The global hip-hop Diaspora: Understanding the culture

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Abstract

From New York to Paris, Tokyo and Sydney, hip-hop culture is a Diaspora transcending ethnic, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. As Osumare [Osumare H. Beat streets in the global hood: connective marginalities of the hip-hop globe. Journal of American and Comparative Cultures 2001;2(Spring/Summer):171–181.] indicates, “Global hip-hop youth culture has become a phenomenon in the truest sense of the word and has affected nearly every country on the map (171).” We extend our knowledge of the worldwide diffusion of hip-hop culture (Stanley TL. Cool consumption goods fit for hip-hop. Advert Age 2004;75:12 [July 12]) and employ qualitative research methods to address our research questions. Our findings identify commonalities among members of the hip-hop Diaspora and suggest that the core essence of hip-hop is shared by marginalized groups. Our data also illustrate that hip-hop is malleable and is adapted to speak to members of multiple national cultures, and localized socioeconomic and political conditions: hip-hop youth culture is glocalized.

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Keywords: Hip-hop culture; Appropriation; Glocalization; Marginalized groups

1. Introduction

From New York, to Paris, Tokyo, Sydney and localities in between, hip-hop culture is a Diaspora spanning ethnic, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. As Osumare (2001) indicates, “Global hip-hop youth culture has become a phenomenon in the truest sense of the word and has affected nearly every country on the map (171).” Similar to other popular music cultures such as punk rock and heavy metal, the global appeal of the hip-hop aesthetic “has led to its being productively used in new social and linguistic environments” (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003, 463). Perhaps, what separates hip-hop from these other genres is that hip-hop gives a voice to the otherwise voiceless, perhaps members of global “connective marginalities” (Osumare, 2001):

Hip-hop’s connective marginalities … are social resonances between black expressive culture within its contextual political history and similar dynamics in other nations. (Osumare, 2001, 172)

Hip-hop has transformed from marginalized to mainstream in the United States, a circumstance that provides audiences and media access to those in other geographic locations in the early stage of a local hip-hop product lifecycle. More than 50 million hip-hop fans in the United States and 100 million worldwide consume some form of hip-hop, making hip-hop consumers a lucrative market to understand (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). Music and associated paraphernalia (e.g., t-shirts, posters) flood the cultural landscape (Fenn and Perullo, 2000). Hip-hop culture influences styles of behavior and dress: from sagging pants to oversized tees, hip-hop style is an important business venture for the not only the recording industry, but also clothing, fashion, accessories and beauty industries worldwide. For example, the fashion of droopy, oversized pants, baseball caps, and Nike sneakers are a leading style for teenage boys in
the United States, Tokyo, Japan (Condry, 2000b), and Tanzania (Perullo, 2005). We suggest that the diffusion of hip-hop culture not only encompasses commonalities among collective marginalities, but also exhibits an ability to adapt to local socioeconomic and political environments.

Much of the research examining the diffusion of hip-hop focuses primarily on the sociological and psychological aspects in single cultural settings such as Japan, Germany, and Italy (Condry, 2001a; Elflein, 1998; Mitchell, 1995). However, there is little business research addressing the impact of hip-hop’s global movement on consumers. A notable exception is Kjeldgaard and Askegaard’s (2006) discussion of the global youth segment that intersects, but does not subsume, the global hip-hop segment. Our objective is to begin to address this gap in the marketing literature by providing consumers’ perceptions of the hip-hop culture and experiences worldwide. We explore the globalization, adaptation and localization of hip-hop. Specifically, our research questions are: How is hip-hop perceived by individuals in different cultures? When hip-hop is found outside of the U.S., is it imported American music (with perhaps necessary language translations) or does hip-hop take on a new form based on the local context in which it exists?

2. Methodology

To develop and illustrate our theory of the hip-hop cultural Diaspora we employed an exploratory research design, and collected primary data in the form of depth interviews and drew heavily from extant literature. We conducted 35 depth interviews of hip-hop enthusiasts representing multiple countries-of-origin over a two-month period (cf. McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Motley, Henderson, and Baker, 2003; Spiggle, 1994). The coauthors and 21 student collaborators interviewed 35 people identified in multiple ways: some were personal contacts of the interviewers, others were visitors to hip-hop clubs, and a few were identified through the Internet.

Informants were from a variety of race/ethnic groups, countries, and ages. Race/ethnic groups include Asians (i.e., Korean, Indian, Taiwanese, Chinese, Iranian, Japanese), White-Americans, Black-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and those of mixed heritage. Respondents’ countries-of-origin include Korea, India, Taiwan, United States, Croatia, China, and Peru. The majority resided in the United States at the time of their interviews; however, those of non-American nationality either did not reside in the U.S. at the time of their interview or had only resided in the U.S. for a short period of time while attending college prior to their interview. The informants ranged in age from mid-teens to mid-thirties. Less than 25% of the respondents were females, which was both reflective of the set of interviewers as well as the global prevalence of males in the hip-hop culture. Informants were qualified if they self-identified as both hip-hop enthusiasts and knowledgeable about hip-hop culture. (See Table 1 for a listing of all respondents quoted within this paper representing a subset of the 35 interviewees). We did not define “hip-hop culture” for them since we wanted the respondents to tell us how they characterized and perceived hip-hop culture.

