

# **Chinese Hip-hop and Youth Identity**

An exploratory study of how Chinese youth construct cultural identity  
through Chinese hip-hop music

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, hip-hop has become a prevalent cultural form in China due to the success of the hip-hop reality show- *The Rap of China*. Coming from underground to the mainstream stage, hip-hop is considered a counter-cultural movement and a morally corrupted art form by the public. Its sudden popularity and controversy have attracted the attention of academics and the Chinese public. Hip-hop music is characterized by direct expression and resistance, which raised concerns about its implications in Chinese society. Youth, as the driving force of the popularity of Chinese hip-hop, ought to be paid close attention to. In existing research, even though the implications of hip-hop have been explored from the production aspect, very few touched upon the consumption of hip-hop. Music consumption is a process for self-interpretation and identity-articulation. Therefore, it is to study how Chinese hip-hop music shapes youth's cultural identities. The research question guiding this study is: How do Chinese youth construct their cultural identity through Chinese hip-hop music? This research focuses on Chinese youth's consumption, perception, and reflection of hip-hop music. Given the characteristics of Chinese hip-hop, how it contributes to youth identity construction needs to be explored regarding their comprehension of social reality and the hip-hop scene in China.

From ten in-depth interviews with hip-hop fans and rappers, valuable insights into the impact of Chinese hip-hop music on youth identity were generated. Thematic analysis was used in the research to capture the complexity of the data and discover significant patterns. The research findings revealed several aspects of Chinese youth's cultural identity construction. First, they make evaluations of their own positions in society through their understanding of the social environment for hip-hop and its development. Second, localized features of hip-hop provoked and enhanced the identity construction in relation to specific places. Third, hip-hop provides social and emotional values to the audiences. Although the specific values that hip-hop can contribute differ from rappers to fans, both types of audiences build their identity on the internalization of their interpretation of the music. This study examined the audiences' perspectives and perceptions of hip-hop, offering researchers a three-dimensional understanding of youth culture in China.

**KEYWORDS:** *Chinese hip-hop, cultural identity, youth, subculture, localization*

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## I. Introduction

In the early 1970s, hip-hop music originated in The Bronx of New York City, and it soon has become one of the most prominent music genres in the United States (Brooks & Conroy, 2011; Wu, 2020). Hip-hop music then traveled across the globe and arrived in China in the 90s (Liu, 2010). A decade later, hip-hop music started to root and sprout there (Wang, 2009). Hip-hop remained an underground, subcultural art form until the first Chinese rap show came along in 2017. The *Rap of China (RoC)* gave rise to a "hip-hop fever" among Chinese young people, especially the post-90s generation, since most rappers on stage are of that generation as well (Cheuk, 2020; Xu, 2017). This show has received more than 1 billion views in total and was booked for several seasons more (iQiYi, 2017). Hip-hop musicians benefited greatly from the show. The entertainment industry embraced hip-hop music with enthusiasm and turned underground rappers into the biggest rising stars. They went from performing in underground clubs to performing on the national stage, from "nobody" to luxury brands' ambassadors (Wu, 2020).

Regarding the cultural-political environment in China, Chinese hip-hop is an incongruous phenomenon. It receives unprecedented attention and crazes while being considered a counter-cultural movement and a morally corrupted art form by the mainstream (Cheuk, 2020; Wu, 2020). Its sudden fame and notoriety make it an epitome of the Chinese entertainment industry, where overnight fame is often followed by heavy commodification and commercialization, resulting in aesthetic fatigue and hypercritical judgment (Wu, 2020). Moreover, Chinese hip-hop music is a product of glocalization. Considering the drastically different cultural-political environment in China, the inadaptability of the Western hip-hop context in China adds a paradoxical layer to it, as some elements of hip-hop can be considered controversial (Barrett, 2012; Lin, 2010; Wang & Zhu, 2018). On the bright side, even though Chinese hip-hop is an imitation of Western hip-hop at large, its local dimension and hybridization constitute cultural reterritorialization for both global hip-hop culture and Chinese popular culture (Um, 2013). It injects new interpretations and understandings into hip-hop culture and reconstitutes hip-hop's meaning with social interaction and creativity.

Dynamically expressive in nature, hip-hop music serves as a portal for powerful socio-cultural messages (Liu, 2010). On the one hand, it provides an alternative non-institutional space for self-expression (Cheuk, 2020). On the other hand, some scholars argue that it might affect Chinese youth's world views and morals negatively. The term "youth" was extensively used in previous researches on Chinese hip-hop, which is ambiguously defined, but primarily refers to the post-90s generation in the Chinese context, yet in the English context, it refers to people who are between 15-24 years old (United Nations, 2020). The post-90s generation (九零后 Jiulinghou) is the first generation born under the one-child policy in China. They did not experience political or historical turmoil and grew up in the digital era, which cultivated their affinity with digital technologies (Baidu, 2020; Liu, 2014). They are the dominant age group that shapes the Chinese cultural industry's lifeline nowadays (Zhang, 2017 in Cheuk, 2020). Apart from this, the post-90s were criticized for being rebellious and sloppy on mainstream media in the early 00s, which coincides with the deviant hip-hop spirit (Baidu, 2020).

As a cultural category, youth is a prominent driving force behind the emergence of popular music cultures (Travis & Bowman, 2017). Popular music engages with young people by validating their voice and agency (Travis & Bowman, 2017). Just like other popular music genres, hip-hop music is a cultural and ideological inscription of meanings perceived from the outside world, constructed and then projected by performances that validate specific ways of social behaviors (Kotarba, 2017). This nature of hip-hop music assists the construction of cultural identities. As Hall (1992) pointed out, cultural identities are ongoing processes where individuals project the "self" while internalizing values they received from the society, bridging the personal and the public worlds. In this sense, hip-hop music is a mirror that reflects cultural values and ideologies, which also allows youth to gaze into their understandings of themselves as well as the world around them.

The negative stigma brought by hip-hop music's explicit content has raised widespread concerns about whether youth can adequately evaluate and criticize such genre, which leads to concerns about the impact of hip-hop on youth, drawing a relation between deviance and subcultural youth identity (Travis & Bowman, 2017; Wang & Zhu, 2018). Kotarba (2017) suggested that subcultural subjects should be placed in a bigger picture to observe their role in a more comprehensive manner. To understand Chinese hip-hop as a cultural and social

phenomenon, one must refer to "how it is constructed by both the insiders and by outsiders of music scenes" (Kotarba, 2017, p.84). In this sense, Chinese hip-hop's influence on youth ought to be analyzed not only in the musical context but also in the social, cultural, and political context.

The strict cultural and political environment in China affects the production and consumption of music significantly. Chinese hip-hop emerged online with songs in local languages in the early 00s, characterized by strong social messages and counter-hegemonic potentials since local languages are associated with local communities and are suppressed by the government's effort to unify national languages (Liu, 2014). The internet is where hip-hop music is circulated, which naturally accelerated the establishment of hip-hop communities. The way hip-hop music is consumed and circulated can be a mirror for Chinese youth's hip-hop spirit. DeNora(1999) observed that self-interpretation and articulation of self-image could be realized through music consumption. In this sense, it is intriguing to study how Chinese hip-hop music shapes its audiences' cultural identities.

The research question guiding this study is: How do Chinese youth construct their cultural identity through Chinese hip-hop music? Sub-questions are as following: How does Chinese hip-hop affect the localized identity-building of Chinese youth? How does hip-hop contribute values to youth's identity in Chinese society? This study aims to examine the role of Chinese hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon in the youth identity construction process. Moreover, it can contribute to Chinese youth identity studies and bridge the gap in the research on Chinese hip-hop music audiences.

This study's scientific relevance primarily lies in Chinese hip-hop's recency and the scarcity of academic research on its relation to cultural identities. Although Chinese hip-hop emerged in the early 90s, it did not officially enter the mainstream cultural sphere until 2017 (Cheuk, 2020). Because it is a recent cultural phenomenon, it has not been extensively researched. Some academic articles focused on the controversy that evolved around the music itself, observing the hip-hop phenomenon from an outsider view, which mentioned that hip-hop music is capable of offering youth an alternative space and an opportunity to articulate their opinions (Cheuk, 2020; Liu, 2014; Luo & Ming, 2020). Besides, not much academic research has investigated Chinese hip-hop music's impact on youth's cultural identities. Most

scholarly articles about Chinese hip-hop music are case studies on the show *RoC*. This study will provide insights from the angle of the audiences about the Chinese hip-hop scene beyond *RoC*. Also, current studies on Chinese hip-hop mostly put emphasis on the production of hip-hop music. By interviewing both young Chinese hip-hop fans and rappers, this study can fill the gap of lacking audience research on this topic, provide an additional perspective on Chinese youth's consumption, perception, and reflection of hip-hop music. In this way, it can add the Chinese perspective to popular music studies and youth culture studies.

The following chapter will present the literature review composed of three sections: popular music and identity, hip-hop culture, and hip-hop music and youth in China. The third chapter will introduce the research design and the methodology of this thesis. The data was collected through 10 in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. In the fourth chapter, the research findings will be discussed regarding three main themes discovered in the analysis: Chinese hip-hop music scene, localized identity, and values of hip-hop music. In the conclusion chapter, the research question will be answered, the academic implication and limitations of the research will also be included.

## **II. Literature Review**

This chapter will start with an overview of popular music and identity, as it is relevant to understand the relationship between music and cultural identity to answer the research question. In order to capture what hip-hop represents and how it influences its audiences, hip-hop culture will then be discussed regarding four themes: subculture, deviance, empowerment, and globalization. In the last section, research on hip-hop music and youth in China will be discussed, focusing on hip-hop's development, the hip-hop community, cultural reterritorialization, and hip-hop's impact on youth values.

### **2.1 Popular Music and Identity**

Cultural identity is a "custom complex," a collection composed of cultural beliefs and practices that social actors actively adopted from one or more cultural communities (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011, p.286). It is constructed in interactions between oneself and the society, which involves personal choices about which cultures to identify with, making identification a process of articulating oneself (Hall, 1996; Jensen et al., 2011). Identification is a never-ending process (Hall, 1996). In a sociological view, identity "bridges the gap between the personal and the public worlds" (Hall, 1992, p.276). While we articulate ourselves in our cultural identities, we need to internalize values and meanings from the outside world to align ourselves with them. Thus, instead of having a stable and singular identity, our identities are continually shifting, broken up, and composed as the social and cultural worlds change (Hall, 1992). On another note, identities function as pinpoints during the process of identification that preserve the shape of the inner world when exposed to external alterations (Hall, 1996). These relatively static identification pinpoints constitute our dynamic cultural identity.

