

Hip-Hop, Ghetto-centricity and the Commodity Fetish

Peter Anderson

[Panders1@gmu.edu]

New Century College

Due to the social construction of the African American experience, which labels the black narrative as one of exoticism, taboo, and rebellion, advertisers have begun using hip-hop fashion and urban sensibilities to market their wares. This paper explores some of the myriad interactions between hip-hop culture and capitalism. First, a brief history of the roles of marketing, advertising and branding will be given. Next, hip-hop's relationship with brand names will be detailed. The topic of ghetto-centricity and the profitability of lower-class urban experience will be explored. After examining the negative and empty position hip-hop culture plays within the commodity fetish, examples of black entrepreneurship will be given. The final section will ultimately prove that although hip-hop culture has become just another tool for advertisers and another example of appropriation of a subculture by the mainstream, this African American urban culture is ultimately allowing for black status-achievement, wealth, and the creation of black commercial networks.

Commodification of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop¹ had its beginnings as an inclusionary, underground, minimalist culture. The community-driven, pro-social gangs promoted by Afrika Bambaataa² morphed into P. Diddy's

exclusive marketing cartels. Rather than have rank and status based on pure microphone talent and rhyme skills, prestige is now awarded to those with the most marketability and business-savvy strategies. This commodification of hip-hop changed focus from the pioneering DJ's, emcees, breakers and graffiti artists and passed the torch to a new age of capital-minded, image-oriented entrepreneurs. Once the channels of mainstream distribution and production were opened up by increased interest from large companies, white America welcomed the first truly black-owned culture.

History of Branding

Before delving into hip-hop's relations with advertising, a brief history of marketing will be given. The first advertisements began around the second half of the 19th century (Naomi, 5). Advertisers were flooded with new products such as radios and phonographs, and had to figure out how to sell them. Although many of these products carried brand names, they were unimportant; the new-ness of the products themselves was enough to sell. Competitive branding and marketing did not come into play until after the industrial revolution, when factories began churning out endless, mass-produced commodities. Because of this industrial capitalism, goods became more common (Heilbroner &

¹ Hip-hop includes deejaying, emceeing, break dancing and graffiti. The hyphen between the two is put in place to show that the words are interconnected, suggesting a sense of unity.

² A former member of the pro-social gang The Black Spades, Bambaataa is credited as one of the founding fathers of hip-hop culture (George, 18).

Thurow, 21). As the centuries wore on, large corporations grew and the standard of living increased with the growth of material goods. As the size of the industrial apparatus grew, so did its complexity and dependency on sales. Producers and consumers became tied to tangible commodities.

The growth of the commercial and industrial sector received a large blow during the recession of the 1980's. As large corporations began to lose revenue, it became apparent that they had become too bloated and splintered. Their previous unchecked growth had created companies that employed too many people, over-reached their boundaries and had too many liabilities. Change came in the form of companies that realized that production and manufacturing were no longer the paths to success. Rather than focus on flooding the marketplace with physical commodities, these new corporations, such as Nike and Tommy Hilfiger, realized the importance of image: marketing, not manufacturing (Naomi, 4). Recent changes in trade liberalization and labor-law reform³ allowed companies to shift the burdensome job of production overseas, where they can skirt child-labor laws and buy supplies from those who employ slave labor.

With this new approach to marketing, advertising spending reaching the heights of almost \$200 billion by 1998 (Naomi 8), causing the public space has become completely inundated with

³ NAFTA opened up borders, allowing large US companies to move their manufacturing plants to places like Mexico, where lax laws allowed workers to be exploited and overworked for minute sums of money. U.S. companies could now hire the cheapest labor around in places where our fair-labor laws and unions do not exist.

brands. This ubiquity of advertising forces companies to continue to aggressively market and research what is 'cool,' frequently tapping into urban and youth markets.

This push towards a youth culture has its roots in the early 1990s. First, the baby boomers were no longer first in the consumer race. Companies that had spent millions of dollars on research on brand names to appeal to this age group were suddenly at a loss. Second, 1992 was the first year since 1975 where the number of teenagers in America increased (68). Companies realized that the teenagers were the new lucrative market, and began to court them heavily. In order to sell effectively to teenagers, companies needed to sell the elusive idea of 'cool,' of edgy and alternative. Enter hip-hop.

The Virtual Ghetto

One of the main ways hip-hop sells is through its ghetto-centricity and its sense of realness. James Richards suggests that the modern idea of the ghetto has become a virtual reality akin to that in *The Matrix*. Advertisers and marketers have realized the potential profit to be made from presenting the authentic black experience as one hinged on endless materialism, commercialism, violence, and drug use. In this matrix, an ethos based on irresponsibility, anger, greed, and violence is reinforced. This matrix is a self-reproducing cycle. Those who live in it are discouraged to leave by the substandard education system; rampant gun and drug use, and need to live up to the omnipresent 'urban culture'. The idea of 'keeping it real' has been ingrained within the matrix, and the

notion of the authentic black experience is inextricably tied to participating within the system.