Interviewers were trained to use a standardized interview protocol (e.g., what do you know about hip-hop? Where did you learn about hip-hop? How do you feel about hip-hop? Have you ever purchased any hip-hop music?). They were also trained on probing techniques to determine individual meanings and perceptions, and on the appropriate depth of transcribed discussions. The interviews were either conducted face-to-face or over the telephone and audio taped. Whereas most interviews were conducted in English, a few were conducted in a language commonly known to the respondents and the interviewers. In the latter instances, the interviews were translated into English. The length of the interviews varied, some were as short as 40 min, and others were as long as 90 min, depending on the informant’s immersion

Table 1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Participant race/ethnicity</th>
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<th>Participant age</th>
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<td>Early 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
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<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>123</td>
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<td>130</td>
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<td>American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
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Table 2
Empirical research on hip-hop: countries analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country/ies investigated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Androuopoulos and Scholz</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheeseeman</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condry</td>
<td>2000a</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condry</td>
<td>2000b</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condry</td>
<td>2001a</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condry</td>
<td>2001b</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decker</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitriadis</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elflein</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Germany, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrn and Perullo</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Malawi, Tanzania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandes</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hess</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalra and Hatnyk</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>South Asia, primarily India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitwana</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitwana</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>Mattar</td>
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<td>Maxwell</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<td>2001</td>
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<td>Morelli</td>
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<td>Korea</td>
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<td>Osumare</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Canada, Caribbean, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, France, India, Israel, Russia, Senegal, USA, more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennay</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perullo</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simmons and George</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tate</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wermuth</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Netherlands (Holland)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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in hip-hop culture. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 60 min. Informants provided basic demographic data, and contact information for subsequent verification of accuracy.

We also examined extant literature on hip-hop from numerous disciplines, (e.g., sociology, psychology, political science, linguistics, history) to help understand the connective marginalities, the global aesthetic and the phenomena, and to situate our respondents’ perceptions and comments. Twenty-nine articles containing either qualitative or quantitative data on the meaning, perception or consumption of hip-hop are analyzed. These studies containing either qualitative or quantitative data on the meaning, perception or consumption of hip-hop are analyzed. These studies are from 23 countries representing six continents (Table 2). Thus, our data are rich as we draw upon research collected with multiple methods and from multiple sources representing views from various national and ethnic groups, and numerous disciplines.

Interpretations of emergent themes were derived directly from interview transcripts, interviewer notes and the extant literature. The themes were independently developed by the coauthors, and while the labels differed, the interpretations overlapped. This consistency in the themes provides confidence in the “story” the data tell.

3. Hip-hop: we are one

A theme that emerged from the data is that there are multiple commonalities within the global hip-hop culture. The Internet facilitates interaction among hip-hop consumers and helps promote commonalities in issues discussed, knowledge of hip-hop community current events, and language patterns (Mattar, 2003). Further, record companies, print media and musicians promote the global hip-hop culture (Condry, 2000a). This youth community is united by not only an understanding of the elements of hip-hop and consumption of these elements, but also shares a sense of marginality and oppression, both real and imagined. We discuss the origins and shared components of hip-hop, the concept of collective marginalities (Osumare, 2007), and how consumers around the world embrace hip-hop to help express themselves and their frustrations.

3.1. Hip-hop: commonalities

Hip-hop music and other elements of hip-hop culture have transformed since the beginnings in the early 1970s in New York City as block party music played by African–American, Puerto Rican, and Jamaican party hosts (George, 1998; Light, 1999; Toop, 1984; Watkins, 1998). At that time, it was a combination of a “rap” or semi-autobiographical chant and an instrumental track, generally sampled (i.e., borrowed) from an existing reggae, rock, or rhythm and blues recording. In addition to serving as a form of entertainment, some musicians used hip-hop to “channel the anger of young people in the South Bronx away from gang fighting” (Lipsitz, 1994). By the early 1980s, hip-hop had gained commercial success, began to enter the musical mainstream in the U.S., and spread around the world (Cheeseman, 1998) (Fig. 1).

Hip-hop culture is transmitted outside and within the United States via film and the arts community (Watkins, 1998). For example, hip-hop was introduced to Germany in movies such as Wild Style (1982) and Beat Street (1984) (Elflein, 1998). More recently, in 2006, hip-hop artists Three 6 Mafia performed at the Academy Awards Ceremony, and their song from the movie Hustle and Flow, “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” won the Oscar for best song (Avis, 2006; Sisario, 2006). To further illustrate the significance of hip-hop in popular culture, in that same year, the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of American History announced a permanent exhibit to honor the history of hip-hop. The “Hip-Hop Won’t Stop: The Beat, the Rhymes, the Life” exhibit is slated to contain a variety of memorabilia (Sisario, 2006). Inclusion of these artifacts and cultural markers in a museum of this stature is part of the institutionalization process, and provides legitimacy to the music genre and hip-hop culture.