The significance of music consists in that it is an aesthetic experience that is both private and public, intimate and social at the same time (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Music can assist with shifting mood and energy levels, contribute to our emotional self-regulation, and it helps us engage in our inner world, discover our values and understand our (DeNora, 1999). While we generate emotional regulations by listening to music, the narratives we obtained from music also affect how we tell our own stories. Albeit music consumption appears to be a private

subject, our subjectivity on this matter is partially determined by the cultural constitution of music (DeNora, 1999). By projecting the stories and feelings in the music on ourselves, we create imaginaries of what we would like to be, instead of an image of what we already are (DeNora, 1999; Frith, 1996). Music is also a shared experience marked by emotional and cultural resonance. Music is often appreciated on a collective basis- for instance, live performances or streaming online, where we would enjoy music with other people either in person or virtually (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In this sense, music becomes where the private realm and public realm intersect, yielding encounters of self-identity with collective identities (Hesmondhalgh, 2008).

Self-identity does not exclude collective identities. Instead, they are co-dependent, which is decisive for the sociality of music. Even though the music itself is intangible, it is "instructive in relation to conceptualizing the materialization of identity" (Born, 2011, p.377). The materialization of identity refers to the process of attaching identity to more concrete subjects, which could be communities, social values, and so forth. To comprehend how music can contribute to identity materialization, it is necessary to regard music as a collection of mediations. Born (2011) named the two most essential mediations of music: mediation of subject-object relations and social mediation. In terms of subject-object relations, it concerns a mutually transformative process between the listener and the music where taste is formed. Taste is a construct to represent music's meanings as well as the audiences' preferences. They could be constructed with respect to things outside of it. In turn, "things outside music may be constructed in relation to music" (DeNora, 2000, in Born, 2011, p.378). For example, some music genres are given certain traits, rock is angry and hip-hop is rebellious. Such traits are not simply assigned to the genres for their musical features, they also involve the audiences' perception and how they refer to themselves according to the music, which becomes what we called taste. Taking an individualistic approach, taste should be considered a part of self-identity since it is also an interaction between oneself and the public world.

As for the social mediations of music, there are four planes (Born, 2011). First, music generates diverse social relations in the production sector. For example, in musical performances, there are social relations generated between the audiences and performers as well as among the performers. Also, in the music labor department, social relations are

generated between collaborators or co-workers. Second, music fosters and facilitates collective imaginations, aggregating its listeners into virtual communities categorized by musical and other relevant identifications (Born, 2011). Thanks to the abstract nature of music, our musical experiences lead us through our self-construction. The resonance that we have with the music we listen to can provide examples for us because the resonance implies a subconscious connection between the musical experiences and our identities (Frith, 1996). In this way, music is endowed a collective feature, as it provides social bonds based on feelings and values. Through aesthetic judgment and echoing with the internal echoes, individuals have the chance to identify with each other, therefore establishing social groups based on a shared understanding of music and the ideologies it articulates (Frith, 1996). Moreover, music does not limit us to pre-existing identification categories; it can help us move beyond them and reconfigure the boundaries between such categories (Born, 2011).

The third and fourth planes pertain to social and institutional conditions that allow for particular types of musical practices. The third plane regards music as a hub for a broader range of social identity formations, embracing all classes and age, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, rather than the musical identifications alone on the second plane. On the fourth plane, music production and transformation are grounded on social and institutional formations, making it an active factor in social life (Born, 2011). For example, the relationship between subsidized and public cultural institutions can influence the music scene profoundly. To apply these two planes in terms of the relations between hip-hop music and youth, Travis and Bowman (2017) noted that hip-hop provides an excellent foundation for youth to explore common narratives within their belonged communities, as well as allowing them to comprehend power interplay and social conflict through the lyrics.

To elaborate more on the relation of music to identity, Frith (1996) addressed the act of choosing and listening to music as a performance of identity. Identity itself is a process produced and represented in performances, "a becoming not a being" (Frith, 1996, p.109). Constructing an identity through music experiences is a discursive process (Frith, 1996). There might not be specific intentions of what sorts of values or ideologies to absorb and integrate into part of ourselves. It is more of a continuing conversation between our inner self and the imaginaries of whom we would like to become (DeNora, 1999). By consuming music,

we explore the expressive and stylistic parameters of ourselves, which are retained, altered, or refined as we interpret ourselves and reflect on ourselves according to what we experience in music (DeNora, 1999). Distinct musical genres engender different musical experiences and therefore contribute differently to our identity construction. In a broader term, music genres can be considered collective identities as well, as they "both constitute social groups and are constituted by them" (Drott, 2011:7, in Born, 2011), which links back to the mediation subject-object relations of music. Hip-hop and many other popular music genres have historically experienced both musical and social identity formations, in which way social identity formation is reflected in music, and the musical development intertwined with the evolving social formations (Born, 2011; Brooks & Conroy, 2011). That is to say, the historical and social influences upon the music genre that we choose to immerse in also impact our identity construction.

## **2.2 Research on Hip-hop culture**

Hip-hop is more than rapping; it is not just a musical genre, but "a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth" (Alridge & Stewart, 2005, p.190). Hip-hop refers to "the music, arts, media, and cultural movement and community developed by black and Latino youth in the mid-1970s on the East Coast of the United States" (Morgen & Bennett, 2011, p. 176). The fundamental elements of hip-hop include DJing, break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping. It is a free-spirited culture with strong influences on the black diaspora (Travis & Bowman, 2017). As it grows into a global cultural phenomenon, various creative practices, social identity, and political mobilization were incorporated into the creative practice. Examining hip-hop in a global context, Travis and Bowman (2017) came forward with the approach of seeing hip-hop as "the forest" and "the trees." As aforementioned by Alridge and Stewart (2005), the forest refers to the broader hip-hop culture, whereas the trees signify hip-hop's elements. Taking their stance, in this section, hip-hop culture will be discussed regarding four themes: subculture, deviance, empowerment, and globalization.

### **2.2.1 Subculture**

The term "subculture" suggests marginality and opposition to the mainstream culture; it is the predominant sociological terminology to capture the ties between music, culture, and identity (Williams, 2006). Western scholars hold a critical view towards the concept of subculture, as it neglects the connection between inequality and cultural practices. It concerns the structural issues situated in the subcultural practices, which refers to that youth of lower socio-economic class can have more difficulties accessing it (Williams, 2018). The usage of this concept in the digital age is also criticized for restricting the fluidity and connectivity of cultural forms by setting rigid boundaries among them (van der Hoeven, Hitters, Berkers, Mulder, & Everts, 2020). Moreover, as technology and digital media accelerated the commodification and commercialization of subcultures, the cultural scenes became decentralized, thus blurring the image of the "hegemonic mainstream" that the concept of subculture is inherently against (van der Hoeven et al., 2020).

However, subculture is a more neutral term in the Chinese context. It symbolizes rarer aesthetics and fashion and is promoted by youth as it represents a sense of uniqueness (Zhang & Tang, 2019). Liu and Duan's (2021) pointed out that the development of new media has diffused the antagonism between mainstream culture and subculture in China. Subcultures are transforming into the representation of liberalism and innovation in the Chinese context. Subcultural awareness is associated with music taste and style, of which hip-hop takes a unique stance by its easily recognizable musical arrangement and explicit content (Brooks & Conroy, 2017; Kruse, 1993; Zhang & Tang, 2019). Subculture is also considered a synonym of alternative culture. The alternativeness is characterized by claiming the uniqueness of either the music or the audiences, addressing the mutual formation between the music and the listeners, the subject-object relations (Born, 2011; Kruse, 1993).

Taken both historical and musical background into account, hip-hop should be categorized as a subcultural genre. It is born in the ghetto neighborhoods of New York City, developed by ethnic minorities who suffer from social injustices and would like to have a voice against them (Alridge & Stewart, 2005; Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). Musically, hip-hop has innovated a chanting and speaking vocal style, which goes along with synthesized beats

generated from cuts and mixes of samples (Alridge & Stewart, 2005; Liu, 2014). Moreover, the focus of hip-hop on challenging social issues, for instance, racial inequality, sometimes violence, and drug abuse, has made it distinct from mainstream music culture (Travis & Bowman, 2017).

While subculture offers marginalized groups opportunities to articulate their identities and feel included, the core of subcultural identities is defined by stating differences (Kruse, 1993). Self-fashioning is embedded in music, and it plays a significant role in stating differences and building social boundaries (Krimms, 2017). Subcultural identity bonds individual differences in a community by detecting the similarities among them, thus provides a sense of belonging. For the sake of accessibility and spreadability, music is a driver for subcultural participation and identification (Kotarba, 2017). Music holds significance for identification for many young people, especially those who account for music culture as an essential part of defining themselves (Kotarba, 2017). By claiming membership in a subcultural community, an individual's identity is broadened on a more extensive scope and prolonged concerning the subcultural activities situated in their social context (Williams, 2006). Together they can refuse the imposed definition from the society as a whole (Kruse, 1993).

### **2.2.2 Deviance**

Deviance is another theme often associated with hip-hop culture. Scholars frequently address Chinese hip-hop as a subculture because of its implications of deviance, while Bennett (2004, p.225) argued that this term is related to lower social class and is "ethnically a white construct". It conceptualizes persons, acts, or events as deviations from some norm (Kotarba, 2017). Sociologists have applied the concept of subculture to interpret deviant behaviors. The term subculture was many times given negative connotations back in the 90s, such as "social inefficient," "social evil," and "problematic" (Blackman, 2014, p.499). In terms of musical subcultures, it is worth noticing that the main actors - musicians and fans together would create particular scenes to support and reinforce the style of music genres (Kotarba, 2017). Therefore, for those who are not fans of such genres, labels such as indecent

or unacceptable can be quickly adopted (Kotarba, 2017). The admiration of deviance is long rooted in hip-hop culture. Resistance, rebellion, violence, and freedom are prevalent topics (Travis & Bowman, 2017; Wang & Zhu, 2018). A common perception of hip-hop music from an outsider of its community is that hip-hop music is "demoralizing, unhealthy, and counterproductive" (Travis & Bowman, 2017, p.151), specifically towards youth groups who are not fully capable of evaluating the content of hip-hop.

Travis and Bowman (2017) then argued that those who approach hip-hop music with the fear of the prevalence of deviance are observing with a lens and birds-eye perspective. They see one tree but not the forest- the broader sense of hip-hop. The deviance in hip-hop culture is constructed by both the insiders and outsiders of the music scenes (Kotarba, 2017). Rather than demonizing deviance, it is more helpful to look into how deviance is generated. Becker (1963, in Kotarba, 2017) gave a more specific definition to deviance: "a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender." Thus, a deviant is "one to whom the label has been successfully applied." In this regard, deviance and subculture are co-existent. Since subculture emerges from the cultural practice where a community label itself as different from the mainstream; deviant is how the outsiders of the community might perceive them through exercising moral force, thus labeling them as the "offenders" of social norms; in turn, the subculturalists would take the subculture as their weapon to fight against the imposed definition from outsiders (Kotarba, 2017; Kruse, 1993).

