proposed study was to seek understanding, a thematic content analysis was critical because it allows for accurate understanding of the data, which is particularly important since coding themes are consistent categories found within the transcripts rather than pre-established measures. Thus, the themes that emerge from the data are natural aspects of the observed phenomenon and will ideally speak to issues of identity and identification as they relate to Whiteness and consumption of hip-hop music as a Black art form.

It was also imperative for this study to accurately represent this phenomenon in its truest form. Rather than imposing pre-existing categories upon the data, it is critical that the data or personal experiences with the observed phenomenon speak for themselves (Harris, 2001). While quantitative methodologies are an important part of social science research, qualitative approaches to scholarly inquiry are of equal importance. More specifically, thematic analysis and other methods for analyzing data allow observers to understand the phenomenon in its most natural state, which is particularly significant in

the case of those experiences not yet explored. Thus, the following chapter will involve a presentation of the themes garnered from this data set.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS

#### Research Question 1

To understand the first research question which asks, “Why are Whites attracted to hip-hop music, considering it is a Black musical art form?,” various questions were asked of participants during each focus group session in order to truly understand this phenomenon (see Appendix B). The questions that were posed to inform this first research question asked that participants discuss and/or describe how often they listen to hip-hop music, their specific uses of hip-hop, how they first got involved with the music, and more directly, what attracts them to the music.

To analyze the data in regards to this particular question, a thematic analysis was done, which yielded six distinct themes that all speak to why Whites are attracted to hip-hop music. The six themes revealed in the data that inform this particular question include: (1) rebellious motivation; (2) appropriation of “blackness” / to be “cool”; (3) to “fit-in”; (4) empowerment; (5) an educational tool for learning and/or appropriating Black Vernacular English; and (6) physical release/expression through dance.

#### *Rebellious Motivation*

As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, many people argue that, in general, Whites are sometimes attracted to black musical forms because it can be seen as a form of rebellion against parents and other institutions of power. Well, from this study, it was demonstrated through the focus group data that rebellion is a significant factor and reason

as to why some Whites are attracted to hip-hop music. In fact, rebellion proved to be one of the more prominent themes discussed very heavily in three of the group sessions; and oftentimes, it was one of the first factors mentioned. This finding is consistent with some previous research findings where scholars made similar claims about Whites who listen to hip-hop music; however, such findings were never substantiated with data. To be specific, both Yousman (2003) and Kitwana (2005) both asserted in their works that Whites sometimes use hip-hop music as a means to rebel against authority. Similarly, this theme of rebellion was also cited by other scholars when White Americans fell in love with jazz and rock music, respectively (Anderson, 2004; Chappell, 2001). Since both jazz and rock are two musical genres directly linked to African-American culture, White critics believed that it would corrupt the lives of its White listeners, just as some White parents believe that hip-hop music is bad for White youth. As a result, White listeners who become fans of Black musical genres are usually cited to be rebellious. It must be emphasized, however, that to date, there has been no data to support the assumptions forwarded by scholars and general public; therefore, it was the goal of this study to explore if at all there was any validity to such claims.

In regards to this study, hip-hop music, representing Black culture and Black experiences, is completely opposite to the White, suburban life that is characterized with privilege. Since this is the case, nine participants in this study (four males and five females) primarily used hip-hop to rebel against parental structures, and explicitly said so. One White male (WM) by the pseudonym of Michael from the fourth focus group (FG4) tells a story about his discovery of hip-hop music and how his mom was against it. He says, “My sister and I were driving in the car one day, and she put on Tupac’s *All*

*Eyez on Me* CD, and just, from then on out, I was just like, alright! But once again, my mom wouldn't let me listen to it, so it had a whole new feel to it". From this statement, it is clear that his mother's disapproval fueled his desire for the music, and made him want to listen even more. Another participant, a White female (WF) by the pseudonym of Nicole from the first focus group (FG1), tells the story of when her father found her *Space Jam* soundtrack and quickly threw it out. *Space Jam* was a movie released during the mid-1990s that starred the cartoon character Bugs Bunny and the basketball star, Michael Jordan. This participant recalls,

When I was like 10 or 12, my dad found [my] *Space Jam* soundtrack (everyone laughs) and like, I was listening to it and he took it away from me. He still doesn't know that I watch MTV because he thinks it's like Satan's fire or something like that. He thinks [if you listen to hip-hop music] you're just going to rot your brain, you're going to end up being like that.

One participant, a WM, Charlie, from the second focus group (FG2), gives his reason as to why he believes parents, in general, are against hip-hop. He simply states, "[Since] your parents don't listen to it, they don't want you to listen to it at all". From those three statements, it is apparent that, according to participants, hip-hop is something that these [White] parents disagree with. And as a result, it then turns into something that young, White adults are interested in. While mocking White parents, a WF participant by the pseudonym Brianna from FG2 jokingly asserts, "I've always seen White parents saying, 'Oh this [hip-hop music] is wrecking our children's society, blah blah blah'". It can be inferred from this comment that the participant is directly challenging this negative

parental belief by immersing herself into the culture and listening to the music against her parents' claim that hip-hop is bad for the White youth.

When commenting on their parents' views on hip-hop, two participants gave different reasons. One participant, a WM from FG1 by the pseudonym Gary, commented by saying, "My parents are [on] the religious side. The whole thing [hip-hop music] seems immoral to them". In this case, hip-hop, in the eyes of this participant's parents, is something that is completely contrasted to religion, spirituality, or anything remotely related to a Higher Power, which is very similar to how jazz was viewed during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another participant from FG1, a WF by the pseudonym Rebecca, notes that her father is against hip-hop music because of political reasons. She asserts, "My dad is so against rap music, 'cause he thinks, you know, it's political. He thinks rappers are Democrats". When prompted for an example of how hip-hop music is political according to her dad's beliefs, she uses the example of Kanye West and his infamous statement that "President Bush doesn't like Black people," which was in response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In this instance, hip-hop being viewed as "political" is indirectly referring to black culture. This is made clear when the participant cites the Kanye West example, which directly refers to African-Americans. So instead of saying that hip-hop music represents the political interest of Blacks, the participant appears to take a defensive stance on behalf of her dad by making a statement that is more evaluative of the genre of music and its creators (e.g., rappers) rather than the Black community as a whole.

Two of the participants viewed rebellion, as seen through the appropriation of music, as something that is inevitable. A WF participant from FG2 by the pseudonym

Lisa compared her rebellion to that of her mom's (when she was growing up). This participant stated, "My mom told me she was rebellious, and she was brought up in this culture where she didn't want to listen to her mom, so she just believed it was inevitable that her children would do that". Another participant, a WF from FG2 (Sherrie), describes musical rebellion as something that every age cohort experiences. She argues, "Like when my parents were young, their parents wouldn't let them listen to things like rock...like, every generation from then on has found some way to rebel and show it by their musical interest".

As these responses suggest, hip-hop music is being used by many young, White adults from this study as a means for rebellion. This is best described by this WM's (from FG1, referred to as Carl) answer to the question of why Whites are attracted to hip-hop: "[Listening to hip-hop] is a new rebellion thing... I think any person goes through that rebellious stage, whether it's middle school, high school, or college". Again, there is this idea that rebellion is inevitable; but for White Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hip-hop music will more than likely be the soundtrack (or music) that represents this phase for them. In addition, the findings from this theme are directly linked to earlier claims made by other scholars (Aaberg, 2006; Anderson, 2004; Barlow, 1995; Chappell, 2001; Walton, 1972) who assert that rebellion is definitely a motivating factor for listening to hip-hop music, as well as older African-American musical genres. The analysis of this data supports pre-existing beliefs that rebellion is a motivation for listening to hip-hop, which appears to be a consistent theme found throughout the history of Black music in relation to White consumers (Aaberg, 2006; Anderson, 2004; Barlow, 1995; Chappell, 2001; Walton, 1972).

*Appropriating Blackness = “Cool”*

From the thematic analysis, it was also learned that many White, young adults listen to hip-hop because of its “coolness effect”. Somehow, listening to this genre of music makes them feel “cool,” which subsequently leads to allowing these young, White adults to appear “cool” around their friends. Again, this theme is one that is also found in the work of Yousman (2003). This author argue that blackness is viewed by some White adolescents as being “cool,” and as a result, it then becomes “cool” to appropriate it. It can also be inferred that other previous Black musical genres also had this coolness effect since many White Americans were captivated by the music. To be specific, both jazz and rock music had an implicit “coolness” effect due to their appeal among young, White Americans. This theme of hip-hop music being “cool” emerged in all four focus groups among 11 participants in particular (seven females and four males). Many participants remarked on hip-hop’s “coolness by saying:

In middle school, it was kind of like, ‘Oh, if you don’t listen to it, you’re not cool’ (WF, FG2, Donna).

It [hip-hop music] just makes you feel cool (WF, FG2, Brianna).

I know it sounds weird, but sometimes if I’m, like, in my car or at a party [and] I’m trying to maintain a certain image or keep a persona to look cool—like an alter ego or something, a gangster ego—I’ll just let it kind of surround me, and I’ll try to become a part of it (WM, FG4, Michael).