Most scholars agree that there are four main elements of hip-hop culture: graffiti, break dancing, “DJing,” and “MCing.” Graffiti is the visual art and break dancing is an element of the performance art of the hip-hop culture. The disk jockey (DJ) selects and blends the background music tracts. Originally, the master of ceremonies (MC) introduced the DJ and the music. To generate excitement, the MC would encourage and greet the audience with verbal exchanges. Over time, the practice developed into a style called “rapping” (Hager, 1984). Similar to the West-African traditions of storytelling with song lyrics (Keyes, 2002; Osumare, 2001), rappers would comment upon their personal struggles including frustrations and joys. Early “… rap’s dense, poetic, lyric content [was] often underpinned by African–American messages about a historical marginalized status” (Osumare, 2001). Grandmaster Flash, a pioneer of rap, notes:

“… rap’s dense, poetic, lyric content [was] often underpinned by African–American messages about a historical marginalized status” (Osumare, 2001). Grandmaster Flash as quoted in Light (1999, vii)

While there is a universal understanding of the elements (DJing, MCing, graffiti, and break dance), the emphasis on particular elements differs by artist, sub-genre (e.g., rap, neo-soul) and region, and thus allows much flexibility in the creation and consumption of hip-hop. Whereas you might find one hip-hop song focusing primarily on the lyrics and thus is much more of a rap song, another may place more emphasis on the sampling...
of various melodies and could contain a blend of traditional/ethnic and even tribal music. As one of our respondents notes:

“Hip-hop and rap are different styles that may seem similar. Both represent urban culture to a limit, but as far as the sounds go, hip-hop has rhythms of the structure that is more twisted around the beats of the song and evident as a derivative of rhythm and blues.”

Indian male, early 30s

Both the artist and the consumer can select what works best subject to their particular needs (Maxwell, 1997). This is particularly evident in a live performance in which the artist and consumer interact to co-produce the experience (Dimitriadis, 1996). Even when choosing recordings, individuals can self-select into a hip-hop community based on the manner in which elements are combined and meet the unique needs of the creator and consumer.

“Hip-hop is the community, but just like any other community, you may not be like your next-door neighbor, so don’t assume one hip-hop artist is like the other... they have a lot in common, but they are not the same.”

Black-American female, early 20s

Certainly, the commercialization of rap music expands the definition of hip-hop culture beyond the four elements to include colloquialisms, body language, attitude, style, and fashion (Kitwana, 2002, 8). An example of how the elements can be combined in new and interesting ways to create meaning and value for the consumers and artists is the Italian group Articolo 31 (Androustopoulos and Scholz, 2003). The cover of their album, “Messa Di Vespiri” (see Fig. 2), shows the artists donning the traditional hip-hop baseball cap turned backwards, and includes the familiar hip-hop graffiti-style font, as well as the Gothic style reminiscent of African–American artists such as Snoop Dogg. In addition, the lyrics speak to common themes of oppression, brotherhood, and the need to stand up for oneself. However, at the same time there are elements that speak to stereotypic local Italian cultural markers: spaghetti, the checked table cloth, wine served in a traditional-looking decanter, blocks of parmesan, and the tattoo of Italy on the artist’s arm. The music includes samples from familiar Italian medleys to further enhance the localization. Thus, a unique meaning is created for those who experience it.

This discussion of the elements of global hip-hop began with a quote from the hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash that suggests that the flexibility of the art form serves those in the hip-hop community well. The hip-hop elements can be combined by limitless factors to create culture and community. Grandmaster Flash said it could be done and it is being done over time, across geographic regions, and across cultures.

“When I think of hip-hop, a lot of things come to my mind; ah the colorful imagery, newer psychedelic collage of samples and styles, tasteful rhythms. As the very popular music of the 90’s; hip hop music very much captures the reflection of urban culture in its musical form. My mind is also replete with the great African–American culture, break dancing, graffiti spraying, turntablism, and sexual expression, ostentatious display of richness and bling-bling, and sensuality. I also think of the great Grandmaster Flash, who is so forgotten by the mainstream...”

Indian male, early 30s

3.2. Ties that bind: collective marginalities

Osumare (2007) proposes the paradigm “connective marginalities” that links culture, class, and historical oppression among youth around the world. In many instances, non-U.S. hip-hop sects combine both the culture presented in U.S. hip-hop with their everyday lives and specific cultural norms. Thus, although many of these global hip-hop sub-segments take cues from African–American hip-hop, they also imbue it with an inventiveness and creativity so it becomes uniquely theirs, and represents their pains, struggles and political issues. For example, African–Americans in New York City, North Africans in France, and indigenous people of New Zealand (Maori) on the whole might be viewed as at the fringes of their respective societies, historically oppressed and members of connective marginalities (Osumare, 2007) that are perhaps connected by hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop music and culture, once considered an American phenomenon, exists throughout the world today. In each cultural area, hip-hop artists filter American and other foreign
hip-hop styles through their own local musical, social, and linguistic practices, creating unique musical forms.  