In this ghetto matrix, the commodities it produces are the virtual bodies of the inhabitants. This virtual world is created, polished, and packaged for consumption by the masses. The images of the ghetto matrix are used to promote the privatized prison industry, sell guns to suburbanites, sell tabloids, and sell products such as clothing and accessories. The ways their physical bodies are adorned are used to test out new merchandise and create trends. These trends, after being labeled urban, are emulated and mass marketed to the outside world. This ghetto matrix provides a virtual space for outsiders to play and participate in without having to be subject to the actual dangers faced by the inhabitants themselves. The matrix provides racial exoticism, marked by just enough socially acceptable misogyny and violence to sell to the average consumer. This idea is also echoed by Adam Krins who states that through the commodification of hip-hop, capitalism has repackaged one of the most negative, draining aspects society, the ghettos of the 1970s, and turned them into a libidinal, lucrative tool for marketing (Qureshi, 67). Through this commodification, the ghetto produces a new use value of a safe, sanitized, portable image for pleasurable consumption by the masses.

Hip-Hop and Brand Names

Hip-hop artists have become entrenched in commercial networks of sponsorship and product endorsement.

This trend began with Run D.M.C.'s ode to their favorite footwear, "My Adidas"⁴. During a 1986 Madison Square Garden concert show, Run commanded the audience to wave their shoes high, the row of sweaty heads turning into a row of sweaty Adidas shoes. At the urging of hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and unbeknownst to the rappers, spokesmen from Adidas were in the theater that night to witness the music's awesome marketing power. The group soon received a \$1.5 million endorsement contract (Parker). This move opened the floodgates, further infusing material culture with hip-hop. A company called Pass was even created to help facilitate lucrative deals between urban music and advertising companies.

Some record companies use these endorsements to help offset the high cost of producing albums and videos. For instance, Motorola recently teamed up with Elektra artist Tweet for an endorsement deal around Verizon's wireless service. Both companies shared the costs for the video and commercial, both featuring Tweet and her Motorola. Not all endorsements have such calculated marketing beginnings. Over the summer of 2002, Busta Rhymes scored a huge hit with his track, "Pass the Courvoisier"⁵. The song repeats the title endlessly, while the video features a host of top hip-hop icons toasting and enjoying the Allied Domecq product. Although Busta claims he just wanted to make a song about his favorite drink, Couvoisier acknowledges contacting Rhymes after the song, to "explore ways to work together" (Parker).

⁴ Run D.M.C., "My Adidas" *Raising Hell* (Profile, 1986).

⁵ Busta Rhymes, "Pass the Courvoisier" *Genesis* (J-Records, 2001).

Although this marriage of music and product is blatantly materialist, it is nothing new for popular culture. Rock and roll has always enjoyed an enduring relationship with corporate America. Tommy Hilfiger sponsored the Rolling Stones; Kid Rock is a spokesperson for Coors Lite beer, and Dragonfly clothing sponsors alternative rockers Lit. The difference with hip-hop is that African American's marginalized position on the fringes of society gives their image and voice a much more potent marketing tool, the rebellion of rock and roll coupled with subversive racial codes.

The Virtual Ghetto

Hip-hop sells through its ghetto-centricity and its sense of realness. James Richards suggests that the modern idea of the ghetto has become a virtual reality akin to that in *The Matrix*. Advertisers and marketers have realized the potential profit to be made from presenting the authentic black experience as one hinged on endless materialism, commercialism, violence, and drug use. In this matrix, an ethos based on irresponsibility, anger, greed, and violence is reinforced. This matrix is a self-reproducing cycle. Those who live in the matrix are discouraged to leave by the substandard education system; rampant gun and drug use, and need to live up to the omnipresent 'urban culture'. The idea of 'keeping it real' has been ingrained within the matrix, and the notion of the authentic black experience is inextricably tied to participating within the system.

In this ghetto matrix, the commodities it produces are the virtual bodies of the inhabitants. This virtual world is created, polished, and

packaged for consumption by the masses. The images of the ghetto matrix are used to promote the privatized prison industry, sell guns to suburbanites, sell tabloids, and sell products such as clothing and accessories. The ways their physical bodies are adorned are used to test out new merchandise and create trends. These trends, after being labeled urban, are emulated and mass marketed to the outside world.