### **2.2.3 Empowerment**

The sensibilities and identity-centric aspects (race, class, gender) of hip-hop can be powerful for young people (Travis & Bowman, 2017). In an ethnographical study, Travis and Bowman (2017) identified five core empowering themes as they engage in hip-hop culture: esteem, resilience, growth, community, and change. Such themes entail that hip-hop is used to "feel better, do better, be better, for a better sense of belonging, and to promote better conditions" (Travis & Bowman, 2017, p. 151). The empowering engagement of hip-hop is exercised by promoting positive identification messages for marginalized groups, providing a platform for affirming identities (Travis & Bowman, 2017). Hip-hop's counter-hegemonic

narratives include but are not limited to racial dynamics, quality, and justice. Even though hip-hop has long been criticized for being misogynistic, it also provides women space to contest misogynistic narratives and assert their presence in this male-dominant genre (Travis & Bowman, 2017).

Moreover, given hip-hop's grass-root feature, hip-hop artists are either self-taught or taught by peers. Thus, it empowers young people to pursue a career related to hip-hop regardless of their socio-economic background (Morgan & Bennett, 2011). As Travis and Bowman (2017, p.151) suggested, "hip-hop and rap are used to feel better, to do better, to be better, for a better sense of belonging, and to promote better conditions within prioritized communities."

Several studies on hip-hop culture mentioned its empowering engagement. For example, in Bennett's (1999) study on the hip-hop music scene in Frankfurt, Germany, he discovered that German hip-hop created more straightforward access to local culture for young immigrants, facilitating integration and the place-making process, in turn, strengthened the sense of belonging and national identity. In the case of the role of hip-hop in cultural identity construction for Southeast Asian American youth, it empowers youth by fostering political engagement, breaks the silence, and challenge stereotypes imposed on ethnic minorities by society (Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). In the Chinese context, situated in a suppressed political and cultural environment, hip-hop also encouraged Chinese youth's self-expression (Wu, 2020).

#### **2.2.4 Hip-hop in a global context**

Along with hip-hop's development in the globalization age, locality, authenticity, and commercialization emerged beside each other, which became the most prevalent discursive themes for the global hip-hop scene (Brooks & Conroy, 2011; Kotarba, 2017; Pennycook, 2007). As hip-hop became a global cultural practice, its scope has been broadened from the African-American neighborhood where it was born (Brooks & Conroy, 2011). New parameters of hip-hop's meanings were attached to local identities. Localization of a cultural

product inevitably involves using local language and a shift of focus on the situated social context about class, race, ethnicity, etc. (Pennycook, 2007).

Hip-hop indeed encourages self-expression. However, as it started to grow in other cultural territories on the basis of imitation of the original hip-hop content that the African-American community produced, and local elements and languages are involved, the concern for the authenticity of hip-hop was raised (Kruse, 1993; Pennycook, 2007). Hip-hop culture advocates "keep it real", yet the realness, or authenticity, is challenging to define. The question is who gets to define and where it should be defined. Pennycook (2007, p.103) argued that authenticity should be defined with respect to the social context and "horizons of significance", which is to say, authenticity is relevant for what really matters in a localized circumstance. The author then came up with a fascinating concept- the global spread of authenticity, referring to that the expression is established in a broader understanding of what is real, but expressed about the local context, local culture, in the local languages (Pennycook, 2007).

Another aspect that was seen as controversial to the authenticity was the commercialization of hip-hop in the music industry. Understandably, hip-hop artists desire to gain more recognition and earn money, yet the act of monetizing hip-hop could be perceived as "un-real," as well as bringing hip-hop culture, which was underground, to the overground domain (Morgan & Bennett, 2011; Kotarba, 2017; Um, 2013). Such concerns were prevalent among the Chinese hip-hop community after watching the show *The Rap of China* blowing up in 2017 and exposing what was treasured by a small group of people to the mainstream public (Flew et al., 2019). Morgan and Bennett (2011) suggested that the commercialization of hip-hop should be regarded critically; while it is accused of polluting the underground hip-hop. Situated in a disparate cultural-political environment than its Western counterpart, Chinese hip-hop music has its peculiarities. To begin with, the absence of class conflict and racial tension in the Chinese context, which are considered the materials that spark hip-hop music creation, leads to doubts about the authenticity of Chinese hip-hop. de Kloet (2007) criticized Chinese hip-hop as being appropriated by the middle-class, as most artists and audiences are not suffering from poverty and social injustices but rather come from a privileged social background. Such differences cut out the link between ethnicity and hip-hop and pollute hip-

hop's original ideology with inauthenticity (de Kloet, 2007). However, this point of view is based on limited knowledge of the social environment of China. If we dive deeper into the Chinese context, the severe economic and social disparity serving as creative inspiration will make Chinese hip-hop no less authentic (Wu, 2019).

## **2.3 Hip-hop music and youth in China**

### **2.3.1 Hip-hop's development in China**

To look closer into the hip-hop music scene in China, we need to be aware of the economic, political, and social factors that influence hip-hop's development in China. Hip-hop first got imported to China thanks to the reform and opening-up policy in the 1990s. This policy promoted international trade and foreign investments in China, fostering the foreign cultural scene (Shirk, 1993). With a large number of black-market CDs and cut-out cassettes imported from the United States to China, the underground musical communities had their first encounter with hip-hop, and it then proliferated along with rock and punk in the local music scene (Barrett, 2012; Cheuk, 2020). Later on, China's economy has entered a rapid developing phase along with the implementation of the one-child policy. These "only children" had access to excellent material conditions and economic resources. However, they were constantly confronted with the conflict between social and familial expectations and the desire for self-expression (Cheuk, 2020; Liu, 2014). Hip-hop then offered a space for identity conversations and social boundaries exploration for middle-class Chinese youth (Cheuk, 2020).

Hip-hop's development in China is profoundly affected by the political environment and policy-making, especially after entering the mainstream popular culture in 2017. Among articles discussing Chinese hip-hop, an occurring topic is state censorship (Cheuk, 2020; Liew, 2006; Luo & Ming, 2020; Wu, 2020; Zou, 2019). The explicit content and engagement in sensitive political issues of hip-hop have stepped on the government's nerve. Since *RoC* gained popularity, the censorship department has been strict with hip-hop music on domestic streaming platforms. It is perfectly normal for hip-hop fans to find the songs they like suddenly turned unavailable because of the platform regulations (Luo & Ming, 2020). The

consequences of intensified censorship have been demonstrated in the online circulation of hip-hop music, strengthened subcultural identity, the hip-hop ban, and the ideotainment using hip-hop music, which refers to the act of integrating hip-hop in state propaganda.

Since many hip-hop songs were removed from streaming platforms, hip-hop forums have become the primary access to the authentic hip-hop music scene. What has been deleted and marked against streaming platform regulation would regain or even surpass its original popularity because the censorship would certify its "realness," thus worth celebrating inside the community (Luo & Ming, 2020). Cultural censorship then facilitates an invisible bond among hip-hop fans and strengthens their subcultural identity, marked by deviance and rebellion (Cheuk, 2020). Even though the hip-hop ban and using hip-hop as a tool for ideotainment seem controversial, they serve the same purpose of the government: "purify" the political environment and reinforce the Party's ideological governance (Zou, 2019). The censorship does not only censor lyrics but also the social behavior of hip-hop artists. For the cause of creating a better environment for the youth's cultivation of moral values, artists who have sexual scandals committed a violent act, and were involved with drug use, have been banned from performing on both TV and online shows (Wang & Zhu, 2018). On the other hand, due to the popularity of hip-hop among young people, the government started featuring hip-hop artists in regional, even state propaganda, using hip-hop as a cultural tool to achieve better permeability and effectiveness (Zou, 2019).

As for the social factors that play a role in hip-hop's development, it is significant to mention the act of unifying national language. This act was part of the quest of the Chinese government to accomplish modernity in the 20th century. It aims for linguistic conformity, encourages, and imposes the use of standard Mandarin in a way that local languages/dialects could be suppressed, excluded, and discriminated against (Liu, 2014). Many Chinese artists rap in local dialects, which becomes a counter-hegemonic cultural practice against center politic and state act of unifying national language (Liu, 2014; Wu, 2019). Liu (2014, p.275) then summarized that "local language provides a rhetoric of social status and identity that goes beyond what is defined by these hierarchies." In this case, the use of local language in hip-hop signifies an oppositional subcultural youth identity. On the other hand, when local language hip-hop is featured in propaganda, it could also create a connection between local

and national identities, which would enhance one's identification with the nation-state (Zou, 2019).

### **2.3.2 Hip-hop community**

Without a doubt, the use of local languages in hip-hop music has provided a natural force to the formation of local hip-hop communities. The affinity for the dialect and the pride that one could take in their home town/region contribute strongly to collective local identities (Cheuk, 2020; Liu, 2014). Featuring local dialects, Chinese hip-hop is more accessible for youth than Western hip-hop, enabling the marginalized and alienated group to articulate their narratives (Liu, 2014; Luo & Ming, 2020). The underlying issue for putting a powerful mark of locality in one's cultural identity is that it might be resulting from the anxiety of placelessness in a radically globalized world, competing to claim difference and uniqueness, regardless of the similarities in local identities beneath the distinctiveness (Liu, 2014). Globalization involves "a multidirectional flow of people, goods and ideas" (Jensen et al., 2011, p. 287), so does the localization within the nation-state.

The use of the internet also contributes to the formation of the hip-hop community. As aforementioned, hip-hop music's circulation and consumption, especially those that were censored and removed from streaming platforms, rely heavily on the internet (Cheuk, 2020). Virtual communities create a collective imaginary, where the participants do not need to reveal their details to engage in the hip-hop music scene (Liu, 2014; Um, 2013). The anonymity and wide varieties of information enable more possibilities for young people to explore both music and self, and it allows extensions of identity to be constantly evolving (Um, 2013), which corresponds to what Frith (1996, p.109) observed about identity in relation to music: "a becoming not a being," addressing the fluidity of identities. In this highly censored cultural environment, virtual communities offer an alternative space for young people to escape from adult culture and hierarchy, to express themselves relatively freely, and showcase their resistance peacefully (Cheuk, 2020; Ruddock, 2019; Wu, 2019).

### **2.3.3 Cultural reterritorialization**

Chinese hip-hop music is a product of glocalization, born locally in the context of globalization. Therefore, the concept of the trans-local scene and cultural reterritorialization can be well applied to it. With the emphasis on youth-oriented kinds of music, the trans-local scene describes the practices where young people integrate music resources in a local context without losing certain musical features and properties paralleled worldwide (Kruse, 1993 in Bennett, 2004). Cultural reterritorialization concerns the new understandings and interpretations of cultural practices and the constant reconstitution of cultural identities through social interactions (Um, 2013).