In a similar vein, another WF participant from FG2 (Sherrie) remarks about how it is cool to have hip-hop music on MySpace pages. She tells this story to her focus group:

I think it's [hip-hop music] is cool now. I'm definitely into the MySpace thing and I think it's cool. My cousin, she's 17, and a lot of her friends all have rap music on their MySpace page, and they give off this vibe that it's cool.

When questioned about why hip-hop is viewed as being a "cool" musical genre to listen to, a WM participant from FG4 (Doug) responded by saying, "Hip-hop music is what's popular at the time". So, the fact that hip-hop music is seen in almost every medium and widely accepted by many increases its acceptance by Whites and help to add to its "coolness effect". Another participant (Lisa, WF) from FG2 honestly admits that it is also a fascination with the culture. This WF remarked by saying, "It's just that they [Whites] are fascinated by the culture." In this instance, "coolness" is marked by "otherness". Or, put another way, it is "cool" to listen to something that, in this case, Whites are not.

Another related theme that consistently came up was this desire of young Whites to "act" Black through an appropriation of the culture learned from the music. Again, "acting Black," according to their perceptions of blackness, was viewed as something "cool" to do. One WF from FG3 (Judie) informs the moderator of this fact by saying, "Right now, in high school, it's cool to try to be Black". A different WM from FG1 (Carl) asserts, "Some people go through a stage where they kind of act black. A lot of people [do it] in middle school, they love that...they think its cool". Consistent with the theme, a WF from FG3 (Tracy) shares how "acting Black" was cool at her middle school. She states "Like, it was cool to be Black at my middle school. Like, that's why everyone dressed Black, everybody talked Black...that's what was cool even though that's the minority". Lastly, one WM participant from FG4 (Michael) shares his personal story

about a phase he went through while trying to assimilate into Black culture: “In high school I went through a ‘ghetto’ phase...there was a point where I would wear White Ts and fitted hats...it was rough [though], I got my ass kicked once and that was the last time I did it.” When asked why he thought it was cool to appropriate his perception of Black culture, this participant responded by saying, “It was appealing. That life, for me, seemed interesting”. To further explain his fascination with his perception of Black culture, this participant continued by saying, “You know, it seemed appealing, going out, chilling on the block, smoking blunts, doing whatever...[just] drinking, listening to music with your crew—and feeling like nothing can stop you...I tried to assimilate”. To sum up why she believes White young adults are fascinated by and infatuated with the Black hip-hop culture and lifestyle, a WF from FG4 (Andrea) asserts, “I just think the majority of White kids listen to it because it’s something that they, like, didn’t grow up with; they’re not familiar with that way of life, maybe it’s kind of cool and interesting to listen to”.

#### *Hip-Hop as a Social Tool to “Fit In”*

In addition to being a cool musical expression that is sometimes used as a means for rebellion, hip-hop music also appeared to offer these White participants the opportunity to fit-in with their peers. As mentioned in chapter one, Yousman (20003) asserts in his work that the White consumption of Black cultural artifacts, particularly music, is used by Whites as a socialization tool. Yousman notes that Whites’ consumption of Black music is referred to as Blackophilia. As this author explains, it is this idea of Blackophilia that allows White consumers of Black music to fit-in and socialize with their White counterparts. This theme of using Black artifacts, in this case

hip-hop, as a socialization tool among White consumers was evident in three of the four focus groups. The sentiments shared here are from five female participants and one male participant. In these cases, hip-hop was used as a socializing tool, a way to connect with White peers. Some general comments made during the focus group sessions that serve as evidence to this claim include:

It's a fun kind of music to listen to if I'm with all my friends (WF, FG4, Andrea).

I really try to listen to rap music and stuff because it makes me feel like I can fit in (WM, FG2, Charlie).

Other participants discussed the influence that their friends had on them to listen to hip-hop music. A WF from FG2 by the name of Tara explains, "I don't have anything against it [hip-hop music], but I really didn't start listening to it until my friends listened to it". A different WF from FG3 by the name of Crystal gives her take on it by saying, "I think that if the people around you are listening to that kind of music, then you're going to be inclined to listen to whatever people are listening to". One participant, a WF from FG2 (Lisa), shares with her focus group how her friends actually influence the specific hip-hop songs that she likes and not just a general interest in this musical genre. Here is her account of this phenomenon: "When I first hear a hip-hop song, I'll be like, 'god, this is just awful'; but then the more I hear it, and the more my friends really like it, the next thing I know, I'm like 'god, I love this song!'". Hip-hop being used by these young, White adults for socializing purposes is best summed up by another WF (Sherrie) from FG2. This participant asserts, "Listening to hip-hop is a social thing...you don't want to listen to it by yourself". The participant continues by comparing her uses of hip-hop to a

social behavior of many college kids that has become normative despite societal disapproval. She says, “It’s kind of like drinking, you don’t drink by yourself”.

### *Empowerment*

From the thematic analysis, it was also shown that Whites are attracted to hip-hop music because they use it as an empowerment tool in an attempt to feel invincible. This is a theme that was not discussed or even mentioned in other scholarly works relating to Whites’ consumption of Black music. As such, it is unknown whether this theme is unique to the population sampled for this study or if other White hip-hop listeners share similar sentiments. In addition, it is also unknown whether earlier Black musical genres provided a sense of empowerment for its White listeners. This theme of empowerment as it relates to hip-hop music and the participants for this study was found in all four focus group sessions among three female participants and one male participant.

Participants discussed the idea of listening to hip-hop music because it makes them feel like an invincible “badass,” which, according to them, is totally the opposite of their true, White, suburban character. It was revealed that hip-hop music is an attractive genre because it empowers participants to feel as if they are temporarily taking on another identity. Some general comments that evidenced this claim were shown in all four of the focus groups. At least one participant in each focus group made mention of feeling like a “badass” while listening to the music. Some of the comments include:

I would listen to hip-hop growing up, and I [would feel like] I being was a badass!  
(WM, FG4, Michael)

I think it [hip-hop music] makes you feel kind of badass (WF, FG1, Nicole)

[Hip-hop music] kind of makes you seem like a badass, you know? (WF, FG3, Maria)

One participant in particular, a WF from FG2 (Brianna), told an elaborate story of how hip-hop music made her feel like a “badass”. She compares this feeling to being a rockstar. She explains:

It [hip-hop music] definitely puts me in a better mood. If I’m angry and I’m driving, I’ll turn on certain artists when I’m driving, and like, I feel better. And then I can drive a bit faster and feel okay that I’m driving faster.

This same participant continues by adding that hip-hop music makes her feels tougher than she really is. She is quoted as saying:

There’s no better way to feel like a rockstar...I feel like such a badass...and I’m so not...it’s like I’m better than all the people driving down 316 right now. I’m cooler, I’m faster, [and] everybody wants to be me.

From this statement, it is made clear that hip-hop empowers some young, White adults do temporarily embody an alternative identity that is usually not present within the participants’ everyday White lifestyle. Hip-hop music in this context allowed its White listeners to take on an identity (at their convenience) that is in stark contrast to their White, suburban identity. Unfortunately, participants do not share or explain the specific things about hip-hop music that empowers them to feel invincible. As such, it is not known whether or not this theme could be potentially related to previous themes seen among White listeners of jazz or rock music.

#### *To Appropriate Hip-Hop Language*

In addition to the previously mentioned themes, participants from this study also use hip-hop music as a way to learn and adopt many commonly cited words, phrases, and terminologies from the Black culture. This theme is also related to Yousman’s

(2003) idea of Blackophilia mentioned previously, which posits that Whites are fascinated with Black culture and consume the popular music of the culture (i.e. hip-hop) in an attempt to identify with the culture. In regards to this study, participants admit to regularly using the language learned from hip-hop music. The language of the hip-hop culture is very unique and originates directly from Black culture and Black experiences. The hip-hop language closely resembles forms of Black Vernacular English, which is also known by some as being Ebonics. The unique thing about hip-hop language is that a lot of it is original, made up (e.g., does not appear in the dictionary or is not a part of Standard English vocabulary), so if some of the phrases, terminologies, and other expressions are used, it is apparent that the language stems from and has its roots in hip-hop music and Black experiences. It was revealed in the focus data that some Whites are attracted to hip-hop music because it allows them the opportunity to learn and appropriate the latest Black phrases. In particular, this theme was evident in two of the four focus group sessions. Most of the participants took the racial element out of it by simply referring to it as “pop language,” which seems to justify their use of the language. Three participants (two males and one female), in particular though, expressed their thoughts on this theme at length. One participant, a WF from FG2 (Donna) exemplifies this by sharing with her focus group:

It [hip-hop language] has really become a part of *our* (emphasis mine) culture...I mean, like, if I call up my friend, and I'm like 'hey, what are you up to,' and she's like, 'I'm ballin' I mean, you kind of joke around with it—but I guess people could take it differently. But I still appreciate it because it's essentially part of *our* culture”.