(Fenn and Perullo, 2000, 73)

The consumption experience in the global hip-hop community is a shared one (Gainer, 1995) and includes a sense of marginalization, frustration, and the examination of battles against oppression, either real or perceived. The commonalities that exist among the marginalized are interesting. Even in cultures in which hip-hop consumers are numerical majorities, from a cultural, political or socioeconomic status perspective, they might still be minorities (Grier and Deshpande, 2001). Thus, lyrics throughout the hip-hop Diaspora are similar to those found in U.S. hip-hop. For example:

We are the Fantastischen Vier
And we’re here
With plenty of beer
And lots of women
They haven’t shot through
They’re here
To watch our show
Hausmeister Thomas D (MC Thomas D), “Jetzt geht’s ab” Germany

(Pennay, 2001, 129)

These artists echo and/or reflect the sentiments of both their personal experiences and those they share with their fans. Despite a marginalized status, they want immediate gratification in the forms of libations and female companionship. There is not only the realization that many mainstream avenues to success might not be available, but also the recognition that financial success is a means of gaining material possessions. They want those items now and by any means necessary (Decker, 1993; Osumare, 2001). To further illustrate:

I want the cash, cause I’m on that mo’ money trip
I want the 850 Beemer [BMW] and all that other shit
Word either way, I’m gonna get my own crib
Doin’ crime or bustin’ rhymes illegal or legit

E-Life, “Stacked with Honors” Holland

(Wermuth 2001, 165)

In the global hip-hop community, lyrics are “real” reflections of the marginalized experiences of the artists and their audiences as they were for the 1970s U.S. innovators. In many ways, members of this culture feel more of a connection to their global hip-hop brethren, than to those with closer familial or proximate ties (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). In an interview with Ian Condry, the Japanese hip-hop producer Como Lee states, “My Hero is Stevie Wonder. He is a god. But when I watch kabuki, I feel like I’m in a foreign country (Condry, 2001b, 241).”

When people relate to and identify with others perceived to be like them (i.e., insiders, connective marginalities), there is the potential for a united voice to be used to advance political agendas. This is evident in the Black-American conscious rap marked and marketed as expressions of anger and pride by those who were faced with racial and social discrimination. As expressed by an interviewee:

“I like the music groups called Arrested Development and Digable Planets, they are both from mid 90s, their music addresses a lot of political issues and the rhythm of the music are very free spirited [sic].”

Taiwanese female, late 20s

And, hip-hop music is used to approximate the voice of global ethnic minority and allied youth who protest against discrimination everywhere (Cheeseman, 1998). The status as “youth” articulates an opposition to parents and mainstream culture, further, hip-hop articulates a third opposition — to imperialism, a policy of aggressively extending authority over foreign countries (Osumare, 2007). It appears that members of the global hip-hop culture rebel against the dominant culture, perhaps due to their perception that they are discounted by their elders (Osumare, 2001).

The Internet and satellite and cable music channels facilitate many of these global hip-hop communal ties (Condry, 2000b; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Osumare (2007) contends that the Internet functions as a literal connection between the connective marginalities. For example, connective marginalities engage in instances of cultural appropriation such that Japanese youth study and emulate popular U.S. rappers’ gestures, dance styles, and images: “Hip hop, as an extension of African–American popular culture, then, becomes a global signifier for many forms of marginalization (Osumare, 2001, 173).”

3.3. Hip-hop is me

Ethnographic researchers suggest that young people appropriate “imported” culture to help construct their ethnic-social identities (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Part of this imported culture includes popular music that can help establish ethnic, cultural, and generational group identities (Osumare, 2007).

“...young Koreans initially accepted this new music genre as a tool with which they can show themselves off to others.”

Korean male A, early 30s
Further, there appears to be a positive relationship between concern for group identification and the importance of popular music (Osumare, 2007). Certainly, Condry (2000b) found that Japanese youths viewed the hip-hop music of African–Americans as a way to distance themselves from the homogeneous mainstream, and perhaps associate themselves with connective marginalities.

Disaffected Japanese youth came to see the African American as a counter to the values of the Japanese establishment, and the Black other was adopted as a symbol of defiance, forbidden fruit and their own alienation from the Japanese mainstream.

(Condry, 2000b, 175)

These youths seem to be rebelling against the traditional collectives of their countries and dominant cultures (clearly individualistic behavior), while simultaneously seeking membership and identification with both the global hip-hop culture and their local hip-hop subcultures (collectivist behavior) (Hui and Triandis, 1986). Where as this tension between individualistic and collectivist behavior may seem to be an inexplicable paradox, it really illustrates what cross-cultural researchers have come to appreciate about the difference between the two behavior types (Oyserman et al., 2002). That is, psychologists tell us that it is a human condition to want a sense of belonging and a group identity, but this sense can be manifested in many ways (Taifel and Turner, 1979). Traditionally, due to perceived in-country homogeneity, cross-cultural researchers have relied upon country (or nationality) as a proxy for individualistic/collectivist behavior. However, recently cross-cultural researchers have come to appreciate the strength of global consumer segments that transcend geographic borders (Brewer and Chen, 2007). Such is the case here with Japanese and/or Korean youth: their generational differences and the reduction of geographical distance via technology have conspired to both alienate them from their elders and align them with their electronically connected hip-hop peers with whom they share a group identity (Taifel and Turner, 1979).