Except for the musical characteristics shared globally regarding hip-hop, the effect of hip-hop music on young people also has common ground in different regions of the world. Firstly, youth around the world develop identity agency from listening to hip-hop music, as it enables more possibilities for identification and encourages resistance against dictated identity choices by society (Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). The expressiveness of hip-hop music allows young people to seek identification outside of what society already defines them, achieve a different persona, and foster identity flexibility (Liu, 2014; Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). Second, hip-hop music is a cultural symbol of resistance for youth. Originally, hip-hop is a source of empowerment and resistance, and it is still the spirit of hip-hop today (Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). Even though the societal issues and values that young people resist can vary, inequality is always of their concerns (Bennett, 1999; Wu, 2019).

Researching on Korean hip-hop, Um (2013) approached it as "a mobile nexus between global and local in terms of production, regional and domestic with respect to consumption." Such an approach could also be applied to Chinese hip-hop, as the trans-locality is evident too. The concept of cultural reterritorialization could be used to understand the mobility of hip-hop music and the derived cultural identity (Um, 2013). Territories are "socially produced spaces with rules of inclusion and exclusion" (Christensen et al., 2011, in Andersson, 2013). This concept can be applied to localized hip-hop practices in China, where strong local characteristics are featured in the music, presenting connections to specific places. The emergence of Chinese hip-hop is not only a cultural reterritorialization for the global hip-hop

music scene but also Chinese popular music culture. The national dimension and political mediation of the state, the implementation of local cultural elements, have added a unique layer of meaning to hip-hop, reflecting the perspectives of Chinese youth on domestic cultural politics and the understanding of their cultural identity (Wu, 2019). Hip-hop also broadened the scope of Chinese popular music by offering various discourses as it emphasizes collective social issues rather than romantic love, which is a prevalent theme in popular music culture (Liu, 2014).

### **2.3.4 Hip-hop's impact on youth values**

Chinese hip-hop provides an alternative cultural space and affirmation for identification (Travis & Bowman, 2017). Simultaneously, it encourages young people to pursue their dreams and challenge imposed definitions of their generation from society (Cheuk, 2020; Kotarba, 2017). Liu (2014) specifically mentioned the positive impact of hip-hop on students. China has a high-pressured, oppressive educational system, which fueled the anger among students and stimulated the desire for opportunities to speak out. In this sense, hip-hop promoted peer solidarity and the formation of subcultural identities (Liu, 2014).

Apart from the empowerment, the negative impact of hip-hop music on young people also raises concern among the public and academics, as some of the pieces were criticized as "morally corrupted" and "poisonous" (Wang & Zhu, 2018, p. 15; Wu, 2020). Some hip-hop artists were deemed to be simply mimicking the negativity and vulgarity of hip-hop without connecting this cultural form to deeper themes such as resilience, peace, and love (Wu, 2020). Such superficial practice of hip-hop could promote the fickleness and restlessness of youth. They might mistake cultural identity and the so-called attitudes as external labels (Cheuk, 2020; Zou, 2019). Moreover, the lack of social soil for the original hip-hop in China could lead to a misinterpretation of hip-hop's spiritual core, which is speculated to result in misconduct, the vulgarization of aesthetic values even losing moral self-restraint (Wang & Zhu, 2018).

### **2.3.5 Conclusion**

Chinese hip-hop is a complex cultural phenomenon. It fosters a hybridized identity in the mixture of global and local (Liu, 2014). It thrives between censorship and cultural regulations as a music genre that dares to address sensitive social issues. Its primary audiences grew up in a less turbulent time regarding cultural and political aspects, which led to a shift of hip-hop music themes (Barrett, 2012; Cheuk, 2020). Moreover, from an underground niche market to overground commercialized products, the question for the authenticity of Chinese hip-hop continues, and there might be a division of identity between people who have been following Chinese hip-hop before it goes on mainstream stage and those who only became a fan because of the hip-hop shows (Wu, 2020). Little did the existing literature explore the relationship between hip-hop and localized identity, nor the involvement of commercialization and niche culture in the hip-hop scene. This research will strive to present the understanding of Chinese hip-hop from the fans' perspective, focusing on the Chinese social reality, localized identity and youth values.

### **III. Methodology**

Given the characteristics, controversy, and recency of Chinese hip-hop, its contributions to youth identity need to be explored in relation to their comprehension of social reality and the hip-hop scene in China. This chapter will address the methodology that used in the research and explain how the data was analyzed. Moreover, it will address the limitation and credibility of the research.

#### **3.1 Data collection and sampling**

This research seeks to understand how Chinese youth make sense of Chinese hip-hop, which meanings hip-hop entail in the Chinese cultural setting, and what kind of values they absorb from it. Descriptive and rich data are required to achieve such a purpose, which can be obtained from qualitative research. Taking an epistemological stance, qualitative research allows researchers to capture the process of how people construct social reality through the use of language and interpretation of the world around them (Boeije, 2009). Therefore, this study is suitable to understand Chinese youth's cultural identities evolved from their interpretation of Chinese hip-hop music.

In-depth interviewing was opted for this research to seek a deep understanding of the implications of hip-hop on the cultural identities of youth (Johnson, 2011). On account of this study's exploratory nature, the interviews were semi-structured. It allowed the researcher to follow up and clarify the respondents' answers, enabling the researcher to dive deeper into valuable topics or issues mentioned during the interviews (Brennen, 2017). Although the interviews were structured within a pre-established framework, the framework permitted the flexibility to some extent and stayed open for new findings. The interviews were conducted in Chinese Mandarin because the respondents were native Chinese speakers. It is also the researcher's mother tongue, which gives an edge on communicating with the respondents. Taken the geographical distance and COVID-19 pandemic situation into account, the interviews were conducted online. Seven interviews were in the form the video calls through Zoom and WeChat. Three other respondents chose audio calls out of personal reasons.

The units of analysis are Chinese youth who have at least three years of experience listening to Chinese hip-hop music. Three years should be a reasonably long enough period for the music to be a more significant part of identity construction. Besides, since Chinese hip-hop first entered the mainstream stage three years ago, it is reasonable to assume that people who started listening to Chinese hip-hop around or before that time and are still listening have a deep affinity. As aforementioned, the term "youth" is differently defined in Chinese and English contexts. In the Chinese context, it primarily refers to the post-90s generation.

Additionally, Chinese hip-hop audiences have two key characteristics. First, hip-hop audience groups are regionalized according to the dialects. Since renowned hip-hop labels are primarily established in Beijing, Xi'an, Szechuan, Changsha, and Xinjiang (Zhao & Lin, 2020), the researcher desired to recruit participants both from and not from the regions mentioned above. Thus, participants from regions where hip-hop prospers might establish different connections between their identities and place through their hip-hop journey than those from a region where hip-hop culture is less prevalent. The second characteristic is that the majority of hip-hop audiences consist of heterosexual males (Luo & Ming, 2020; Wu, 2020). The significance of gender diversity also lies in that hip-hop music is a male-dominant genre (Kotarba, 2017). Therefore, it is valuable to hear the in-group minority's voices to avoid heterogeneity of opinions and experiences about Chinese hip-hop among Chinese youth.

Regarding such specific sampling criteria, purposive sampling was used in this study. The researcher first reached out to acquaintances who display a fondness for Chinese hip-hop music in their social network and post recruitment messages on social media timelines asking for friends' recommendations. Then, to recruit participants from different regions and of different genders, the researcher specified such requirements with acquaintances who are willing to help. In the end, ten respondents were recruited. They are eight male and two females from six different regions: Beijing, Szechuan, Changsha, Hebei, Fujian, and Zhejiang, aged from 20 to 27 years old. It is worth mentioning that 6 of the ten respondents are amateur/professional rappers who write and produce rap music because they sometimes see the same topics differently from those who do not make their own music.

The interviews were conducted as the researcher reaching out to the participants from the end of April to the middle of May. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes. As for ethical concerns, each respondent received consent forms that contains information about the research purpose and that all interviews will be recorded in audio form as data for this study. At the beginning of the interviews, all respondents were asked for oral consent again to give permission to audio recording to make sure they are fully aware of such practice. Considering that the research paper will be published online, all respondents were given fake names to protect personal information. Especially for the rappers, even though they gave permission to use their stage names in the paper, eventually, the researcher decided to number them as rapper 1-6 to respect their privacy.

### **3.2 Operationalization**

The operationalization structures around the research question and sub-questions. The sub-questions are: How does Chinese hip-hop affect the localized identity-building of Chinese youth? How does hip-hop contribute values to youth's identity in Chinese society? Chinese youth's cultural identity construction through hip-hop music can be operationalized regarding three main aspects: place, values, and cultural identity. Bowen (2008, p.14) concluded that sensitizing concepts are "interpretive devices and as a starting point for a qualitative study." The following sensitizing concepts will provide directions for this study: localized identity-building, values, subculture, and community.

A prepared topic list was used to guide the interviews and unravel how the participants connect their identities with their hip-hop music experiences. The topic list is arranged in four sections. The first section concerns the general hip-hop experience, collecting basic information of the interviewees as hip-hop fans. The second section centers around place, which aims to understand the connection between hip-hop and localized identity. In the third section, there are questions about participants' meaning-making process of hip-hop. Last but not least, the fourth section intends to discover the participants' positioning regarding subculture and hip-hop community and identify the values that hip-hop contributes to their identity building.

Localized identity-building is about Chinese youth's perception of hip-hop music regarding global and local elements, especially local elements' influences on their cultural identities (Um, 2013). Considering the localized characteristics of Chinese hip-hop, where dialects have strong presence, and rappers are clustered according to the region they come from (Liu, 2014), it is worth exploring how such characteristics interact with the participants' identification, creating connections between place and identity. It is covered in the topic list by asking the participants about their listening preference regarding local regions and dialects and their perception of hip-hop with localized features. In this way, the threads of cultural identity construction through Chinese hip-hop can be defined by understanding the hip-hop scene in general and how they resonate with hip-hop's local transformation in China.

Values is an over-arching concept that appears in all sections of the topic list. It refers to the manifestation of hip-hop's impact on the audiences' identity construction. This concept was examined by asking about their general perception of hip-hop, how hip-hop influences their understandings of the topics touched upon in the music, and also their interpretation of hip-hop spirit as well as how it is demonstrated in personal lives. Since some scholars concerns about the morally corruptive side of hip-hop on youth (Wang & Zhu, 2018; Wu, 2020), the negative impact of hip-hop was explored in follow-up questions according to the participants' stories.

Subculture in the western context is a relatively stigmatized and rigid term for describing youth culture, whereas, in the Chinese context, it is considered rather trendy and valued commercially (Williams, 2019; Zhang & Tang, 2019). Taken the distinction of subculture between western and Chinese context into account, hip-hop as a fashionable subculture in China is somewhat controversial. Therefore, it is necessary to look at it through the audiences' eyes to understand the implications of subcultural identity, the charm of hip-hop as a subculture about keeping it real and being true to oneself, and the freedom and restrains that subculture offers terms of self-expression. The dimensions of this concept include the understanding and assessment of hip-hop as a subculture and how the participants define themselves regarding subcultural identity. In the interviews, the participants were asked to define subculture in their own words and express their opinions on the relationship between

subculture and hip-hop. Then the attitudes towards subcultural identity were examined, followed by their cultural practices regarding such attitudes.