Other participants were conscious of the fact that they appropriate Black hip-hop language. In fact, one WM participant from FG1 (Carl) admits, “My whole life since high school, [we] appropriate black phrases—white people with their friends, especially the people that I know”. The participant went on to add that they do it because it is cool. Another WM participant from FG2 (Gary) struggles to understand whether his appropriation of Black hip-hop language is racist. He makes his struggle known to his group by saying, “Some of my friends, I don’t think they’re trying to make fun of race, but they’ll kind of take on hip-hop [language]...like ‘Hey nigga, how you doin?’”. After thinking about his comment made, this same participant continues by saying, “But it’s an obvious act...but I wonder if it’s kind of a statement on, like, superiority, if you look at it a certain way”. From this statement, it could be inferred that this participant believed there were deeper implications related to Whites’ use of Black language. After thinking about this topic for a while, this participant concludes by profoundly saying, as if he had an epiphany “in some way, [when] I think about it, it is racist”.

#### *Physical Release/Expression Through Dance*

From the data, 11 participants from all four focus groups mentioned that they are attracted to hip-hop music because you can dance to it. History also demonstrates that jazz music had a similar appeal for its White consumers, thus connoting a similar trend repeating itself in popular culture. There is a specific style of dance that derived from jazz music and it is referred to as swing dance (Walton, 1972). With swing, listeners of jazz are able to move rhythmically to the music while “swinging” in the air with partners. As with jazz, hip-hop music is cited by many participants from this study as being a genre of music that allows for dancing. To be specific, participants cited the nice beats of

the music as the reason for hip-hop being great dance songs. The statements presented here represent nine of the participants (seven females and two males). Some general comments about the beats include:

For me, it has to have a beat...I don't listen to it for the words (WF, FG2, Lisa)

I just listen to it because the beat is good (WF, FG1, Sheena)

Other participants made direct connections between hip-hop music and dancing. One participant, a WF from FG3 (Crystal), notes, "A lot of hip-hop songs I don't know...it's [just] fun to dance to". Another WF participant from FG3 (Tracy) chimes in by adding, "When you go out dancing, that's all they play". In a different focus group session, a WF from FG4 (Andrea) admits that she likes to listen to hip-hop for the dance element. She shares with her group that, "I listen to it because [if] I'm going out or if we're downtown, then it's good music to dance to and just move around and have fun...it's just fun to me". AWF participant from FG1 (Rebecca) compares dancing to hip-hop music to the feeling of a natural high. She asserts, "[When] you're at a club, and you're dancing, hip-hop feels kind of like a natural high...it's good".

In a similar vein, two other participants listen to hip-hop music because of formal dance classes that they are a part of. AWM from FG1 (Gary) admits, "Recently, in the past couple of years I've gotten into ballroom dance and salsa, and basically, you can salsa to almost any hip-hop song". The other participant, a WF from FG2 (Sherrie), shares that, "I think it's fun to dance to...I take dance classes and they use it a lot". A WM from FG4 (Doug) sums up the hip-hop and dance connection by arguing that, "Hip-hop is more like dance music now".

## Research Question 2

The second research question posed for this study asked, “What relationship do White consumers of Hip-Hop music believe exists between hip-hop music and expressions of Black culture.” From prior research and social commentary on African-American musical genres, it is unknown how, if at all, the White consumers of each respective genre made connections between the music and Black culture. However, for this study, understanding how Whites relate hip-hop music to African-American experiences is of significant importance due to the fact that rappers, through authenticity claims, directly and explicitly make references to African-American culture. So, from this particular research question, participants in this study were able to share their thoughts on the relationship between hip-hop music and Black culture. To elicit responses to this question, there were several questions included in the interview guide that helped to inform the responses received (See Appendix B). Some of the questions included: “What are some of the messages within hip-hop music that are usually communicated to its audience?”; “Who are some of your favorite hip-hop artists?”; and “What do you believe it means to be ‘authentic’ within the hip-hop community?”

The findings emerged through a thematic analysis of the data for this research question in particular showed a variety of themes. Before the themes are revealed, though, it is important to note that only one participant out of all four focus groups, did not believe that hip-hop was necessarily related to Black culture in any particular way (in an attempt to be “politically correct”). This participant, a WM from FG1 (Gary), is quoted as saying, “Maybe this is just because of the people I’ve been around, but when I listen to hip-hop, it not like—there’s no racial bias there...I don’t ever think, ‘Oh, this is

Black music””. Other participants, however, made connections between hip-hop music and Black expressions of identity indirectly by discussing the (1) old-school hip-hop vs. mainstream hip-hop dichotomy, (2) authentic vs. unauthentic rappers, (3) the messages communicated in hip-hop music, and (4) the White listener’s guilt.

### *Old School Hip-Hop vs. Mainstream Hip-Hop*

Without directly saying so, many of the participants (10 total; five males and five females) from all four focus groups associated older hip-hop that was more prominent during the 1980s and early 1990s to the “authentic,” Black hip-hop culture and expressions of Black identity. This may attributed to the fact that earlier hip-hop music is undeniably characterized as Black music and was evidenced by its larger Black fan-base from where its roots first started. As one WM participant from FG2 (Charlie) explains:

Hip-hop has definitely changed a lot from when it first started, like kids doing it on the streets and stuff...it just seems a little weird, like, if you listen to old hip-hop songs, they’re trying to get their message out and tell their story, now it’s like they’re [newer rap artists] trying to get catchy phrases.

In the same focus group session (FG2), a WF (Donna) asserts, “I don’t consider it hip-hop now...[true] hip-hop was back in the eighties and nineties, when it was first starting”.

A WM participant from FG1 (Carl), along the same line as the previous participant, notes that, “A lot of earlier stuff, not lately, but early 90s, is the best kind of hip-hop [music].”

Some students even preferred the more “authentic” Black forms of hip-hop over the whitewashed, mainstream hip-hop music. One WM participant from FG1 (Gary) expressed his love for the “real” hip-hop music as opposed to the hip-hop music that’s played on MTV and other popular media outlets. He is quoted as saying, “Sometimes

we'll [my friends and I] turn on some really old-school hip-hop...other than that, we don't watch MTV, and we don't listen to 95.5 [an Atlanta "pop" radio station]".

It is important to note that the participants who preferred the old-school hip-hop music over the mainstream music were very few. Most of the participants enjoyed more of the mainstream hip-hop music, as evidenced by this comment from a WM participant (Doug, FG4): "I just like the popular crap that's on the radio. I don't, like, dig deep, you know what I mean? A lot of times I'll like a song even though I don't know who sings it—but it's a rap song". Even though this was this case, most participants observed a difference between the old-school hip-hop music, which they believed had more explicit expressions of blackness, and the "whitewashed," mainstream (read non-racial) hip-hop music. These participants expressed how more mainstream hip-hop is less authentic because it is farther away from its Black roots. In fact, a clear dichotomy was made by the participants when they associated old-school and underground hip-hop with expressions of Black culture, while the mainstream hip-hop music, as they believed, is catered more towards the musical preferences of Whites, thus making it unauthentic. One WF participant from FG3 (Maria) expresses her views on this dichotomy by saying, "I think a lot of mainstream rap is kind of focused more towards white kids, in all honesty, because a lot of those – a lot of black people listen to, like, some hardcore underground rap that I wouldn't even know the artists." When critiquing the very mainstream hip-hop that they [young, White adults] mostly listen to, other participants are quoted as saying:

The mainstream stuff—I don't know if it's more appealing to White people, but it's more...commercialized. It's fine-tuned in a sense that a lot of people can listen to it. It is so...poppy...mainstream [read White] (WF, FG1, Rebecca).

I don't feel like a lot of the mainstream hip-hop stuff is aimed at me...[but then again] maybe it *is* aimed at White people, because the mainstream in some capacity is for you to buy it [emphasis mine] (WF, FG1, Sheena).

It's very superficial, so it's kind of a fun thing—at least as far as mainstream. If you're listening to the radio, you can always just plug any hip-hop artist's name into that song, and it would be the same thing (WF, FG1, Nicole).

I don't not like something because it's popular, but it's really just...you can tell what it was designed for...like, there's a formula, and it was made for you to buy it (WM, FG1, Carl).

From these statements, it is clear that these Whites recognized the differences between the old-school hip-hop, which had more explicit connections to Black culture, and the new, whitewashed, mainstream hip-hop music that is being blurred with pop music.

#### *Authentic vs. Unauthentic Rap Artists*

Stemming from the discussion of old-school versus mainstream hip-hop, participants from all four focus groups then applied this concept of authenticity directly to the rap artists themselves. Just as with the previous discussion, five participants (three females and two males) expressed that authentic hip-hop artists are the ones who remain close to their Black roots and this is expressed through their music. When asked to explain what “authentic” expression means in regards to hip-hop, several responses were

given, even though they all indirectly related back to Black culture. One WM from FG4 (Zach) asserted that authenticity for hip-hop means, “[when] you’re actually a product of the experience you’re purveying through your music...that’s what I think that means.” This participant continues by adding, “Honestly, I think it’s a term used to discredit certain types of hip-hop that do not originate from the same background as it has historically been seen as originating from.” Of course, the background being referred to is the “authentic,” Black cultural background that centers around staying true to the culture and “keeping it real.”