Fenn and Perullo (2000) found that some youths in Nkhata Bay, Malawi self-describe as “OG’s,” “niggas,” or “gangsta.” For these Malawian youth, the recontextualized terms take on new meanings, based partially in the inner-city gang culture of the United States, and partly on their indigenous and contemporary political, social, economic and cultural experiences (Fenn and Perullo, 2000). Despite the frequent use of these and similar expressions in the Malawian hip-hop environment, there is no consensus among users about the meanings. These terms and other idioms serve as markers of identity shared by Malawian youths who incorporate rap or hip-hop music into their lives. They provide users access to the local hip-hop scene, a point of differentiation from the larger culture, and serve to unify them with those who speak like them, i.e., members of the hip-hop culture (Fenn and Perullo, 2000). A similar phenomenon is evident with Japanese members of the hip-hop culture who self-identify as “jiggers.” “Jiggers” adopt an intense black identity and use not only language, music, and attire to enhance this identification, but also darken their skin and crimp their hair to visually approximate the characteristics of Black-American rap artists (Condry, 2000b; Osumare, 2001).

A hip-hop identity appears to have been embraced by second-generation, marginalized Turkish youths in Germany as a means of expressing their heritage and critiquing their continual status as “immigrant” and “foreign” in the nation in which they were born. Institutionalized racism and other forms of discrimination nurture feelings of being an alien or stranger in their own country. They were perceived as “guests;” neither automatically German nationalists nor able to hold double citizenship (Elfen, 1998). These feelings of marginalization lead to an identification with their conceptualization of a hip-hop culture which began with Blacks in America.

Krauts with Attitude is a recording produced in 1991 in West Germany. As with the Turkish–German, these hip-hop enthusiasts adopted the self-production style of marginalized Black-Americans. The lyrics are typical examples of a subcultural discourse of dissidence. There appears to be a construction of a worldwide hip-hop culture composed of those deprived of power — regardless of social, political and economic differences, without consideration to whether exclusion is a symbolic act of free will, or a mandatory reality of life (Elfen, 1998). Regardless of the genesis, hip-hop and its elements are embraced by and incorporated into the lives and environments of members of the global hip-hop village.

“Even if hip hop may be loved among young generation, I think hip hop has already positioned itself as part of the art and social trend in Korea.”

Korean male B, early 30s

4. The glocalization of hip-hop: think global and hip-hop local

Another theme that emerged from the data was one of glocalization (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Robertson, 1995; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). That is, while the core essence and elements of hip-hop are shared by all members of the hip-hop culture, the aesthetic is adapted to suit multiple national cultures, localized conditions and grievances. As such, the genre is imbued with issues, language and other cultural markers reflective of local environments. We suggest that glocalization involves appropriation, adaptation, and ultimately tension and questions of authenticity.

...packaging of hip-hop as a global commodity has facilitated its easy access by young people in many different parts of the world. Moreover, such appropriations have in each case involved a reworking of hip-hop in ways which engage with local circumstances. In every respect then, hip-hop is both a global and a local form.

(Hip-hop culture, especially the music, is so malleable that consumers can find in it different meanings. In other words, the aforementioned elements (i.e., DJing, MCing, graffiti, break

dancing) take on differing significances and importance weights depending on the artist and the audience (c.f., Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Individuals process them in diverse ways and incorporate hip-hop into their everyday cultural lives for varying reasons. This flexibility and pliability is what has lead, in part, to hip-hop music being able to crossover into and be adapted within multiple (sub)cultures of connective marginalities. Individually, or collectively, those miles and oceans away from New York City seek it out, like it, embrace it, and want to make it their own. We describe and illustrate the glocalization components of appropriation, adaptation, and authenticity.

4.1. Appropriation: I heard it and I like it

From a sociological perspective, appropriation is defined as “…the productive use of an originally imported cultural pattern (Androussopoulos and Scholz, 2003, 463).” Early exposure of non-U.S. individuals to hip-hop was in its original form: performed in English and reflective of African–American experiences (Mitchell, 2001, 6). Further, early hip-hop music and the messages in U.S. music appeared to resonate with individuals outside the geographic boundaries of the United States and those individuals embraced it as their own, i.e., appropriated it.

Grier et al. (2006) suggest the characteristics of, the promotion and distribution decisions made about, and the context in which people consume products such as hip-hop may lead them to want to adopt it. For hip-hop, a distinction must be noted between crossover and appropriation. Crossover (push) is part of a marketer imposed market growth strategy, and Grier et al. (2006) define ethnic product crossover as when a product intended for one ethnic group is marketed to and consumed by a significant number of people outside of that particular referent ethnic group. Appropriation (pull) of hip-hop might reflect receptivity, initiative, and perhaps inappropriate or undesirable borrowing according to some African–Americans by consumers outside the United States (Kitwana, 2005; Ziff and Pratima, 1997). Some individuals who are not from the U.S. appear to recognize hip-hop music as the latter:

“...I was intrigued by ‘License to Ill’ by the Beastie Boys when I was in grade 9 in high school. Also, it is very ironic that the Beastie Boys, a bunch of white kids, popularized a genre of music held tightly by black people. However, a major earthquake wrecked when a plethora of great artists, on both sides of the Atlantic, released some fascinating albums in the late 80s when I was in India.”