In terms of community, as discussed in the literature review, it is one of the main empowering themes of hip-hop (Travis & Bowman, 2017). Moreover, music genres are collective identities, and shared interests could create collective imaginaries (Born, 2011; Liu, 2014). Chinese youth could claim their place in such collective imaginaries by engaging in communities. The engagement in communities could foster and strengthen the identification with hip-hop culture. In the interview, the participants were asked explicitly about their positioning in relation to hip-hop communities and what such positioning entail for them.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The recordings of the interviews were uploaded to iflyrec.com for transcription. It is a Chinese transcription platform equipped with artificial intelligence assistance. The researcher later corrected mistranscribed texts and made modifications according to the audio recordings. Thematic analysis was applied to the data set. It is suitable for a large amount of data, and it assists the researcher capture the complexity of the data and identifies significant patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its flexibility and depth allow the researchers to acknowledge the meaning-making of one's experiences and how broader social context is reflected upon such processes, without losing focus on the material itself and the social reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After transcription, all transcripts were imported in NVivo 12 for data analysis. As the analysis and collection process are done side by side, it was necessary to read into each transcript and constantly update the coding scheme according to the insights obtained from previous interviews. Namely, the understanding of Chinese hip-hop music, personal growth, and changes related to hip-hop were taken into consideration when analyzing the following interviews. Boeije (2009) describes open coding as a process of segmenting and conceptualizing data. All data have been carefully divided into fragments, compared among each other, given a definition, and then the initial codes were created. After the first round of coding is completed on all transcripts, there were 219 codes generated.

Later on, the researcher established connections among the codes, related codes were merged, and themes were then developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the axial coding process, the open codes were reassessed, some fragments were assigned to different codes in order to cover the data more sufficiently (Boeije, 2009). Additionally, sensitizing concepts such as localized identity-building and subculture guided the interpretation of the participants' experiences, set the foundation for the data analysis, and offered general ideas in developing thematic categories, yet remaining open to new findings (Bowen, 2006). A considerable amount of codes were left out in the axial coding process because some were too specific or lacked relevance to defined categories. At the end of the process, ten categories were identified. Arriving at selective coding, the definitive findings are confirmed. In this step, the connections between the categories were located to make sense of the data in a bigger picture (Boeije, 2009). Three themes were then determined to describe and explain the research findings: the Chinese hip-hop scene, localized identity, and values of hip-hop music. An overview of the subcategories, frames and codes developed from the data analysis is attached in Appendix B.

### **3.4 Credibility of the research**

The credibility of the research is a significant aspect that needs to be taken into consideration. The validity and reliability of the research need to be discussed in terms of the credibility of the thesis. Validity concerns the accuracy of the research, whether the concepts intended to measure in the study were adequately measured (Babbie, 2014). Furthermore, reliability refers to the results' consistency, meaning whether it is replicable if the same techniques were applied (Babbie, 2014). For research that used in-depth interviews as the data collection method, the positioning of the researcher in terms of the research topic and the relevant social environment could impact the credibility of the research significantly, especially reliability. Using NVivo 12 allowed me to keep track of the analysis, which contributed to the reliability of the research. In the software, I was able to take notes, give definitions to codes, and to have overviews of the texts assigned under one code, which facilitated the revision of coding.

Berger (2015) argued that the researcher's positioning could impact the research in three ways: the access to the field, the researcher-participant relationship, and the lens for meaning construction. Even though I am not a fanatic of Chinese hip-hop music, I have some basic knowledge of it and have been keeping up with its development on social media. This allowed me to remain relatively neutral regarding the hip-hop field and stay focused on the theoretical concepts that this research aims to study. However, it might result in overlooking. Also, the knowledge gap has urged me to ask for a more detailed explanation of terms and phenomena from the participants. As for the researcher-participant relationship, I positioned myself as a student and expressed my intent to learn from the participants, encouraging their will to share personal experiences and stories. Last but not least, even though born and raised in China, having lived abroad makes me more reflexive when it comes to the cultural-political aspect of hip-hop music in China. The experiences in different cultural contexts can give me a critical perspective but, on the other hand, might lead to biased understanding. Through active reflection and taking my own limitations into account when doing the analysis, the validity of the research could be enhanced.

## **IV. Results**

In this chapter, three main themes discovered in the interviews will be presented. The chapter starts with a general discussion of the Chinese hip-hop music scene according to the participants' insights, which focuses on three aspects: hip-hop's production, hip-hop's development, and audience identification. The following section centers around the localized identity, which discusses how Chinese youth's identities regarding geographical place through hip-hop music are manifested through cultural resonance and pride. The last theme is the values of hip-hop music, including how it shines a light on social issues, how it engages with personal worlds, and how it influences life attitudes.

### **4.1 Chinese hip-hop music scene**

In this section, a general description of the Chinese hip-hop music scene will be provided. Chinese hip-hop music industry has been growing rapidly after the success of the *Rap of China* in 2017. In the interviews, all participants shared their perceptions and concerns about the Chinese hip-hop scene, focusing on Chinese hip-hop's production, its development, and their identifications as hip-hop audiences.

#### **4.1.1 Hip-hop's production**

The production of hip-hop music in China is one of the most prominent aspects where the participants observed changes in the industry. One of the changes that a fair amount of participants mentioned was commercialization. It has provided Chinese hip-hop with better resources for production and collaborations. However, hip-hop is losing its original spirit in such a process. According to rapper 3 (24, M), "you could feel that money is flowing in [after the *Rap of China*]," he looked at the issue critically, "the benefit is that we can listen to better-produced hip-hop music now, however, the resistance spirit that hip-hop represents is fading away." Rapper 6 (24, M) expressed his understanding of hip-hop's commercialization that it is inevitable because the rappers will need to feed themselves somehow, but there are compromises and sacrifices to make according to the demands of the market, which make hip-hop less "real" and more realistic. The critical perspective of the participants on the commercialization of hip-hop demonstrates a utilitarian approach to the social situation for

hip-hop. They understand that for Chinese hip-hop to survive and prosper, it is ultimately beneficial for it to commercialize and smooth its edges by catering to the mainstream market.

The successful commercialization of hip-hop brought hip-hop musicians more fame and money. Fame and money have been a recurring topic in hip-hop music's lyrics, which was criticized in Chinese society where materialistic pursuit is not favored. However, such a pursuit is not opposed among the participants. Fi (24, F), a Beijing girl from a middle-class family, expressed her approval:

I approve of this...even though I do not have similar experience [starting from the bottom], and we are from different [social] worlds, I approve of demonstrating ambitions for fame and money in their music because if I were born in a lower class, that would be what I want for myself as well.

Rapper 1 (20) approved it by saying that it is impossible to live in dreams instead of material reality. If fame and money are what the artists desire, pursuing them is consistent with the hip-hop spirit "keep it real". Therefore, demonstrating the desire for materialistic success is nothing to be ashamed of in the participants' eyes. Realness is a relative concept, and it is not necessarily disconnected from material pursuits. Whether someone or something is considered real is mainly objective. In terms of the intervention of fame and money on hip-hop, most participants reckon that it is not conflicting with being real.

Imitation is another feature of hip-hop's production that has been mentioned frequently in the interviews. Multiple participants widely recognize that it is natural that Chinese hip-hop musicians started making music by imitating Western hip-hop, as it is an imported cultural product. As hip-hop develops, some participants argued that it is unfair to call Chinese hip-hop an imitation anymore because innovative elements and forms are emerging. Rapper 1 (20, M) concluded that the perception of Chinese hip-hop remaining at the imitation stage is a preconception of the audiences for hip-hop as foreign, but it has progressed a lot further, which shows his confidence in the originality of Chinese hip-hop. Other participants talked about the imitation of the content of music instead of the forms. June (22, F) described that some rappers would be flaunting their wealth and bragging about gangster life, violence, and

drugs in the same way that some Western rappers do. However, such scenarios do not apply to the Chinese social context. She gave an example of Masiwei's song, the lead rapper of hip-hop group Higher Brothers:

I remember this lyric from his song P-Town: I bought Louis Vuitton bags in Taikoo Lane [renowned luxury shopping district], bought new jackets from Balenciaga. Except for showing how rich they are, they [Higher Brothers] would also talk about drugs and whores. This kind of lyrics makes me sick.

Such blind imitation is often despised by the participants, indicating a critical attitude towards the explicit content of Chinese hip-hop music.

Many participants also mentioned the low threshold of Chinese hip-hop's production. Without decent musical knowledge and recording equipment, anyone could download a beat online and rap along with it. "The bar is really low", rapper 3 (24, M) said jokingly, "I mean, look at me, I wrote rap songs without knowing anything". Rapper 6 (24, M) expressed his appreciation for such a low threshold: "You don't need to hit the notes, just get the beats going and everyone can participate in this, it's amazing". The low threshold results from its sudden popularity and underdeveloped appreciation ability of the audience as well. The market was crowded with new hip-hop fanatics without having enough easy-listening pieces. Therefore the threshold needs to remain low to welcome more audiences, which is beneficial for the development of hip-hop in the long term.

#### **4.1.2 Hip-hop's development**

Hip-hop has received unprecedented attention since the Rap of China. However, it has not been progressing very smoothly. Two factors that impact hip-hop's development the most are China's cultural soil and social soil. Cultural soil mainly involves restrictions and moral tolerance. Restrictions usually come from the government's end, which is ideological. State censorship plays a big part in restricting the development of Chinese hip-hop. Rapper 3 (24, M) pointed out that tattoos and swears words are not seen in nowadays' Chinese hip-hop

because the government identifies them as against mainstream values and has negative influences on the audiences. Also, hip-hop songs are quickly banned from streaming platforms as soon as there are any political-sensitive elements or even when the artists are said to have misconducted. "We communicate with audio files," said rapper 5 (20, M). Censorship has made the circulation of music difficult, which impedes its development to some extent. Another event that state censorship implemented was turning hip-hop into a propaganda tool, as it is the art form that attracts young audiences the most. Fi (24, F) commented on such behavior as "evil", "destroying hip-hop's core". The ideological control that the government exercises is pervasive. It narrows down the space where hip-hop can grow and eliminates possible directions where hip-hop could grow into. However, it is undeniable that incorporating hip-hop into state propaganda can contribute to the spread of hip-hop as a music form and also a subculture.

Moral tolerance refers to the Chinese public's lower tolerance for rappers' misconduct and hip-hop's content. Rapper 2 (24, M) observed that the public often judges artists from a moral high ground. Artists who make appearances in the public eyes are automatically considered moral exemplars on account of their social impact on the media. In Chinese society, positive energy and the core ideology of socialism have strong presences in cultural products. Positive energy refers to statements that are upbeat about social reality (Lu, 2012). The core ideology of socialism is a 24-word political guideline that the government invented to set moral standards for thoughts and acts (BBC News 中文, 2014). Jessy (22, M) complained that the demand for hip-hop music to demonstrate positive energy and for hip-hop artists to obey the core ideology of socialism in public had confined the freedom of artistic expression. The moral radar of the public is sensitive. Once the artists are reported to have misconducted or misspoken, they would be despised, banned from performing, and their careers could be ending. The censorship does not only come from state administrative departments but also the people themselves. Such moral pressure thus dilutes the resistance that hip-hop stands for and leads its development astray.