Another WM participant from FG1 (Carl) replies to the inquiry by saying, “I think of authentic, in another sense of the underground hip-hop—that’s where the *real* [emphases mine] artists are, as opposed to these big name people”. AWF from FG2 (Brianna) chose to explain the authenticity phenomenon by sharing knowledge about the subject that she learned from one of her Speech Communication courses. She explains:

I’m in a rhetoric of pop culture class right now and we watched this video about [the] authenticity of hip-hop. A lot of rap stars that I had never seen before were saying that the people that are on the radio are not authentic, and they’re sell-outs. I think the farther you get away from where you started out [Black culture], the less authentic it gets

Seemingly baffled by this, the participant continues by adding, “ It’s almost like the more records you sell, the more people know your name, the more you are a household name, the less authentic you are”.

To make parallels between inauthentic hip-hop expressions and White, mainstream culture, some of the participants’ comments include:

I think a generalization about authenticity would be, once your music starts selling to people like us, White twenty-year-olds in college, that when you're not authentic anymore...really, we're not the people who hip-hop was originally made for (WF, FG2, Tara).

I think you become not authentic when *we* [Whites] know half the lines to these mainstream songs [emphases mine] (WF, FG3, Tracy).

### *Rap's Communication Messages*

Two of the most prominent themes found in hip-hop music that several participants from all four focus groups believed were commonly communicated to listeners also illustrates how they, as White fans, made a connection between hip-hop music and Black culture. The two themes mentioned within the focus group data included "making it out of the 'hood'" and anti-establishment messages. "Making it out of the 'hood'" refers to overcoming (or rising above) poverty and horrific living conditions. Anti-establishment messages usually refer to the process of standing up to institutionalized power structures that have traditionally oppressed Black people, with the police being the most common power structure discussed. What is interesting, though, is that the participants never explicitly use the term Black while describing the common communication themes expressed in the music. Instead, all references to Black people are just described by using the word "they," in what appears to be an effort not to offend or be (perceived) as politically incorrect or racially insensitive.

During the first focus group session, when participants were discussing the messages communicated in rap songs, the theme of "making it out the 'hood'" came up in reference to a popular song that is currently out, which is entitled, "Runaway Girl" by rap

artist Ludacris and songstress Mary J. Blige. The song is about girls who run away from home in order to get away from their horrific living conditions, and it was also mentioned during FG3's discussion. While discussing this song, one participant from FG1 (Carl) could see how this theme related to Black culture. He stated, "It's more like we're [Whites] looking at this racial picture of these poor underprivileged kids. It's more like we feel for them—all those situations they're in, it's not their fault. I would say all of us are pretty far away from that". Without explicitly using the terms Black or White, this participant made a connection between that particular song and Black culture. His careful word choice suggests his overt attempt to discuss issues of race and covert efforts to avoid racially offensive language.

When asked what specific anti-establishment messages were communicated through hip-hop music, a WM participant from FG1, Gary, responded by saying, "They're always talking about how the cops won't leave them alone...feeling the pressure by 'The Man'". When asked who or what The Man refers to, the participant responds by tentatively saying, "The police?", as if he is doubting his own assumptions. After much thought, this participant revisits the question and offers another answer: "I've been thinking about this, and I think that The Man is White people somehow." Carl, a WM from FG1, refers to this comment later on in the discussion by adding, "In [hip-hop] songs you'll usually hear that there's a police officer that's chasing somebody and it's typically a white police—they'll usually say that".

Artists who the participants feel are authentic because they communicate messages that stem directly from their Black roots include Outcast (from Atlanta), Nas (from New York), and Kanye West (from Chicago). These particular artists have unique

musical (rap) styles that are qualitatively different from each other, yet collectively function as three different regional styles of rap that communicate similar messages about Black culture.

### *Guilty Pleasure*

Unlike the other themes, only one participant made direct, explicit connections between hip-hop music and Black culture. This WF from FG3 (Crystal) asserts that, “Hip-hop culture is somehow tied to Black culture...I don’t think it’s tied to White culture...hip-hop is definitely Black culture”. However, three other female participants from two different focus groups indirectly expressed their views through examples of the (White) guilt they experience from listening to hip-hop music, remaining conscious of the fact that rap is truly still a Black cultural art form. During FG2, in particular, one brave WF participant (Brianna) timidly asked the other participants, “Does anybody else feel bad about, like, if they’re driving through certain areas where’s there’s a large Black population [and listening to hip-hop music]?” Most of the participants respond with a relieved “Yes,” as if the burden of their guilt had been taken off of their shoulders. The participant who posed the question continued by saying, “I’m always thinking, ‘I wonder what they’re thinking about me right now.’” Another WF participant in FG2 (Donna) gives her account of listening to hip-hop music in Black neighborhoods by saying: “We [my friends and I] drove to New Orleans to go to Mardi Gras...we were like grooving in New Orleans, we were playing a rap song...then we like rolled the windows up, and feeling kind of like we should change the song—to country”. The last example of this guilty, White hip-hop consumption phenomenon was observed by a WF’s confession in FG3 (Judie) to the rest of her focus group. She is quoted as saying:

You know what? To be really, really, honest... I don't know how this is going to come out sounding, but like, in high school there were times where I was riding around and listening to my Jay-Z CD or something like that, and it was right around when it was out. If I pulled up next to a black person, I would turn it down. Because I felt like I shouldn't be listening to it. They think that maybe I shouldn't... like, 'Why's this white girl listening to rap?' Like, I don't know how that comes off, but that's just sort of how I felt. It's just such a big part of the Black culture that I feel like, sometimes Black people might think that, why are these people trying to be a part of our culture when they're obviously not? I don't know. I just know that to a lot of Black people, hip-hop is a very big marker of their culture, and, like... yeah, maybe something that they want to keep personal to themselves.

By feeling guilty for listening to hip-hop music, participants clearly realized the in-group (Black) and out-group (White) boundaries that are associated with hip-hop music. In addition, it was also shown from this theme that participants were able to make implicit connections, for the most part, between hip-hop music and Black culture.

### Research Question 3

The third and final research question sought to examine how Whites understood and related to hip-hop music through their White racialized identity. No other academic study has ever examined through empirical, qualitative research the relationship between hip-hop consumers' racial identity and the music with which they claim to most identify. More importantly, this is the first hip-hop, academic study that seeks to explore this perceived connection between whiteness and hip-hop music from the consumers' point of

view. As mentioned in Chapter Three of this thesis, the primary studies that focus on the racial identity of White hip-hop community members examine rap star Eminem and his negotiation of whiteness (Armstrong, 2004; Calhoun, 2005). These studies assert that Eminem relates to the hip-hop culture through his poor socio-economic status while growing up in a working-class, suburban area outside of Detroit. While these studies are significant for the literature surrounding this topic, it is also important to understand how the White consumers who help to sustain the career of Eminem and many other rap artists understand their whiteness while seemingly immersed within the African-American hip-hop culture. Understanding how the participants for this study relate to hip-hop music is especially important for this study considering that all of the participants self-identified as being White and hip-hop music is a genre that is largely representative of certain aspects of Black culture. The specific question posed for this particular study was, “How do White listeners negotiate/position their Whiteness as consumers and listeners of Hip-Hop, where Black identity is central to this art form?” As with the two previous research questions, specific questions were included in the interview guide to inform this particular research question (See Appendix B). The questions sought to facilitate understanding of what participants’ perceptions are of White Americans in general, how they believe hip-hop parallels the White American culture, and how their experiences being White Americans help them to better understand the music. Before the specific responses are revealed that specifically speak to this the third research question, it is important to first understand how Whites view and understand their Whiteness and what it means to be White in the U.S. culture.

When asked what it means to be White in America, there were three significant themes that emerged from the data. The themes include (1) Whiteness Made Visible, (2) Oblivious Whiteness, and (3) White is Just a Color.

### *Whiteness Made Visible*

From the focus groups, there were four participants (one from each focus group; three males and one female) who had no problems explaining what it meant to be White in America. These participants acknowledge and accept everything that Whiteness entails in our country. As one WM from FG1 (Gary) bluntly puts it, “It means being catered to...everything is pretty much focused on more things the way you want it”. This participant from FG1 continues by saying, “I was thinking of being White as probably having more opportunities just right off the bat”. This participant really wanted the rest of his group to understand the privileges associated with being White in America so he continues by sharing with them the results of a discrimination study that he had read in one of his classes. He revealed to them the following:

I read a study about part-time jobs...like a White person, like a White male with several counts of possession of marijuana, misdemeanors, and other stuff like that...compared with a Black person with nothing on their record, the White person is still more likely to be hired, even if they have a criminal history.

Other participants shared their knowledge of whiteness and offered the following comments to reflect those revelations:

I'll go ahead and say it—I think Whites still represent America (WM, FG2, Charlie)

Being White in American has this personification of power, or the upper-hand, or just better off than this or that (WF, FG3, Tracy)

The last participant who was very adamant about making whiteness visible was a WM from FG4 (Michael). After hearing the question posed by the moderator, this participant eagerly shared what he learned about whiteness from one of his Speech Communication courses. The participant asserts, “I just recently went over this same exact thing in my Speech Comm. Class—we read that Peggy McIntosh article about White privilege. It’s [whiteness] something like, unless someone tells you, you don’t really acknowledge it”. After immediate confusion from his other White peers about what he shared, this participant attempted to provide a more simplistic representation of whiteness by giving examples. He continued by saying:

It’s [whiteness] almost like a natural advantage. When you walk into Best Buy, no one is going to follow you because they think you’re stealing. Or, when you go get a loan, no one will necessarily think you won’t be able to get approved for it.