Indian male, early 30s

The concept of intended audience (part of the definition of crossover) is particularly important in our context, since it is not clear when the African–American, Caribbean and Puerto-Rican intentionality was lost for hip-hop music (Grier et al., 2006). That is, in the early days of underground hip-hop (remember the Grandmaster Flash quote from our introduction), the expectation and intentionality was that hip-hop would not be consumed by people outside of the South Bronx. However, as the music has been appropriated over time by the connective marginalities, clearly something changed:

“I used to have this feeling of racial divide, like only African–Americans had access to hip-hop and everybody else was an imposter. Now it is all over and everybody is welcome in hip-hop clubs and among hip-hop fans.”

White-American female, mid 30s

Whether the change originated with the artists (or producers) or a change was necessitated by the influx of new listeners and buyers, the content of the lyrics, the music sampled, and the featured collaborating artists were all altered (Kalra and Hutnyk, 1998). These adaptations to global, broader and/or different, local audiences are discussed.

4.2. Adaptation: same but different

Early non-U.S. adopters experienced hip-hop in its original form, as it was made for the original “intended” audience, but probably listened to it in a different context, as ascribed by their local socio-economic and geographic environments. Over time, as with most acculturation processes, they found it necessary to negotiate some middle ground as cultural meaning was transferred between the African–American-based hip-hop and their local, non-U.S. consumption experience (Bennett, 1999; Holbrook, 2006; McCracken, 1986).

“Hip Hop has its root in the young African–American culture in the U.S. This has been transferred to other races in the U.S. and on to foreign countries including Korea. I find the hip-hop in Korea is the same as that in the U.S., but at the same time, a totally different form of art from its original version.”

Korean male A, early 30s

This adaptation, or tailoring to fit the needs of a local audience, resulted from either emerging artists developing their styles or from more established artists changing the content of their lyrics (MCing), and the songs they sample (DJing) so that the overall product is more conducive to matching the needs and the experiences of the new audience(s). This is part of the glocalization process as these lyrics illustrate:

Enough. Enough already. (Enough)

Enough of that kind of learning. (Enough)

I’m satisfied. I’m now satisfied. (Satisfied)

Every morning at 7:30 we are forced into a little classroom.

All nine million children are forced to learn the same things.

Hip-hop artists around the world also use their celebrity and voices to speak to specific social issues and political concerns. In Germany, hip-hop grew in the 1990s along with German nationalism, and rap offered a public vehicle of anti-racism and anti-xenophobic protest, by and on behalf of threatened out-group members (Cheeseman, 1998). Lyrics stated that second-generation Turks should have civil rights, such as German passports and other rights afforded German citizens, and were critical of the killings of foreigners. In these early years, Turkish–German hip-hop gained significant media attention (Cheeseman, 1998). One of our respondents expressed his interpretation of the political origins of hip-hop:

“The core of hip hop is the spirit of freedom and resistance to the established values and pressures on people, especially young generations. This spirit has been transferred to Korea as it is in the U.S. However, this spirit has been slowly changed in Korea and transformed into a culture for young people…”

Korean male, early 30s

Cuban youths also used hip-hop as a political voice in attempts to promote racial egalitarianism. Cuban rappers wrote lyrics that promoted inclusion of marginalized sectors in processes of economic and political change. These efforts were fueled by the discrimination against and treatment of the mostly Black working class individuals residing in Cuba’s public housing developments (Fernandes, 2003). A Cuban rapper suggests:

I have a dark and discriminated race,
I have a work day that demand sand gives nothing,
I have so many things that I cannot even touch,
I have so many resources that I cannot even step on,
I have liberty between parentheses of iron,
I have so many benefits without right that I imprison myself,
I have so many things without having what I had.

_Hermanos de Causa_ (Fernandes, 2003, 586)

The lyrics express dissatisfaction with the status quo. The phrase “I have so many things and so many resources,” refers to leaders’ claims that the revolution has provided health, education and welfare improvements for Afro-Cubans, however there is no evidence of these advances to this artist.

Similarly, in Italy, “Rap Night” was a way hip-hop was used to address the political issues faced by the connective marginalities. The Mafia, increase of racketeering, historical neglect of South Italy, marijuana legislation, and the corruption of the hospital and health care were some of the main topics discussed (Mitchell, 1995).

Heroes without any land
Fighting a war
Between the Mafia and the Camorra, Sodom and Gomorrah
Naples and Palermo
... you gotta FIGHT THE FEUD!!!

_Frankie Hi-NRG, “Fight da faida” (Fight the Blood Feuds)_ Italy (Mitchell, 2001, 196)

This Italian lyrical excerpt represents a recognition of not only a local struggle against an oppressive Mafia, but also a homage to the global hip-hop culture of predecessor U.S. performers such as Public Enemy with their “Fight the Power” (which, in turn was borrowed from the Isley Brothers). Further, cultural appropriation of U.S. hip-hop is evident in the use of lyrics shown throughout the video, as with pop icon Prince in his “Sign of the Times” video (including the font) and samples from Sly and the Family Stone (Mitchell, 2001).