The social soil that fosters the development of hip-hop in China consists of injustice and consumerism. A few participants realized that the social soil for Western hip-hop and Chinese hip-hop is different. "In the US, there are class struggles and racial conflict that sparked hip-

hop, but it is a different case in China, yet we have our own kind of injustice to fight back." Rapper 1 (20, M) addressed. Such injustice includes the mal-distribution of wealth, resources, and the systematic glass ceiling for young people. Rapper 3 (24, M) saw the connection between the fact that the seniority system restrains the career progression of young people to hip-hop's popularity among them. Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Chinese youth get to vent out their frustration of the system with an art form as straightforward as hip-hop, and it can provide strength for them to express the objection to such a system as well.

Consumerism is a prevalent theme when it comes to a subculture or a niche culture in China. Rapper 6 (24, M) pointed out that people have to behave by the rules strictly in Chinese society, and spending money on "niche" items can make some people feel unique. Fi (24, F) and June (22, F) both raised their concerns on the phenomenon that representing cultures with consumable items is the easiest way for the audiences to participate and identify with them, which caused many young people to follow trends and to spend money blindly. "Even though they dress in the most hip-hop way, they probably do not understand hip-hop", said Fi (24, F). Consumerism is turning hip-hop culture into tangible labels. It might encourage some audiences to establish their understandings of hip-hop on a superficial level, which contributes to hip-hop's popularity, however not beneficial to its further development.

#### **4.1.3 Audience identification**

This section will explain how audiences understand their positions in and out of the hip-hop community. Four kinds of possible hip-hop audience identifications were developed from the interviews. The first identification is subculturalist. All participants agreed that hip-hop culture is still a subculture in China, as it is only popular among youngsters, not accepted by the mass audience, or even stigmatized by the older generations. Nonetheless, the label of subculturalist is disgusted by most participants who are older than 20. "Of course, I'm not a subculturalist! I don't think I'm a mainstream-ist either. The superiority of so-called subculturalists makes me sick", said Fi (24, F). Taking the subcultural label meaning that they will potentially become one of the blind trend-chasers, and they have a more critical view of the best way to participate in hip-hop culture. The resistance of hypocrisy and the act of

labeling also coincides with hip-hop's spirit. Rapper 6 (24, M) expressed his disappointment to the trend-chasers:

I miss the hip-hop live in Beijing in old times, everyone would sing along with every song. But now the audiences are probably just fans of one or two of the performers, they don't know the lyrics and all they do is recording videos and take photos to post on social media. It's not the same anymore.

Two 20-year-old participants took the subculturalist title with pleasure, as it entails a higher level of aesthetics and uniqueness. Such a contrast marked by age implies that, as one grows older, they are more likely to grow out of labels and get rid of the need for external validation of uniqueness.

The second identification is with niche culture. Niche in Chinese is directly translated as "small crowd", which often refers to a wide variety of aesthetics or cultural preferences that only a few people know and accept. The concept of niche is deeply embedded in consumerism. Niche culture is something that could be bought and used to dress oneself. Jessy (22, M) and GodZilla (24, M) expressed their love for hip-hop-styled clothing and street fashion. "Hip-hop is a lifestyle for me, that's what my aesthetics is all about", Jessy (22, M) said. Some participants do not promote the concept of niche. Fi (24, F) questioned: "It seems like it is simply about outfits and styles, but do people actually give thoughts into it?", implying a superficial connection that the audiences establish between hip-hop and niche culture.

The third identification is hip-hop aficionados, which is what most participants refer to themselves. Because of how popular hip-hop is as a niche/subculture right now, they refrain from mentioning to others that they are aficionados and keep such an identity to themselves. Rapper 1 (20, M) expressed his opposition to joining hip-hop communities, "I find most people in the communities stupid and shallow, so I refuse to be one of them". Rapper 3 (24, M) said that he would not specifically categorize himself in a community because it is such an act that shows the desperate need for belonging, but he does not have the desire to do so. In general, the attitude towards identifying as hip-hop aficionados is that they consider

themselves as one, however not one in a community. This attitude entails an individualist approach of young people to their identities and a strong sense of assurance regarding self-acknowledgment.

The fourth identification is occupational identities. Compared to the three identifications mentioned above, the participants would usually refer to themselves according to their professions and majors. They are not willing to be categorized as a superficial groupie, and more importantly, other identifications play a significant part in their lives. "Hip-hop is important to me but not everything of my life", said Rapper 3 (24, M), "I would rather state myself as a scientific researcher". Rapper 6 (24, M) gave a similar answer:

I didn't think about the mainstream and niche, about their relationship with me, so I probably never felt that I was a subcultural youth. Put aside my love for hip-hop, which I never mentioned to outsiders, I might have a little bit of personality, but I couldn't be more ordinary.

Not prioritizing the identification related to hip-hop demonstrates a more down-to-earth perspective that the participants take on hip-hop culture and themselves. They do not need to consolidate their identity with things they like, but things they do.

## **4.2 Localized identity**

In this section, we will turn from the hip-hop music scene to localized identity, which concerns the identification with specific geographical places. The use of various languages/dialects and the implementation of unique Chinese cultural elements, as well as the cultural context, are what makes Chinese hip-hop special. Such features of hip-hop provoked and enhanced the localized identity of Chinese youth. It is primarily manifested in two facets: cultural resonance and pride.

### **4.2.1 Cultural resonance**

Cultural resonance is the bond that connects an individual's identity to a place through hip-hop music. It includes exclusive cultural elements that belong to and represents those

places. When asked why they listen to Chinese hip-hop, many participants answered that it is primarily because of the linguistic affinity, whether in Mandarin or local dialects. Besides, the stories and scenarios that Chinese rappers portray in their lyrics are closer to their social reality. *Hello Teacher* by IN3 is a frequently mentioned example in the interviews. IN3 is one of the most famous Beijing rap groups in the 00s, and this song is about the ill-ed education system, where teachers would disrespect and discriminate against students with poor grades. The lyrics are pretty controversial; however, they touch the heart of the so-called "bad students". The resonance with this song also reflects the desire for freedom of Chinese youth, as in the society, they lack the freedom to say what they want to say and be whom they want to be.

According to the properties of Chinese hip-hop music that provoke cultural resonance in the participants, there are three kinds of hip-hop. The first kind is regional/local hip-hop, where dialects are used, and strong regional features are attached. The regions where hip-hop thrives the most are Szechuan, Beijing, Xi'an, and Changsha. For people from a particular region, listening to the hip-hop of their regions could generate homesickness and strengthen a sense of belonging. Rapper 6 (24, M), a born and raised Beijinger, talked about when he was assigned to a city a thousand kilometers away: "I listened to more Beijing hip-hop to place my homesickness". Beijing hip-hop provided rapper 6 (24, M) an anchor to his identification as a Beijinger when located in an unfamiliar environment and surrounded by an unfamiliar dialect. Jessy (22, M) and June (22, F) are both Szechuanese. Listening to Szechuan hip-hop has deepened their attachment to their hometown and also contributed to the "flexing" attitude, similar to *carpe diem*, that Szechuanese people are known for.

Szechuanese hip-hop is the most popular branded regional hip-hop in China. However, its popularity also stirred up some opposition. "I don't like that whenever we talk about hip-hop, we are referring to Szechuanese hip-hop by default", said rapper 3 (24, M), an amateur rapper from Fujian, which is a coastal region in Southeastern China. He complained that he does not understand the dialect or context most of the time, which makes him feel excluded. Moreover, the fact that hip-hop from his region is underrepresented and less developed became a disappointment to him. Rapper 4 (27, M) is from Northern China, his acceptance of Szechuanese hip-hop has been gradually improving. Especially after traveling to Szechuan a

few times, he started to appreciate their aesthetics and lifestyle. He also mentioned his affinity with Changsha hip-hop, as he spent his college life in that city. Even though he is not originally from there, listening to it reconnects his tie with the city and reactivates his memories about that city. In this sense, regional/local hip-hop represents a tangible connection, or disconnection, with a place.

The second kind is Mandarin hip-hop. It is often marked with Chinese cultural elements, sounds of traditional Chinese instruments, and hints of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Traditional Chinese aesthetics often take inspiration from ancient poems, tales, and paintings. In the interviews, some participants expressed their faith in Mandarin hip-hop to form a unique style or even genre. Rapper 4 (27, M) gave credit for forming a possible new genre to the traditional Chinese aesthetics, in which audiences need to speak the language and have some extent of knowledge of Chinese poetry to be able to appreciate it. "It is really something ours, and it has plenty of potential", he then added. Showing faith in Mandarin hip-hop's future development is related to having cultural confidence as a Chinese, which can be considered asserting one's national identity.

As the official language of China, Mandarin also sparks profound cultural resonance in terms of Chinese national identity. First of all, Mandarin hip-hop eliminated the cultural and language barrier in a broader sense for the Chinese audiences, thus easier to listen to. Moreover, many participants praised Chinese rap lyrics as "sophisticated" and "poetic". Chinese is a complicated language, and therefore there are many ways to play with it, which fascinated the audiences. June (22, F) and rapper 3 (24, M) were impressed by the diverse rhetorical techniques Chinese rappers could practice in their lyrics. "He [Soft Lipa, Taiwanese rapper] could use three distinct yet relevant metaphors to describe one thing", said rapper 3 (24, M). Rapper 4 (27, M) also expressed his admiration for a rapper who implemented Chinese idioms, which are composed of four characters, in his lyrics naturally. He called him a "truly cultured" rapper. Even though none of the participants directly their love and pride for the charm of the Chinese language, it can be observed through their admiration and amazement for good lyricists, which in a way confirms the prominence of Chinese national identity among them.

The third kind is Chinese hip-hop that is famous overseas, which is particularly referring to Higher Brothers' music in the interviews. Higher Brothers is a Szechuanese rap group signed under a label that focuses on Asian musicians in the US called 88rising. They are the first Chinese hip-hop group that was widely recognized in the West (Grogan, 2021). According to rapper 2 (24, M), who has been an NYU student, Higher Brothers' audiences overseas are mainly composed of Chinese international students. He gave a few reasons for that. The mixture of Chinese/Szechuanese and English conforms with international students' linguistic habits. Also, their lyrics are often situated in foreign lands' settings and sometimes describe how it feels to be in the limbo of different cultures. The characteristics mentioned earlier of Higher Brothers' music resonate with international students deeply. Additionally, some participants take pride in Higher Brothers' success in cultural export. Jessy (22, M) shared his story:

I remember the first year I went studying abroad, in my class, some classmates played Made in China [Higher Brothers' biggest hit], I told them that they are singing in my local dialect and they told me they think it's really awesome...it felt pretty good, I felt quite proud.