Whenever you walk into a restaurant and a Black [person] walk in behind you, a lot of White people who work there are going to be like, ‘better seat the White guy in my area, cause I want the tip’.

As evidenced by the examples offered, these participants had a very good understanding of what it means to be White in America. They also demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the unearned privilege that comes with their whiteness, often times at the expense of others who are not of the same racial standpoint.

### *Oblivious to Whiteness*

While some participants recognized their whiteness and the power and privilege it affords them in America, there were six other participants (from three different focus groups; five female and one male) who were totally oblivious to their whiteness and the meanings associated with it. When asked what it means to be White in America, one WF participant from FG2 (Lisa) responded by saying, “I have no idea”. Another participant from FG2 (Brianna) was almost offended by the question as she laughingly asked, “Are we *really* supposed to define what it means to be White?! It’s like asking, ‘What is a Black person!’ There’s no generalization”. Other examples of an unawareness of whiteness include the following statements:

Everywhere you go, it’s different—so I don’t know (WF, FG3, Maria)

I just think because you’ve always been maybe more of the majority, or whatever, that we don’t feel like a special bond (WF, FG3, Judie)

Another participant from FG3, a WF (Crystal), believed that White people are different all across the country and that regional culture is the only thing that bonds some White people together, not their White racial identity. This participant made this claim by saying, “I think the White American culture will vary depending on where you are. I mean, we’re definitely not the same. We may have the same cultural history and background in general, but we’re...our lifestyles are going to be different”. The participant continued by adding, “I think of it as more regional...I don’t look at it as general White culture—it’s more regional”. Another participant, a WM from FG4 (Zach), explained that he could not truly understand what it means to be White or being immersed into the culture. He asserts, “It’s something that I can’t really know what it’s

like to be White, because it's the only thing I've ever known—ever will know in America. And until I'm in a situation where I'm the minority, I don't think I'll ever really appreciate it or understand it”

*White is Just a Color*

The last theme that emerged from the data in regards to understanding how young, White adults view their racial identity was that the White racial identity was viewed by three participants (all from FG2; one female and two males) as being only a color that is not associated with a person's character. These participants claimed that their skin color is totally separate from anything that defines them and who they are. They viewed white as simply a color, and nothing more. One participant actually associated whiteness with White historical superiority and explicit racist beliefs, and subsequently had a negative, emotional response to the question posed about his understanding of what it means to be white. This WF from FG2 (Sherrie) angrily stated:

I work my entire life not to be...(southern accent) White American! I'm just the complete opposite of that. I was raised to be open-minded...open to things...and not to consider yourself a race, consider yourself a person, accepting of other people and races. I worked really hard to do that, and so to be defined as a White person in America—it's the color of my skin, not the type of person I am.

This participant obviously associated whiteness with many of the southern, White, racist stereotypes. Along the same lines, another participant, a WF from FG2 (Donna), shared her views by saying, “I think the big thing is how you were raised. My dad had the mentality of, ‘You're a person, and your skin color doesn't matter' ...so, I don't see myself as White”. A third participant from FG2 (Tara) simply responded to the inquiry

posed by the moderator by saying, “I don’t think of myself any different than anyone else”. From this iteration, it can be inferred that for this participant, White is just the color of his skin and he is the same as everyone else, thereby failing to acknowledge or be aware of the privilege or preferential treatment that come with his racial group membership.

### Relating to Hip-Hop through Whiteness

Now, in order to explore how Whites position their whiteness or use it to understand hip-hop music, there were two prominent themes that emerged from the data. This part of the study sought to understand how Whites specifically used their racial identity to relate to hip-hop music in general. The two themes that emerged were (1) the struggle and (2) white reality.

#### *The Struggle*

There were six participants from two different focus groups who believed that they could relate to hip-hop music if race was taken out of the equation (four males and two females). Three participants argued that they relate to hip-hop from a class perspective, which to them is more prevalent than race. The participants who believed that they could relate to some of the messages being communicated in hip-hop music had this perception of a middle-class “struggle,” which they believed was parallel to the struggle oftentimes discussed in the hip-hop music. Within hip-hop music, race and class are two terms that are interrelated and one cannot be examined without the other. But nonetheless, White participants felt they could relate to some of the overall class messages about rising above poverty-stricken situations that are found in the music, in spite of their out-group status. Participants’ relationship to hip-hop music through their

perceived middle-class struggle ultimately speaks to the universality of hip-hop music, which was discussed at length in Chapter One. This musical genre appeals to many different types of people all over the world, and for the White Americans in this particular study, a connection was made from a class perspective. One WM participant from FG1 (Gary) felt he could not relate in a literal sense, but in terms of the overall message, he felt as if similarities existed. He explains,

Like, I'm not looking to get a new Cadillac with new rims, but I am looking to do really well in my life...And so, if you go with that mentality, like, I'm going to do what I have to do to get up there, then, yeah, that's relevant. [But] I don't think, like, the specific things that they talk about are necessarily part of my life—but the overall ideas are...I'm not going to do it starting out in poverty and working my way up to be an awesome rapper, but I will do well in school.

Another WM in a different focus group session (FG4, Zach) makes a similar comment. He shares, “I feel like I look at it from a different place [other than race]...I'm going to generalize so it will look like my class, even if it's not explicitly said in the song”. He continued by adding, “...the famous truth for anybody who is upper-middle class or middle class is that you're trying to go up the corporate ladder—it's a different ladder, but it's still the same concept”. In general, many participants believed that the persona of being wealthy, or a “baller,” given off by some rappers is reflective of middle-class values in general. When asked how he could relate to the music, another WM from FG1 (Carl) indicated that he does so through “a lot of the excess about things...about the things you have...in middle class we buy a lot of things”.

Two participants (from FG2 and FG4) felt as if they could relate, in general, to the middle-class struggle of not having any parental guidance, which is an issue many rappers speak to in their songs. One WF from FG2 (Donna) confesses to her group that,

My parents were hippies...both of them were neglectful. And so a lot of times, when they're [rap artists] like, 'daddy wasn't there, momma was doing this,' I mean, my parents left the kids to grow up on their own [too]. And so, a lot of times rap music is saying that, but more in depth.

After thinking about this specific for a while, another WF participant (Sherrie) in the same focus group (FG2) agrees and chimes in by saying, "I guess I didn't really think about it like that. Like, both of my parents worked full-time, so yeah, I had a lot of raising my sister—even though we grew up in a wealthy neighborhood". Lastly, another participant, a WM from FG4 (Doug), believes that he can relate to the music from an emotional perspective. This participant discusses how many rappers display frustration in their music and he notes that this is something with which he is familiar. This participant is quoted as saying, "I think I can relate to it on some level—the underlying emotion that everybody feels, and that's pretty universal regardless of how you grew up or whether you're Black, White, or whatever".

### *White Reality*

While some participants believe that they can relate from a more humanistic approach once race is taken out of the picture, there were three participants from FG2 and FG3 who asserted that they are not able to relate to the music, from *any* standpoint (two females and one male). After being questioned about whether or not Whites can relate to the music, a WF from FG2 (Brianna) answers quickly by asserting, "Noooo...not at all. I

grew up in the Fayette County Golf Cart Planned Community”. She continues by saying, “hip-hop is something that I am not. I am a Ralph Lauren-loving, cashmere-wearing, spending 180 dollars on a pair on jeans, White girl”. A similar sentiment is shared by a different WF participant from FG3 (Judie) who says, “It’s sort of hard to relate to them personally, to my life—‘cause I don’t go out and have promiscuous sex and do drugs”. This comment shows that this participant thinks that sex and drugs are the extent of hip-hop music. After listening to people in his group say that they can relate to the music because their parents were workaholics and never home, a WM from FG2 (Charlie) shares that, “Both of my parents would never be home, they’re both like workaholics, but I still wouldn’t say that I related to the music”. This participant continues by saying, “We don’t have the upbringing at all—[but] we have an appreciation for the music”.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### Whites' Appropriation of Hip-Hop Music

The goal of this thesis was to understand the phenomenon of White hip-hop listeners through an empirical, qualitative study. As mentioned in chapter two, this phenomenon is best understood within the larger context of Black music and its history. In the past, Whites have been known to appropriate Black musical genres such as jazz and rock (Aaberg, 2006; Anderson, 2004; Barlow, 1995; Chappell, 2001; Walton, 1972), and this study sought to understand whether the same White appropriation is currently taking place with hip-hop music. A very popular statistic within the hip-hop community shows that 70% of hip-hop's consumers are White, middle-class, suburban Americans, which implies that hip-hop music may soon face similar White appropriation as was seen with earlier Black musical forms (Kitwana, 2005; Morgan, J., 2002; Yousman, 2003). The results from this study give insight into the White hip-hop listener phenomenon as it is placed with the larger dialogue of African-American music.