In the 1990s, Tanzanian youths who adopted the hip-hop culture were deemed “hooligans,” because the perception was that individuals who adopted this culture were violent, hostile, and disruptive (Perullo, 2005). In an effort to combat these accusations, the youth used the music and their consumption of other items to portray themselves instead as “creative and empowered individuals in society” (Perullo, 2005, 76). The latter manifestations of social identity serve as a moderator to the actions, behavior and consumption of hip-hop’s growing worldwide market. A respondent echoed this sentiment — a melding of political commentary and commercialization:

“I wanted to get the shirt Red Cloud was wearing, so I’d buy that.” (Authors’ note: t-shirt with four Native Americans carrying shotguns across their chests, with the words, “Homeland Security” above the picture, and “Been Fighting Terrorism for 200 years” under the picture).

Native American male, early 20s

Some think that if hip-hop music is adapted to fit a, local—global experience and lifestyle, then it is not “true” to its origins. Therefore, the questions become: what is authentic hip-hop? Since audiences have changed and even the more traditional performers have changed, what constitutes authentic hip-hop?

4.3. Authenticity: who says it’s real?

In hip-hop culture, there is a tension between authenticity or “keeping it real” and profitability or “selling out” (Grier et al., 2006). Hess (2005) suggests that the importance of authenticity, i.e., reflecting genuineness and truth (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) of hip-hop increased with commercial success. Further, Hess (2005, 297) proposes that authenticity is essential in building credibility within hip-hop: “A successful performance of hip-hop authenticity is one which positions the artist as
experienced knower...” American hip-hop culture is based on a “realness,” “an experienced knower” that some perceive tainted by commercialization. That is, in some cases artists are no longer telling their life stories, but appear to be attempting to gain business contracts. Consequently, the commercialization and globalization of hip-hop have complicated the authentication process in American hip-hop. In addition, Maxwell (1997) suggests that the commercialization and globalization of hip-hop have complicated the authentication process in American hip-hop. In addition, Maxwell (1997) suggests that authenticity is also an important theme in global hip-hop.

Marketing scholars Grayson and colleagues define an authentic object as the “real thing” that can exhibit indexical authenticity, iconic authenticity, or both (Grayson and Martiniec, 2004; Grayson and Shulman, 2000). Indexical authenticity for hip-hop music could be temporal (linked to a proper time), spatial (associated with the right place), or corporal (from the individuals who can “keep it real”). When hip-hop music is adapted and glocalized (Robertson, 1995) by artists and consumers in connective marginalities, then it might possess indexical authenticity (linked to a time, a place and individuals) to these artists and consumers. On the other hand, iconic authenticity can be perceived as a proxy for, or a close approximation to what is true or real (Grayson and Martiniec, 2004; Grayson and Shulman, 2000). The physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic (Grayson and Martiniec, 2004). Ironically, when U.S. hip-hop culture is appropriated, this can lead to perceptions of parody and mimicry. For example, the aforementioned “jiggers” represent a minority of Japanese hip-hop enthusiasts (Osumare, 2001; Wood, 1998) whose attempts to physically resemble Blacks could be perceived as actually mocking their African–American hip-hop counterparts rather than exhibiting iconic authenticity (Grayson and Martiniec, 2004; Motley, Henderson, and Baker, 2003).

No matter how much one likes black music and culture, both were born from the situations blacks faced, and the burden of their history and fate. In some ways, it was a brutal process (resistance against whites, the need to be proud of their own identity, their unique labor in the midst of poverty, etc). If you consider this, I can’t help but question the shallow, superficial imitation (mame) of us Japanese.

Reader’s letter to a Japanese Hip-hop magazine
(Condry, 2000a,b, 166)

There is the suggestion that since they (Japanese youth) lack the “ghetto experience, culture wards, and racial disharmony” (Schwartz, 1999, 365) that spark many of the lyrics and feelings behind hip-hop, that “blackness” on the streets of Tokyo is a commodity instead of a lifestyle, an icon rather than the real thing. This indexical authenticity deficiency (from the perspective of U.S. hip-hop consumers) has led many original consumers or members of the hip-hop culture to question the authenticity of new, global (particularly non-U.S.) hip-hop. The resulting appropriation and adaptation of the genre by others is perceived by members of the U.S. hip-hop community as copies or imitations of the “real thing.”

However, others indicate that some Japanese youths relate to connective marginalities, albeit in a different form, especially females.

Rap, Japanese style seems to offer a way out of the social limitations of polite traditional Japanese culture and its expectations of young women...Resonance with hip hop culture in Japan is based on a vital youth signification as a marginalized subculture, seeking to make its mark in the adult society by participating in the global postmodern youth phenomenon.

(Osumare, 2001, 176–177)

That is, these youths view hip-hop as a way to distinguish themselves from the homogeneous mainstream environment (Condry, 2000a,b). Therefore, Japanese rap is believed to be more indexically authentic to the Japanese experience than American rap by some of its listeners.

“. . .Japanese rap is the real thing...for us, raised in a different environment and different language, Japanese rap by rappers raised in the country is much more ‘real’ than American rap.”

Ben the Ace Japanese DJ as quoted by Condry (2000a,b, 166)

Whether global hip-hop is indexically or iconically authentic, the shared consumption of global hip-hop connects the disparate members of the global hip-hop community. The processes of appropriation, adaptation, and authentication create more than a hip-hop nation, they give rise to a hip-hop globe (Osumare, 2001).