For this kind of hip-hop, the participants' national identity is demonstrated on another level, and it is on the international level rather than the domestic level. The cultural resonance comes with an additional feeling of being a foreigner and the desire for identity affirmation when facing foreign cultures.

#### **4.2.2 Pride and place**

Another aspect that illustrates localized identity through hip-hop music is pride, which refers to the participants taking pride in the relations between them and particular places. The most notable kind of pride is hometown pride. June (22, F), as a Szechuanese, is thrilled when her friends told her about how much they like Szechuanese hip-hop: "I felt proud, and I'm happy that my [hometown] culture is being appreciated by so many people". She then

mentioned that when her foreign friends express their fondness for Chinese hip-hop, she would feel proud. Whether she presents herself as a Szechuanese or a Chinese, the validation and recognition of the cultures that she identifies with would always provoke a strong connection between the place and the localized identity. It is a similar case with rapper 1 (20, M), an emerging rapper from Changsha:

It feels nice that people who are not from here would also appreciate songs that sing about Changsha roots and Changsha culture, especially it is in Changsha dialect. As a Changshanese, it gives me a stronger sense of belonging and of course, pride in my city.

Such hometown pride in local hip-hop is also transferable, meaning that listening to hip-hop from other regions celebrating their culture can also provoke hometown pride for one's own region or city. Even though Fi (24, F) is from Beijing, she is fond of Szechuanese hip-hop:

I'm not interested in romantic topics in hip-hop songs, but I do like it when they talk about their love for their hometown. It's not that they are singing hymns, just mentioning certain elements would remind me of the attachment and pride that I take as a Beijinger.

She felt encouraged by such songs to defend her hometown and be proud of her own culture, especially when seeing disputes over various issues about Beijing. To her and many other participants, hometown is attached with exclusiveness at heart, only insiders are allowed to talk about its problems, and they will defend it at all costs when outsiders criticize it.

Some participants are proud of artists from the same region gaining remarkable achievements in the hip-hop world. For instance, rapper 5 (20, M) talked about the rapper Falao, who is from his region, started from the bottom and worked hard to have his talent recognized in the past ten years, and he is now one of the most respected rappers in the Chinese hip-hop scene. Such pride does not necessarily associate with the place itself directly, but the talent that this land cultivates and the possibility that this land presents. Established

rappers from the same regions as the participants could be their exemplar in a way, as they are examples of success close to home.

The participants also take pride in Chinese culture and the rapid development of Chinese hip-hop. Culture-wise, they are proud of the exquisiteness of the Chinese language and how well Chinese aesthetics can combine with an imported art form like hip-hop. "In some ways, we can put out things that English hip-hop can't compete with", said rapper 4 (27, M).

Development-wise, some participants reckon that the stage where Chinese hip-hop is at now could be mind-blowing to people who were trying to talk it down. "China can have its hip-hop, and it's prospering, haters just refuse to listen", said rapper 6 (24, M).

### **4.3 Values of Chinese hip-hop music**

In this section, I will explain how hip-hop music contributes to Chinese youth's cognition of social reality and how youth consolidate their identities through hip-hop. Hip-hop's values come from two perspectives, societal perspective and personal perspective. Societal perspective reveals how hip-hop as an art form interacts with society. Personal perspective emphasizes the function of hip-hop in providing emotional values and assists with personal development.

#### **4.3.1 Social values**

Situated in a highly sensitive and suppressed cultural-political environment, Chinese hip-hop is destined to involve social implications in the music. Chinese hip-hop provides a different lens for the participants to observe the society and encourages engagement in social discourse, dividing the social values into two dimensions: social injustice and empathy. As aforementioned, hip-hop's spirit lies in resistance, freedom, and keeping it real. Furthermore, it is often manifested by opposing the social system and speaking out against social injustice, which is the first dimension of hip-hop's social values. Jessy (22, M) gave examples of Xie Di's two banned songs. One is called Please Fill Your Pocket with RMB, which mocked the low social mobility in China, as it suggests one has to be rich to get by. Another song criticized the positive racism in China, that some white foreigners get better, differentiated

treatments in the society without making any contributions to the society. Hip-hop's straightforwardness is emancipatory for some participants, as it speaks about issues and raises awareness of them. Rapper 6 (24, M) appreciates the courage that hip-hop entails in addressing social issues because neither his environment nor his character allows him to touch upon such things.

Another dimension of social values is empathy. Some participants mentioned that they would pay more attention, empathize and give more thoughts to political issues when spoken out by the rappers, especially when the songs are banned, their rebellious spirit would be stimulated, and they tend to participate in relevant social discourses. Rapper 3 (24, M) named one line of lyrics from a song that impressed him very much: "You are picking the size of the crabs in a Western-style restaurant, while on the other side of the world there are children starving to death", which describes the mal-distribution of wealth in a cruel way. Additionally, some participants feel represented by songs that touch upon social reality, speak for marginalized groups and minorities, or simply youth that face similar struggles in life.

The government also takes advantage of the politicization of hip-hop as they see the capability of it infiltrating political opinions among young audiences. As rappers need to get by under state censorship, they need to collaborate with the government in propaganda for them to get green lights for their future career. Such collaborations were described by some participants as "cringe" and "horrifying", because it puts the hip-hop spirit in reverse and it advocates what has been oppressing the people.

#### **4.3.2 Emotional values and personal development**

As DeNora (1999) suggested, music can contribute to our emotional regulation and help us engage with our inner worlds. According to the participants, hip-hop provides various emotional values and sources for personal development. It is worth mentioning that the six participants who produce rap music themselves identified distinct values, which are confidence, self-reliance, passion, and dreams coming true.

Hip-hop helps the participants establish confidence, as they believe in keeping it real and being true to themselves. Moreover, being able to produce music that they like and be

good at it also boosts their confidence. Some of the participants mentioned that they developed self-reliance from making hip-hop. Independence is what hip-hop encourages. Besides, producing hip-hop music independently enhances the self-reliance of the participants, and the sense of being capable of accomplishing things on their own demonstrates in other aspects of life as well. As for passion, hip-hop is something that the participants are most passionate about and to work hard for in life. Rapper 1 (20, M) is a signed emerging rapper, and he talked about how hip-hop gives him a purpose:

It has a positive impact on me, it makes me feel that I'm different from others, because I have a real passion for something. And every day I work harder in the direction to do this well, and it makes the state of life a little bit better. It gives me a purpose to be better.

He also addresses that hip-hop gave him the chance to perform with his childhood idol on stage together at a music festival. "It's just a dream come true, and it made me so much more confident, as if I won't be afraid to face anything else in life". The rapper 5's (20, M) case is similar to rapper 1's (20, M). As they produce hip-hop music, they had the chance to progress towards the kinds of people they admired, which is a recognition and an affirmation for their hard work.

In a universal sense, hip-hop offers the participants empowerment, entertainment, emotional vent, and an eye for the other side. Hip-hop empowers in many ways. First, it can send out the message "do not give up". Rapper 4 (27, M) said that he would find the strength to keep going in songs where rappers shared their miserable life experiences before becoming successful, which encouraged him to stay strong and believe that better life would come around. Second, it can provide motivation for life. For instance, listening to emo rap drives Godzilla (24, M) to look at the bright side of life. Rapper 3 (24, M) wrote a song when his grandmother passed away to store his regret for not being able to show her his accomplishment in music at that time. Whenever he felt like losing purpose, he would listen to it and rediscover his motivation for music. Third, hip-hop makes the participants feel less lonely. Rapper 5 (20, M) described his favorite rapper's music as his only companion when he

started rapping: "It's painful that no one understood me in school". Nevertheless, the lyrics and experiences of his favorite rapper supported him emotionally as he pursued a career as a rapper.

Entertainment refers to the function of hip-hop as a stimulation because it creates excellent ambiance at parties and sometimes simply relaxes people's minds. Hip-hop also works as an emotional vent. Its direct expression and the embracing nature for all sorts of topics make it an excellent alternative space to store or let go of negative emotions. Rapper 6 (24, M) and rapper 2 (24, M) confirmed that hip-hop can help them relieve pressure and that recording their negative emotions in their own music is an excellent way to deal with their feelings. Rapper 2 (24, M) said:

In fact, I had such thoughts very early, that I do not want to rant about my sadness and spread negative energy on social media. It feels quite silly. I'd rather write it down in the lyrics, it is a good way to deal with my emotions, it's somehow private but effective.

For participants who come from an average or above-average family background, hip-hop offers them an eye for the other side of society, the paralleled worlds they have never experienced. Rapper 6 (24, M) appreciated that hip-hop allowed him to see the darker side of Beijing. Now that he works in the law enforcement department, the music that touches upon the police-civilian relationship makes him reflect upon his professional behavior and reminds him to be a "good cop". For rapper 5 (20, M), rapper 3 (24, M), and Fi (24, F), getting to know the social reality outside of their environment encourages them to have more empathy and to see social issues from different angles.

### **4.3.3 Life attitudes**

Last but not least, some participants developed certain attitudes towards life from listening to hip-hop. "Love life" is an attitude mentioned by quite a few of them, it might sound controversial for a music genre that represents resistance, rebellion, and even anger, yet it still keeps the love for life alive. Rapper 6 (24, M) explained: "While we remain angry at

this world, we should maintain our love for the world. What we are angry at are the bad encounters, bad people and bad things, but this is still a beautiful world". Rapper 1 (20, M) mentioned that a rapper who centers his work around his family that creates a peaceful and loving atmosphere impressed him. The pictures of life that he offered gave rapper 1 (20, M) a concrete idea about "the simplest things to love in life". Another occurring attitude is "work hard". Since hip-hop promotes being realistic, the participants have learned that they either work hard or go home. As addressed by Fi (24, F):

They will tell you that the world is so f\*\*ked up, so you have to work hard or you won't achieve anything, it's as simple as that. These are harsh words, but they would sober you up from daydreaming that you can rely on anyone else than yourself... you can not make the world change for you, the only thing you can do is to work hard, and that's how you gain power in your own hands.

Hip-hop provides the participants with a rational perspective to take on life, reminds them of the meritocratic system, and brings positive influence as it encourages them to work hard. Nonetheless, hip-hop also talked some people into work less hard, reduced their ambitions, and slowed down to enjoy life. Rapper 4 (27, M) described how his life attitude is influenced by hip-hop: "I don't value fame and fortune as much. Perhaps I was never an ambitious person...hip-hop slows me down, and made me sometimes self-effacing or too lazy". Hip-hop's impact on whether work harder or less hard appears to be dependent on personal characteristics. For someone who is inherently ambitious, hip-hop could reinforce such ambition. Nevertheless, for people who tend to be carefree, hip-hop could encourage them to remain the status quo. All in all, hip-hop seems to help the participants become more certain about their life goals and amplify their inherent personality traits.