As previously noted, the three primary research questions posed for this thesis were to understand (1) why Whites are attracted to hip-hop music, (2) the relationships Whites believe exist between hip-hop music and Black culture, and (3) how Whites use their racial identities to relate to and understand hip-hop music. For RQ1, it was found that the Whites who participated in this study were attracted to hip-hop music for six different reasons. First, nine of the 19 White participants revealed that they are attracted

to hip-hop music because of rebellious motivations against parental structures. This reason was also cited in other works that examine White listeners of hip-hop music (Kitwana, 2005; Yousman, 2003). According to Kitwana (2005), the White hip-hop fans who were immersing themselves into the hip-hop culture during the 1980s either shared similar socio-economic backgrounds and living conditions with many poor Blacks or were rebelling against parental structures. For some of the 1980s White hip-hop fans, hip-hop music proved to be a musical outlet for them as they rebelled against authority structures and struggled to find their identity (Kitwana, 2005). None of the participants from this study grew up in a low socio-economic bracket as evidenced by the demographic information collected at the beginning of each respective study (they were all middle to upper class suburban Americans); however, many of them cited listening to hip-hop music for rebellious motivations. An important thing to note in regards to this issue is that from this study, we learn that young, White hip-hop listeners do in fact rebel against parental structures, but not explanations were offered by participants, which is consistent with the explanation Kitwana offers regarding this motivation. So in this regard, the participants from this study were similar to the latter group of hip-hop fans that Kitwana describes in his work as White, rebellious hip-hop fans. It can be inferred that the participants from this study also use hip-hop music and their rebellious motivation in an attempt to figure out their identity within their White, middle-class world as many of them struggled with their whiteness and identity. To truly understand the specifics about how Whites use hip-hop music as a tool to help them negotiate their identity warrants further research and closer examination. This theme of rebellion is consistent with and offers support for unsubstantiated claims that similar motivations

were also attributed to Whites' attraction to jazz and rock music, respectively. With jazz, White parents and critics believed that it was voodoo music that corrupt that brains of their innocent White youth, which ultimately led the young adults to like it even more (Anderson, 2004). As the data suggests, rebellious motivation has been a consistent theme for White listeners of Black music throughout history.

The second theme that emerged in regards RQ1 was that participants (11 total) from this study cited being attracted to hip-hop music because it proved to be a “cool” thing for 10 White participants in this study. In addition to this, the participants noted that it was also “cool” to “act” Black or to appropriate blackness learned from the hip-hop culture and music. This theme is consistent with Yousman's (2003) argument that many young, White Americans consume Black cultural art forms such as hip-hop in an attempt to co-opt and appropriate blackness. As noted in his study, Yousman asserts that Whites who consume Black musical art forms and attempt to appropriate blackness are also the ones who are opposed to federal mandated programs (i.e., affirmative action) designed to help the progression of African-Americans. As mentioned in Chapter One, Yousman argues that this is a dread of African-Americans (Blackophobia) in an attempt to uphold White supremacy, even though he argues that these very same Whites are fascinated with Black culture and music (Blackophilia). From the qualitative data gathered in this study, no themes emerged that explained or address *why* the White participants believed it was cool to listen to hip-hop music and appropriate blackness. In addition, it is also not known whether the White hip-hop listeners who participated in this study are opposed to the progression of Blacks through programs like Affirmative Action in an attempt to uphold White supremacy. However, what is known at this point is that

hip-hop music and perceptions of blackness as seen through the music are considered to be “cool.” This theme of appropriating blackness and Black culture that the White participants engaged in also speaks to their use of hip-hop music as a way to negotiate their identity. If White Americans are using hip-hop music as a way to “act” Black, this very clearly shows that these participants are in the process of figuring out their identity and negotiating their perceptions about the self. This is another issue that warrants further scholarly inquiry.

The third theme that emerged for RQ1 was empowerment. Four White participants were attracted to hip-hop music because it empowered them, specifically, to be a “badass”. This sense of empowerment was not cited in any other work that focuses on hip-hop consumers. In addition, this theme was not mentioned in works that focus on earlier African-American musical genres and their respective consumers. As such, the specific reasons for this sense of empowerment felt among White hip-hop listeners were also not revealed in this study. However, what is seen from this theme is this continuous idea of White consumers’ using hip-hop music to negotiate their identity, as was the case with the other aforementioned themes that are related to RQ1. If White participants are temporarily embodying an alternative identity of invincibility when listening to hip-hop music, then surely they are negotiating the boundaries of their “true” White, middle-class suburban identities, which is deserving of further investigation.

The fourth theme to emerge in regards to RQ1 was that hip-hop was seen by some participants (six total) to be a tool to help them fit-in socially with friends. To be specific, hip-hop music allowed six of the participants to fit-in socially with other White peers, which is another argument that Yousman (2003) makes in his work on the White

consumption of hip-hop. Yousman argues that Blackophilia, or the consumption of Black music among Whites, helps to create social networks for Whites who are fans of the music. In the case of this study, participants were able to use hip-hop as a social tool due to the fact that the friends of the White participants were cited as also being hip-hop fans. So, by the participants being fans of hip-hop music, they can better relate to their White peers who are also fans. It is not known whether White fans of earlier musical genres also used Black music as a socializing tool even though the theme was evident within this study. In addition, it is also not known whether this theme of hip-hop being a socializing tool is a way for participants to deal with identity issues that they may be faced with as friends, in general, may prove to be some of the most influential factors on one's identity development. So, in this regard, using hip-hop as a way to socialize with friends may also have significant implications on Whites using hip-hop music as a way to negotiate their respective identities.

The fifth theme to emerge within the data from RQ1 was that three of the White participants used hip-hop as a means to learn and appropriate hip-hop language, which also speaks to the idea of Whites negotiating their identities through the use and consumption of hip-hop music. The participants cited being attracted to hip-hop music because they could learn and appropriate the various words and terminologies of Black language, and this was shown through the comments of five participants. This theme is similar to Yousman (2003) claim that Whites are fascinated with Black culture, and as a result, attempt to co-opt the various form of the culture and, in this case, the language. The reasons for Whites wanting to use/co-opt hip-hop language were not explicitly revealed in the data, even though some of the participants did consider the Black

language to merely be “pop” language. It can be inferred, however, that appropriating the language of another culture and referring to White friends using the word “nigga” as one participant was cited, shows significant issues with dealing with a White identity that deserves the attention of empirical research.

The sixth and last theme to emerge regarding why Whites are attracted to hip-hop music pertains to its dance element. Many of the participants (11 to be exact) viewed hip-hop music as an attractive medium because the music offers good rhythms and beats for dancing. The literature surrounding African-American music suggests that Whites were also attracted to both jazz and rock music (respectively) due to both musical forms providing wonderful outlets for dance (Chappell, 2001; Walton, 1972). As such, this has been a consistent theme found within the history of African-American in relation to its White consumers and fans.

From the six themes that emerged from the data which revealed why Whites are attracted to hip-hop music, none of the themes showed an interest by participants, necessarily, in the socio-cultural aspects of hip-hop music from which the music derives. It was shown that the participants are attracted to hip-hop music for reasons other than the fact that it provides a voice for the marginalized voiceless, specifically African-Americans. None of the participants were attracted to the medium due to the roots and history of hip-hop music; nevertheless, it was seen, from a close analysis of the data, that hip-hop music is an outlet for White consumers to negotiate their respective identities, which, interestingly enough, are in stark contrast to the Black experiences that the genre speaks to. Hip-hop music has been proven to be a voice for African-American youth and young adults who are still victims of ill social conditions (Crossley, 2005; Rose, 1994);

but from this study, hip-hop is also proving to be a medium that allows White Americans the opportunity to question and negotiate their social identities, demonstrating hip-hop's universal appeal.

Cummings and Roy (2002) argue that hip-hop "...operates through both resistant and empowering voices to create a sense of unity in the African-American community against dominant and oppressive structures" (p. 71). In addition, hip-hop has been shown to be a racial and socio-cultural transmitter of identity for African-American youth, which marks hip-hop as a significant medium for this group (Clay, 2003; Evelyn, 2000; Roach, 2004; Tyson, 2002). From the data collected for this study in regards to RQ1, it can be inferred that most of the White participants were not attracted to hip-hop music because of its deep and strong cultural/racialized richness. Instead, participants were attracted to it because it represented blackness and blackness is marked as "other," which allows Whites to understand and negotiate their identity when contrasted to the group that makes their whiteness visible.