This ghetto matrix provides a virtual space for outsiders to play and participate in without having to be subject to the actual dangers faced by the inhabitants themselves. The matrix provides racial exoticism, marked by just enough socially acceptable misogyny and violence to sell to the average consumer. This idea is also echoed by Adam Krins who states that through the commodification of hip-hop, capitalism has repackaged one of the most negative, draining aspects society, the ghettos of the 1970s, and turned them into a libidinal, lucrative tool for marketing (Qureshi, 67). Through this commodification, the ghetto produces a new use value of a safe, sanitized, portable image for pleasurable consumption by the masses.

The Commodity Fetish and Hip-Hop

Another important way in which hip-hop interacts with capitalism is what Marxist theory calls the 'commodity fetish.' Marxist theory calls this the process of mistaking an object for a social relation (Qureshi, 68) 'commodity fetishism.' In this process, products are emptied of the meaning and content of their production and the labor of making them

and imbibed with new, mystical properties and cultural codes different from the actual meanings (McLellan, 473).

Once hip-hop culture entered the mainstream, it gave advertisers another tool to sell lifestyles. Products such as clothes are given the mystical qualities of 'ghetto authenticity' through reification⁶. Sturken and Cartwright posit that commodity fetishism is an inevitable outcome of mass production, when products and consumers are inextricably tied up in complex networks of distribution (200). The actual working conditions, which may be made in sweatshops using immigrant labor, are rendered invisible to the consumer, and the goods require intangible markers of status.

Since entertainment and sports are the two dominant avenues for African Americans to achieve status and wealth, athletic companies such as Nike invest heavily in hip-hop oriented marketing. The majority of Nike ads do not feature the logo prominently, but instead subtly incorporate it into the advertisement. Most feature a fabricated urban territory complete with destitute alleyways, dilapidated cityscapes and littered basketball courts. These virtual spaces rely on a sense of ghetto-centricity to sell its product. The Nike logo, miniscule in comparison with the rest of the image, promises the consumer an acceptable, sanitized ghetto experience through the product.

To help illuminate the inner workings of Nike, author Naomi Klein traveled to one of Nike's manufacturing plants in Rosario, Indonesia. Her findings illustrate the exploitive and inhumane labor practices carried out by

⁶ Reification is the process where abstract ideas are given concrete meaning.

multinationals. Klein details the workings of these massive, faceless plants, where guards with automatic weapons are posted at the entrances to every facility. Workers are paid far below the minimum wage⁷, and work 12 to 14 hour days. Workers, regardless of loyalty and years worked, receive no health insurance, benefits, or job security⁸. For the consumer, these practices are rendered invisible, while the promise of a hipper, edgier urban identity continues to sell and fund the Indonesian factories. For these companies, hip-hop culture is just another tool to help push a product. Advertisements exploiting the social taboo and history of race relations now count among such time-honored marketing methods as homoeroticism and scopophilia⁹. For companies such as Abercrombie & Fitch, images of scantily clad men engaged in horseplay have become standard marketing for men.

The next advertisements, by Gillette and Mars, also utilize commodity fetishism. The first ad (see figure 1) features prominent rappers Redman and Methodman hocking Right Guard deodorant. A sense of hip-ness is even extolled in the deodorant's scent, 'Chill.' Although Gillette is apparently clean, Mars Company has been documented as being linked to the same egregious labor practices as Nike. Illuminated by a

⁷ Many countries will bid against each other to be able a large company's manufacturing plants. One of the ways they entice the companies is by promising to skirt their labor laws and minimum wage, guaranteeing tax breaks for the company, and unlivable wages for the workers (Klein, 206).

⁸Some companies will lock restroom doors, restricting their use to sparse 15-minute break periods to ensure maximum productivity.

⁹ An obsession with looking, including voyeurism and exhibitionism.

string of media exposes, the contractors Mars bought their product from employed slave labor in West Africa, with children as young as nine harvesting the raw materials (Coyle 131). This abusive environment, where children are frequently beat with bicycle chains and branches, is a far cry from the presented reality of the advertisement. The next ad, for Snickers (see figure 2), displays a tall, masculine basketball player losing out to "Shorty," a short, goofy feminine character. Some signatures of African American urban neighborhoods appear basketball, rusting fences, and a nighttime cityscape. These ads, albeit asinine, are representative of the market's growing acceptance and acknowledgement of hip-hop culture. Historically, white America has always appropriated black culture.

Basu and Werbner claim that one of the marks of ethnic entrepreneurship is society's exploitation of cultural markets, and their demand for cheap imitation, and exotic and distinctive goods to peddle (240-241). The masses desire to be entertained in edgy, yet ultimately socially acceptable ways. Hip-hop provides not only access to exoticism, but also diluted forms of violence towards women, homosexuals and minorities.