5. Conclusions

This global hip-hop culture is interacting with and influencing consumption and the marketplace. From sagging pants to oversized tees, hip-hop style has become an important business venture for the clothing, fashion, accessories and beauty industries (Stanley, 2004). While there is limited financial data on the worldwide hip-hop consumers, in the U. S., urban youths from 15 to 24 years old have a combined income of $203 billion (Brown and Washton, 2003). This figure is a conservative estimate, and when extrapolated to the global market, the financial resources of the 150 million members of the hip-hop culture would be staggering. These resources, combined with the group’s trendiness, make it important to understand this market. “In a word, they’re trendsetters — and the clothing, music, accessories, etc., that are introduced and popularized on the streets and in the clubs of Los Angeles, New York and Chicago soon find their way to suburban shopping centers and television advertising (Brown and Washton, 2003).” Similar to the worldwide spread of the other elements of hip-hop, hip-hoppers and marketers around the world are “buying in” to the style.

We seek to understand this phenomenon of the ever-expanding global hip-hop culture and contribute to a growing stream of research examining relationships between globalization and consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). While other researchers examined hip-hop culture around the world, in general they have focused
on a few countries and particular facets, e.g., politics, language, social identity. We use extant literature examining hip-hop culture from 23 countries representing six continents to help explicate responses from depth interviews from global hip-hop consumers. An analysis of these data leads to a focus on the commonalities, glocalization, and the politicalization of hip-hop.

We know that hip-hop has been spread around the world by various means of communication: the Internet, music videos, movies, and individuals traveling internationally have assisted in the dispersion of not only hip-hop music, but also the other elements of hip-hop (i.e., break dancing, graffiti art), and styles of dress. In addition, this culture is connected not only by an awareness of and familiarity with the hip-hop elements, but also by a sense of connective marginality. That is, members of the global hip-hop culture were initially drawn to the messages of resistance to oppression and struggles against discrimination and racism of the early hip-hop artists of the United States because of their marginalized status.

If traveling, one cannot choose an international vacation spot or journey to a city on business and not find hip hop culture, usually containing the sounds and movements of the American originators spiced with local flavor.

(Osumare, 2001, 173).

This represents the glocalization of hip-hop: A global commonality of connective marginality combined with local elements (e.g., language, lyrical content, music, ethnic symbols) that create unique sounds and statements. This glocalization suggests that the meaning of hip-hop differs among various host cultures. For example, youths in Japan embrace hip-hop as a means of distinguishing themselves from the homogeneous mainstream, and perhaps as a way to rebel against their elders. The young people in Tanzania reject the perception that individuals who listen to hip-hop music are “hooligans” and use lyrics to address political concerns and educate their listeners on multiple topics, such as AIDS and multiple sex partners. Second-generation Turkish youths in Germany also address political concerns: their lack of civil rights and xenophobia.

Some criticize imported youth cultures suggesting that “subcultural styles mediated into new societies lack connection to particular socio-historical conditions that fueled these subcultures in the first place, therefore, imported cultures are necessarily ‘superficial,’ ‘secondary,’ ‘derivative’ and purely ‘manieristic’ (Androulopoulos and Scholz, 2003, 2).” However, our research suggests that hip-hop is indeed quite malleable, and this flexibility lends itself to multiple authentic renderings and meanings. Specifically, it appears that hip-hop created outside the United States is not just U.S. hip-hop with language modifications, but rather reflects local culture, issues and concerns and therefore is indexically authentic.

We explored how hip-hop has evolved from a very localized art form with its genesis in the streets of the Bronx, New York, to a cultural phenomenon that resonates throughout a global community. Our research indicates that in general, the members of the hip-hop culture are linked as members of collective marginalities (Osumare, 2001, 2007): The storytellers (hip-hop artists) and listeners use the hip-hop aesthetic to express their individual perceptions, collective memories and political views and to protest against the dominant culture. And, while our data recognizes and identifies the commonalities among the members of the hip-hop Diaspora and suggest that the core essence of hip-hop is shared by members of the global hip-hop community, it also suggests and illustrates that hip-hop is malleable and is adapted to speak to members of multiple national cultures, localized socioeconomic and political conditions in the environments in which it is adopted. In so doing, we extend our knowledge of the hip-hop cultural Diaspora, begin to understand how it bonds consumers around the world and enhance our understanding of the global youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006).

The hip-hop culture is a fruitful area for future research. For example, while we examined the more global commonalities and differences between hip-hop from around the world, future research could focus on a cross-cultural and perhaps longitudinal content analysis of rap lyrics to determine the similarities and differences in the messages embedded in the music. Such a study would take into account the socio-cultural and other environmental contexts that produced the artists and the messages. In addition, interviewing the hip-hop producers (i.e., artists) might help us understand the supply side of this global culture. It may also be beneficial to examine the evolution of other music genres. As a reviewer suggested, there appear to be parallels in the progression of hip-hop and that of rock music: Rock also grew out of the African-American experience, was appropriated by White-Americans and was later glocalized around the world (Rose, 1994). An interesting paper could compare the culture and evolution of hip-hop with the culture and evolution of rock.

References