For RQ2, it was shown that, in general, Whites realize that hip-hop music speaks directly to the Black culture and experience. Participants made connections between hip-hop music and Black culture through discussions on (1) old-school hip-hop vs. mainstream hip-hop, (2) authentic vs. unauthentic rappers, (3) communication messages, and (3) White guilt. In regards to the first discussion, 10 participants implied that old-school hip-hop music was more closely related to Black culture than mainstream hip-hop because they believed that old-school hip-hop clearly represented the social conditions that inform the musical genre. For the second discussion, five participants made implicit connections between authentic rappers and Black culture. Participants believed that

authentic rappers remained true to their original (or Black) roots, while unauthentic rappers catered to White, mainstream culture. While discussing the dichotomies of old-school hip-hop vs. mainstream hip-hop and authentic vs. unauthentic rappers, participants seemed to justify their listening habits of hip-hop music by explicitly stating that mainstream (unauthentic) hip-hop was designed for them (Whites), while implying that old-school (authentic) hip-hop music was for Blacks. McLeod (1999) notes that because of hip-hop's move into mainstream culture, "[Black] hip-hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation...: being 'inside' a mainstream culture they had, in part, defined themselves as being against" (p. 136). While this may be the case, the literature still supports the idea that many rappers nonetheless make known their authenticity by making references to Black culture through their songs, despite the fact that they are in White, mainstream culture. To be specific, it has been shown that most rappers still make appeals to Black culture despite their mainstream status and likeability (McLeod, 1999). However, the White participants argued that more mainstream hip-hop is created for them, even though they acknowledged that the genre overall is still representative of blackness. This idea of mainstream hip-hop being catered towards White audiences is similar to a phenomenon that occurred within the jazz movement. After jazz became a national craze as a genre of music adored by many White youth, Black jazz musicians were forced to adopt the canned, whitewashed style of jazz to appease its White listeners if they were to have profitable careers (Walton, 1972). As a result, the jazz performers who catered their music specifically to appease White audiences were accused of selling-out and being unauthentic, which is also a term used to refer to black hip-hop artists who seem to do the same thing with their music. At this

point in hip-hop's history, there is no way to accurately determine whether or not this same idea of pleasing a White audience is currently happening to hip-hop music as it did with jazz. As noted, many rappers are cited as representing their blackness through hip-hop music despite their status; however, an examination of this should occur years from now so a true retrospective of the music can be depicted. For the third discussion, it was mentioned in all four focus groups that two of the more prominent messages communicated in hip-hop music center around rising above ill social conditions and anti-establishment. By acknowledging these messages within hip-hop music, participants indirectly made links between the music and Black culture. The earlier musical genres, like jazz and the blues, had characteristics reflective of their socio-cultural roots; however, hip-hop one is of the few Black musical genres that directly and explicitly make references to Black culture and its marginalized position in this country. In addition, hip-hop music also explicitly calls out the injustices of power structures within the country that have been seen to oppress African-Americans. By this, it is hard to deny the Black roots of hip-hop music. For the fourth and last discussion, three participants expressed burdens of guilt for listening to hip-hop music. By expressing a guilty pleasure for listening to hip-hop, three participants, in particular, implied that hip-hop music is in fact a musical genre that directly and explicitly represents Black culture rather than their White, privileged culture.

RQ3 also yielded interesting responses. In regards to participants understanding their White, racialized identities, three themes emerged. First, four participants were able to accurately acknowledge and define their whiteness. Second, six participants were oblivious to their whiteness and were unaware of what it means to be White in America.

Asumah (2004) argues that Whites are very rarely conscious of the benefits associated with their race, which may explain the first two findings related to this question. Third, and last, only three participants viewed their White race as the color of their skin and asserted that their whiteness had nothing to do with their character. Since all of the 19 participants claimed to be hip-hop fans (which is a genre that speaks directly to the experiences of African-American), it is interesting that only four of the participants recognized their racialized identities. The reason behind this may be that Whites are generally not taught to recognize their racialized identities. As Asumah (2004) asserts, “The basic difference between White and Black racial identity development is that Blacks learn and understand “Blackness” very earlier on in life, while Whites resist any association with “Whiteness,” especially when they are cognizant of the fact that there is a correlations between “Whiteness” and privilege” (p. 505). For this very same reason, Whites, as they grow to understand the societal power bases and racial typology within this country, may be using hip-hop as a means for truly understanding their whiteness, which is contrasted to the blackness represented in the music.

When asked how their whiteness helped them to understand and relate to hip-hop music, none of the participants in any of the focus groups could use their racialized identities to relate to the music. Instead, six participants cited their middle-class socio-economic statuses as helping them relate to hip-hop music through a struggle that they believe is evident in both the hip-hop culture and middle-class. Relating to hip-hop music from a class perspective ultimately takes the Black racialized element out of the music; however, class was shown to represent a pertinent social identity membership for the participants, which is a part of their larger identity. Whites being able to relate to hip-

hop music from a class perspective speak to the music's universal appeal. This also shows that White listeners of hip-hop music, for the most part, attempt to relate to the music from one of their significant social identity memberships (class) even though they could not relate from a racialized perspective, which makes this a significant implication of the data.

It is known that hip-hop music is the voice for many Black marginalized Americans in many ill socio-cultural contexts (Rose, 1994). As such, it *may* be argued by some critical scholars that the Whites from this study do not truly understand hip-hop music and the Black experiences that it speaks to, especially since many of the White participants could not even recognize their own White, racialized identities. In addition, it may also be argued that Whites do not have the capacity to fully relate to the music through themes of class due to the fact that race and class are oftentimes framed as interrelated issues within the hip-hop culture. The socioeconomic statuses of hip-hop rappers are oftentimes informed by their racial perspectives. That being said, it is undeniable that hip-hop plays an extremely important role in the lives of these participants as they are at critical times in their lives (young adult status) where they are seeking to find their place in the world through the identity negotiation of their social group memberships. While many of the participants could not articulate their own whiteness, they were, however, able to make connections between hip-hop music and Black culture, which may have allowed them to actually see their whiteness since it is starkly contrasted to blackness and the hip-hop culture. The participants from this study may understand more about their whiteness than they let on or shared within the focus groups, especially since Asumah (2004) asserts that whiteness is not a polite topic of

discussion for many conservative Whites. This author argues that whiteness is something usually avoided in the conversations among many Whites because they recognize the power and privilege that have been afforded to them through their skin color. As such, a conversation about this topic might have made participants shy away from answering in an attempt to not put their racialized position on display. In addition, if the participants admitted to “acting” Black and appropriating Black language, then surely they should have some idea about their racialized standpoint, which some participants revealed is in total opposition to their alternative Black, “badass” identity. In this case, it can be inferred that hip-hop music is allowing them to understand their identities and to negotiate the boundaries of their social group memberships as they temporarily embody alternative identities that primarily speak to Black culture.

As noted in Chapter One, Black hip-hop community members are desperately trying to “save” hip-hop from the whitewashing appropriation that previous Black musical genres like the blues, jazz, and rock have gone through (Grant, 2002; Hess, 2005). From this investigation of White hip-hop music listeners and the literature surrounding the genre, it appears that the appeal of hip-hop for most Whites is not to steal and appropriate the music as was the case with previous Black musical genres, such as with jazz and rock. As such, participants from this study were able to make distinct connections between hip-hop music and Black culture, showing how hip-hop is still categorized as being an African-American musical genre at heart. In addition, participants admitted to temporarily embodying alternative Black identities that they saw being depicted within hip-hop music, which again shows how the music is still representative of Black culture. The literature on hip-hop music makes mention of how

Black rap artists must constantly make appeals to their blackness, the inner-city, and their poor socio-economic upbringing in order to appear credible and authentic. With all of those factors combined, hip-hop music appears to be headed in a different direction than jazz and rock music when it comes to its popularity among White Americans.

With the statistic that over 70% of hip-hop consumers are White, middle-class Americans, the future of hip-hop music may more closely resemble the history of the blues, which was discussed in Chapter Two. The blues has continued to remain a musical genre that speaks to the lived experiences of the Black culture, however, its fan base is now predominantly White (Kinnon, 1997). In fact, African-American blues singer Koko Taylor mentioned that her fan base all across the world is about 95% White (Kinnon, 1997). Hip-hop is similar to the blues in that the music is still representative of Black life and culture; however, the racial make-up of its fan base is drastically shifting and including more Whites. Only time will tell whether the percentage White consumers of hip-hop music will increase beyond its current percentage of 70.

Another difference between the fan bases for White hip-hop music and other earlier Black musical genres is that White hip-hop fans attempt to co-opt the Black culture as depicted within the music. So, instead of appropriating the music itself, some of the White hip-hop fans are co-opting Black identities in an attempt to fit-in with their peer groups in an effort to appear “cool”. This issue demonstrates how these participants may be in the process of figuring out their social identity memberships, specifically relating to race and class, and are using hip-hop music as a means to do so. This particular phenomenon of appropriating Black culture through hip-hop music in light of identity negotiation definitely warrants a more thorough and direct investigation. This

thesis in particular only sought understanding of the White, hip-hop listener phenomenon, and as such, the reasons why Whites feel the need to embody temporary Black hip-hop identities are not yet known.

Music in the Black community has always been used as a voice of hope and strength, and despite its criticism, hip-hop music is no different. Hip-hop music was birthed from the ill social conditions that many Blacks still suffer from today. It is because of this very reason that hip-hop means so much to Black youth and young adults. It is *their* story, a story to which they can relate to and value as a critical part of their lived experiences. As such, it has been shown from this study that Whites also find ways to relate to hip-hop music through some of its universal appeals of class and emotions. These same Whites realize that hip-hop music directly speaks to the Black experience, but they nonetheless find ways to parallel the music to their White, suburban lives. While hip-hop may not serve as a voice of hope for the White participants from this study and speak to their live White experiences, participants continuously asserted throughout the four focus groups that this is nonetheless a genre of music that they like and appreciate. Participants may not have appreciated the cultural embeddedness of hip-hop music, but through the music's universality, Whites were able to use it as a tool for negotiating their social group memberships as they claimed the music allowed them to take on temporary alternative identities. From this study, it is clear many people outside of the Black community, particularly Whites, are attracted to hip-hop music for reasons that extend beyond its socio-cultural roots. However, Black hip-hop community members have done a good job in ensuring that this is a genre of music that prioritizes Black voices first and foremost, so that it does not have a history similar to that of jazz

and rock music. Even with blackness being at the heart of hip-hop music, Whites still find ways to relate, which may speak to hip-hop's universal appeal and longevity.