D.I.Y. Capitalism

The history of African American entertainment is one of white consumption and white appropriation. Institutionalized racism has prevented African Americans from being able to fully succeed and take credit for their art forms and cultural capital. Although no other single ethnic group made as many

contributions to American popular culture as African Americans, black mainstays such as Billy Holiday and Bessie Smith died without a penny (Basu & Werbner 243). White-dominated record companies, concert promoters, etc., raked in countless dollars thanks to such performers.

Although profitable African American-centered music did exist, its success hinged upon its sanitization, creating a soulful but less menacing sound¹⁰ (243). These labels dominated the post WW2 music scene, proving that R&B music could be easily and effectively marketed and sold to white teens.

The hip-hop movement represents the first time African Americans have truly been in charge of their cultural product. This most recent commodification of black culture has been spearheaded and seized upon by black entrepreneurs, such as business/fashion moguls Sean Combs and Karl Kani. Central to this control is African American's ability to maintain ownership of their subcultural capital. Despite the millions of white consumers, the ghettocentricity of the culture remains an African American experience. Blacks have used this fertile connection between popular culture and inner city experience to create long-standing economic networks. Rather than remain simply rappers, black artists are creating their own record labels, production companies, fashion companies, and publications. Dr. Dre, who began rapping in NWA, went on to produce and co-found his own label. Russell Simmons began the seminal label Def

¹⁰ Labels such as Berry Gordian's Motown and the Philly Sound of Delta Records capitalized on this idea.

Jam, and went on to own the successful clothing company Phat Farm, as well as branching into movies and television. This proliferation of cultural currency extends to the other branches of hip-hop. Deejays such as the Xecutioners produce, host fashion shows¹¹, and graffiti artists get hooked up with advertising and magazine deals.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the many connections between hip-hop culture and capitalism. Hip-hop has given advertisers another tool to market products. The exoticism and inherent racial qualities of the culture make it an incredibly effective marketing tool. Although this 30 year-old culture is allowing African Americans to make sizeable headway in various industries, it remains to be seen whether or not 1) ultimate cultural control will remain in their hands and 2) if hip-hop's entrance into the marketplace will end up diluting the message.

¹¹ On MTV's Fashionably Loud, the most recent episode featured a member of the Xecutioners providing the deejaying.

Figures



Figure 1. Right Guard Ad

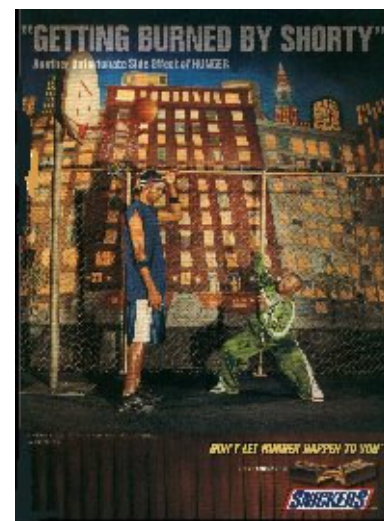


Figure 2. Snickers Ad

Authors Biography

Peter Anderson is a junior at George Mason University. He is majoring in integrative studies with a concentration on Family Studies, as well as a music minor. This paper allowed him to explore a culture and style of music unfamiliar to him as well as further his studies of the mass media.

Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright.
Practices of Looking. New York:
Oxford University Press, 2001.

Works Cited

- Basu, Dipannita and Pnina Werbner.
"Bootstrap Capitalism and the
Culture Industries: A Critique of
Invidious Comparisons in the Study
of Ethnic Entrepreneurship." Ethnic
and Racial Studies 24 (2001): 236-
262.
- Coyle, Diane. Sex, Drugs & Economics.
New York: Texere, 2002.
- George, Nelson. Hip Hop America.
New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Heilbroner, Robert and Lester Thurow.
Economics Explained. New York:
Touchstone, 1998.
- Klein, Naomi. No Logo. New York:
Picador USA, 2000.
- McLellan, David, ed. Karl Marx:
Selected Writings. 2nd ed. New York:
Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt, ed. Music
and Marx. New York: Routledge,
2002.
- Parker, Erik. "Hip-Hop Goes
Commercial". The Village Voice 11
Sept. 2002. 27 Oct. 2002
<[http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/
0237/parker.php](http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0237/parker.php)>.
- Richards, James (May 2000). "The
Ghetto Matrix." Black Film Features
Retrieved 29 Nov. 2002.
<[http://blackfilm.com/0205/features/a
-ghettomatrix.shtml](http://blackfilm.com/0205/features/a-ghettomatrix.shtml)>