#### Conclusion: Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

##### *Strengths*

The primary strength of this study was that it was able to empirically document the experiences of White Americans as they relate to the hip-hop culture and music. In addition, this study was able to truly and accurately reveal information regarding this topic due to the qualitative methods used. This study sought understanding of the White, hip-hop listener phenomenon, which was captured through the voices of people who are actively involved in this culture. A second strength of this study is that participants were able to honestly and comfortably express their thoughts through the use of a same-race moderator. Although there was slight hesitation (at times) among some of the participants, the use of White moderators definitely helped to reduce some of the tension felt, as this was literally expressed by several participants at the end of the focus group sessions. If a non-White facilitator had been used, it is highly unlikely that participants would have been as forthcoming and open in disclosing their true beliefs, opinions, and attitudes this cultural art form. A third strength is that participants were also able to comfortably discuss issues relating to race and whiteness within peer focus groups. The focus group method was chosen by the principal investigator as the most effective method for this project since many Whites are uncomfortable talking about whiteness (Asumah, 2004). The use of focus groups prevented participants from feeling 'singled-out'.

### *Limitations*

There are three particular limitations to this study. The first is that this study was only able to capture the lived experiences of 19 young, White Americans as they relate to hip-hop music. It was the goal of the principal investigator to interview at least 24 people; however, due to the fact that many other researchers were using the Speech Communication student research pool, the number of available students who fit the criteria was scarce. As a result of the limited White experiences captured, the findings presented in this thesis are in no way to be generalized to the larger public. Although qualitative research is not usually used to generalize findings, the results of the current study are limited to those relative to this particular population. Thus, future research should be conducted among participants from the same racial group but in diverse geographic locations to better understand this national and international phenomenon consumed by a significant portion of this racial community.

A second limitation of this study is that it did not take into consideration the latest technologies that also make hip-hop music readily available to mainstream culture. As previously noted, over 70% of hip-hop consumers are White, but this percentage is simply based upon CD sales and nothing else, which is problematic. With the advent of new technologies, the percentage may actually be higher due to the fact that music is now more easily available than it has ever been. Examples of these technologies include the Internet and MP3 music sales. Many participants from this study noted that they frequently download music to their MP3 player and burn music from Internet music websites. Thus, it may be concluded that this is a tremendous phenomenon with no geographic boundaries.

A third limitation of this study is that the participants were unevenly divided based upon gender. There were a total of 13 females and only six males who participated in the study. The uneven gender distribution may have influenced the themes that emerged within the data, but it is not known for certain. To be more specific, some of the themes that emerged may be more characteristic of female gender socialization than male gender socialization. It must be noted, however, that a gender bias in participation is not a unique phenomenon in the social sciences. Nevertheless, equal representation from both genders may provide further understanding of the tremendous consumption of a cultural art form typically dominated by African American males. Thus, more male representation may reveal a stronger or unique identification with hop-hop. The only way to truly combat this issue of uneven gender distribution within the focus groups is to purposely recruit more male participants. With more White, male participants, their voices can also be heard as researchers seek to truly understand the phenomenon of White hip-hop listeners.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Being one of only a few empirical hip-hop studies, this project has set the foundation for many other possible research projects to come. One direction for future research could be to replicate this study using more participants. Using more than 19 participants will increase the chances of the data being applicable (not to be confused with generalizable) to other White hip-hop listeners through the possibility of additional consistent themes being emerged from the data. A second direction for future research would be to also include African-American participants in an effort to understand their perceptions of hip-hop music and Whites' consumption of this musical genre that is

intended to address or explore racialized experiences with which they can identify. Including African-American participants will also help to better understand whiteness as it relates to hip-hop consumers since whiteness is oftentimes made visible by being directly contrasted to blackness. It is also a possibility that having interracial focus groups with both Black and White participants will help the Whites students make more direct connections between hip-hop music and Black culture. A comparison of same-race and interracial focus groups might afford participants the opportunity to reveal either consciously or subconsciously their (dis)comfort with discourse regarding race in these temporal relational contexts. A third and final suggestion for future research would be to have African-American focus group moderators in addition to same-race, White moderators. Having African-American moderators would make for great comparative data to see if themes that emerge from the data remain consistent among both the Black and White moderators. There is a strong possibility that the presence of a non-White or Black moderator might directly influence the degree to which participants disclose their beliefs about this cultural art form. If this proves to be the case, then such findings will support the assumption of qualitative data that similarity between participant and moderator or principal investigator is critical to focus group participation. Conversely, if few to no differences in disclosures are observed, then the use of different-race moderators might provide evidence that interracial dialogues concerning issues of race are indeed a successful site for fostering effective interracial communication (race relations).

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## APPENDIX A

### CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in research being conducted by Janise M. Blackshear of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia (222 Terrell Hall, 583-0952). This research is entitled “*Understanding the White, Mainstream Appeal of Hip-Hop: Is it a Fad or is it the Real Thing?*”. I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent to participate at any time without penalty. I understand, though, that once the research is completed my contributions will no longer be identifiable.

The purpose of this research is to understand how race impacts participants’ understandings of hip-hop music. The purpose of this focus group is to provide participants the unique opportunity to share personal stories of how hip-hop influences their lives. The benefits that I may expect to receive from participation include learning more about the hip-hop culture, being able to converse about the topic in a positive environment, and gaining understanding of social science research.

The follow points have been explained to me:

1. Participation in this project is completely voluntary.
2. I will answer questions about my understanding of hip-hop and how this musical genre relates to my life, which may take 1 to 2 hours. The interviews will be audiotaped for the purpose of data collection.
3. There are no foreseen stresses or discomforts due to my participation in this research. There are no foreseeable risks due to my participation in this study.
4. The results of my participation will be confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless required by law. Once data is collected, my name will be removed from everything that pertains to me and replaced with an identification number. The interview tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the primary researcher’s office. The consent forms and audiotapes will be destroyed in 3 years.
5. I may ask the investigator to answer my questions or provide more information about the study at any time. If I so choose, I can request that a copy of the results of this study be provided to me as soon as they are available.

If at any point I feel uncomfortable with the questions being asked of me, I may terminate the focus group.

My signature below indicates that the researcher(s) has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Investigator  
(706) 583-0952  
black1jm@uga.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name PRINTED

PLEASE SIGN AND DATE ONE COPY OF THE CONSENT FORM AND RETURN IT TO THE INVESTIGATOR. KEEP THE OTHER COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS.

For questions or problems about your rights please call or write: The IRB Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; e-mail address IRB@uga.edu.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

*“Understanding the White, Mainstream Appeal of Hip-Hop: Is it a Fad or is it the Real Thing?”*

Before we begin, I would like to go around the group and have each person state their name and share a little about themselves with the group (—i.e., year in school, major, and how long you’ve been a fan of hip-hop, etc.)

1. How often would you say you listen to hip-hop music?
2. Why do you listen to hip-hop music? Is this your favorite kind of music to listen to?  
(PROBE: What about hip-hop appeals to you?)
3. How did you first get involved with listening to hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: What prompted you to listen to hip-hop music?)
4. In what settings do you listen to hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: When doing homework? Driving in the car? At parties? With a certain group of friends? Etc)
5. How do you *use* hip-hop music?  
(PROBE: As a source of motivation or strength? To make you happy when your down? To vent frustrations?)
6. What are some of the messages within hip-hop music that are usually communicated to its audience?
7. What is the name of one or two of your favorite hip-hop songs that “speak” to you or tell your story?
8. What messages are being communicated in these songs?  
(PROBE: What is it about the song that causes you to closely identify with it?)
9. Who are some of you favorite hip-hop artists? Why?  
(PROBE: What is it about these artists that appeals to you?)
10. How many of you have heard the term “authentic” in relation to musical expression? What do you believe it *means* to be “authentic” within the hip-hop community?  
(PROBE: What does it mean to “keep it real” within the hip-hop community?)
11. How do you believe the artists you just named “keep it real”?
12. What does it mean to be White in America?

(How would define White-American culture?)

13. Statistics show that over 70% of hip-hop consumers are White, suburban, middle-class Americans. Why do you think Whites are attracted to, or like, hip-hop?
14. How does hip-hop speak to your lived experiences, if at all?  
(PROBE: How does hip-hop music relate to your life?)
15. How does hip-hop speak to your lived experiences as a White-American, if at all?  
(PROBE: How does hip-hop reflect/speak to your White racial identity, if at all?)
16. How does hip-hop represent White culture in America, if at all?  
(PROBE: How does hip-hop reflect/speak to “American” culture?)
17. How does your race or socio-economic status help you to understand or relate to hip-hop culture, if at all?  
(Does being a White, middle-class American help you in any way in relating to hip-hop and your favorite artists?)
18. How has your life paralleled what it means to be White in America, if at all?  
(PROBE: How is White-American culture a part of your life?)
19. What are your thoughts about Whites who say they can relate to the experiences and messages expressed in/through hip-hop music?