## V. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to answer the research question: How do Chinese youth construct their cultural identity through Chinese hip-hop music? It is achieved by conducting in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese hip-hop lovers, including both young hip-hop audiences and rappers who have been listening to Chinese hip-hop music for more than three years. Several themes were identified from the interviews, and the research question can be answered with the combination of the main findings of the themes.

In terms of the Chinese hip-hop music scene, I discovered that participants hold critical views of hip-hop's situation and development in China in the interviews. In perceiving and interpreting the social soil and cultural soil for Chinese hip-hop to grow, they make evaluations on their own positions in the society, which thus contributes to their identifications. They recognize hip-hop as a somewhat paradoxical existence, as it is targeted by state censorship and stigmatized by the public while being embraced by mainstream popular culture and propaganda. The audiences' observation on the cultural-political environment about Chinese hip-hop coincides with the research findings of Cheuk (2020), Luo and Ming (2020), and Zou (2019), where they also pointed out the social dilemma in hip-hop's development. However, the commercialization aspect was overlooked. Commercialization is inevitable. However, it is a double-edged sword. How the participants perceive the environment for hip-hop to grow demonstrates their reflection on their stances in Chinese society. They are well aware of the political sensitivity when it comes to the content of hip-hop music. Also, they are not against hip-hop artists catering to the mainstream or government, making a profit from it. Because in an authoritarian state, the prices are high for offending the rules. The participants take a moderate but practical approach to what hip-hop artists do to let this genre survive in China. They might be rebels by heart, but they also know the artists must play by the rules.

Precisely because Chinese hip-hop is restricted by many rules, and China's social soil appears to lack conflicts that spark hip-hop creation, it raised doubts on its authenticity among scholars (de Kloet, 2007). Even though Liu (2014) already disputed such a perspective for its ignorance of Chinese social context, the participants gave more details on it and expressed

their understandings of Chinese hip-hop's authenticity. From the participants' viewpoint, Chinese hip-hop is authentic because it speaks out on structural issues like the seniority system and wealth distribution. Also, it incorporates exclusive cultural elements such as dialects and traditional instruments. Thus, through the meaning-making of Chinese hip-hop, the cultural identity of the participants was enhanced.

Additionally, the participants reflected upon their own positions regarding subculture and the hip-hop community as well. Objectively, they confirmed that hip-hop is yet a subculture in China since older generations and mainstream culture do not entirely accept it. However, the attitudes towards subcultural identity are rather negative. Four types of hip-hop audience identification were developed from the interviews: subculturalist, niche-related, hip-hop aficionado, and occupational identities. Most of the participants prefer applying the two latter identifications to themselves. In the Chinese context, the participants consider subculture and niche culture trendy but deem relevant identity superficial and a demonstration for lacking identity independence. Therefore, they prefer asserting their occupational identities than the subcultural identity. Furthermore, individuality is highly valued among the participants, as most of them are "anti-community." They reject the idea of joining communities and refuse to be labeled with specific social groups, indicating the opposition to conformity and strong independence in their identification process.

Western scholars are concerned that the concept of subculture is outdated, as it rigidifies the boundaries among different cultural forms and neglects that the accessibility to subculture is unequal for different social classes (van der Hoeven et al., 2020; Williams, 2018). According to my research findings, subculture is yet a relevant concept in representing hip-hop in the Chinese context. This study also provided an updated understanding of the hip-hop community of Chinese youth. Previous studies on Chinese hip-hop concluded that it creates a community that provides an alternative space for Chinese youth to escape from adult culture and hierarchy, to express themselves relatively freely, and showcase their resistance peacefully (Cheuk, 2020; Ruddock, 2019; Wu, 2019). Even though the participants appreciate hip-hop for its emancipation from structural pressure, the idea of community appears to be restricting their identification processes.

How does Chinese hip-hop influences localized identity-building can be explained with the cultural resonance it generated and the pride it provoked. In addition to the localized feature of the music, the connection between such features and localized identity was established. First of all, local languages generate cultural resonance that helps participants develop a sense of belonging to their hometowns, aligning with Liu's (2014) and Wu's (2019) findings. Nevertheless, this study could enclose more specific dimensions of localized hip-hop identity other than the linguistic dimension. The connection between place and identity is not only established through local languages but also the resonance with Chinese cultural elements, sounds, and Mandarin language. Unlike in Liu's (2014) observation, the use of local language is oppositional to the mainstream discourse dominated by standardized Chinese Mandarin. The participants did not see local languages/dialects as counter-hegemonic, as both dialect and Mandarin hip-hop were appreciated.

Pride is another aspect of localized identity that came across in the interviews. Except for taking pride in local languages and cultures showcased in the music, which is related to specific regions, they are also proud of established artists who worked hard to succeed in China and found empowerment in these artists' stories. The pride then includes national identity at both domestic and international levels. The national identity at the domestic level is primarily manifested through the admiration of the charm of the Mandarin language and traditional Chinese aesthetics as well as their faith in the future of Chinese hip-hop music. Furthermore, on the international level, it is manifested in the fact that they feel proud of Chinese hip-hop music gaining recognition overseas. It is a successful cultural export that enhances cultural confidence. My research has contributed additional dimensions to localized identity in relation to Chinese hip-hop, which gave an opportunity to observe the audiences' identity building in an all-around manner.

Hip-hop contributes values to its audiences in mainly two perspectives: societal perspective and personal perspective. Such values are delivered through the individual interpretation of hip-hop music and the internalization of their understandings of the music. Chinese hip-hop's social values lie in its political nature. It directly addresses sensitive topics, activates the engagement of the audiences with social issues, encourages self-expression, and affirms self-worth. Such findings validate the worth of direct expression of hip-hop from the

audiences' perspective. Hip-hop's values in the personal perspective can be divided into the rappers' side and the general audiences' side. For the rappers interviewed, hip-hop has given them a passion for life, making their dreams come true, helped them boost confidence in themselves, and developing self-reliance. They gave examples and told stories on how "hip-hop and rap are used to feel better, to do better, to be better" for them (Travis & Bowman, 2017, p.151). My research was able to identify a mutual interaction between the identity of the rappers and hip-hop music. Hip-hop made them realize the values in themselves, and in turn, they use hip-hop music to express such values and make them tangible.

For general audiences, except that hip-hop music participated in the emotional regulation of themselves (DeNora, 1999), it also gave them an eye for "the other side". The stories and experiences that the artists tell in their music allowed the audiences to see a paralleled social reality that they have never lived in, which adds up to how Hesmondhalgh (2013) explained the significance of music, that it is an aesthetic experience that is both private and public, intimate and social at the same time. Moreover, hip-hop adds up to the participants' views about life. Through the lens of hip-hop, they can define their life goals more clearly.

Most of the participants described the positive impact of hip-hop on them, and they were not worried about its negative impact. The reasons are that, first, they have developed critical thinking ability, which is demonstrated by their attitudes on Chinese hip-hop's situation and subcultural identity. Second, they believe that the rappers are more concerned about the potential negative impact of their music, as they need to pass the censorship to get more exposure and make a living. The findings are somehow contradictory to what scholars were concerned about in previous studies that Chinese hip-hop could be misleading and harmful for youth (Cheuk, 2020; Luo & Ming, 2020 ).

## **5.1 Discussion, limitations and future research**

This exploratory study provided valuable insights into the impact of Chinese hip-hop music on youth identity. It shed light on the audiences' perspectives and perceptions of hip-hop: how they also struggle through the social dilemma that hip-hop faces and how they are enriched and encouraged by listening to hip-hop. Such points of view developed from

personal experiences can offer researchers vivid yet complex images of youth culture in China. It can also inspire hip-hop artists to learn how their audiences interpret their work and perhaps discover new approaches to communicate with them.

Undoubtedly, this research has its limitations. First of all, the researcher's positionality certainly has affected the analysis of the research. Even though being a non-hip-hop fanatic allowed me to remain relatively neutral, it might have let me overlooked some deeper connections in the data analysis. Second, conducting interviews online came with the risk of technical issues. Due to the pandemic, the interviews have to be conducted online. During a few interviews, there were internet problems, which interrupted the talking flow of the participants and potentially has a negative impact on the results. Third, the sample was not as diverse as desired. There was only two female among the ten participants, which could essentially limit the findings in a male perspective, and it is worth concerning because hip-hop is a male-dominant genre already. Also, the sample lacks diversity in social background. All participants are from a middle-class family and received higher education, which could embed structural issues in the finding since Williams (2018) criticized the concept of subculture neglects its accessibility for lower socio-economic class youth.

As for future research, one possibility is conducting a longitudinal study on a more socially diversified sample and observing how their identity regarding hip-hop develops as the industry matures and gets older. Another possibility is to look into authenticity. It is a topic forever in debate in the hip-hop music scene, and Chinese hip-hop's authenticity has been questioned quite often. Even though the participants of this research have expressed their understanding of the authenticity, the content and expression of Chinese hip-hop music are also worth looking into to figure out the composition and implications of Chinese hip-hop's authenticity. Moreover, the application of the four audience identifications found in the research could be explored further concerning other popular cultural forms that are deemed "niche" in China, for example, cosplay, vinyl collecting, etc. In this way, a more detailed portrait of Chinese youth can be painted, enabling new perspectives to observe Chinese culture and society for academics.

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## Appendix A. Overview of participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Hip-hop experience</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
Fi	24	Film student	F	Beijing	8 years	46 mins
GodZilla	24	Mechanics student	M	Hebei	4 years	47 mins
Jessy	22	Business student	M	Szechuan	8 years	42 mins
June	22	Marketing student	F	Szechuan	4 years	60 mins
Rapper 1	20	Dentistry student	M	Hunan	7 years	57 mins
Rapper 2	24	Law student	M	Fujian	4 years	47 mins
Rapper 3	24	Photonics student	M	Fujian	7 years	67 mins
Rapper 4	27	Psychology student	M	Hebei	10 years	52 mins
Rapper 5	20	E-Commerce student	M	Zhejiang	7 years	60 mins
Rapper 6	24	Law enforcement	M	Beijing	15 years	75 mins

## Appendix B. Coding tree



## **Appendix C. Topic list**

### **Introduction**

Hello, I'm Yibing Wang, I'm a Masters student in Media Studies from Erasmus University Rotterdam. Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. My research is focused on the influences of Chinese hip-hop music on Chinese youth's identity. The interview will be recorded in audio form and used as research material.

### **Basic info regarding music experience**

1. Could you tell me about the first music that you listen to?
2. How did you start to listening to hip-hop?
3. What attracted you to Chinese hip-hop? (language, cultural resonance, resistance to social oppression and labels)
4. Could you describe what hip-hop means to you?

### **Place**

5. Can you tell me about your favorite Chinese hip-hop artists or songs? Why?
6. I see that you mentioned mostly artist from xx region, could you tell me why their music interest you the most?
7. How would you describe hip-hop from xx region?
8. How do the origin of the artists and the dialect they use play a role in your listening experience?
9. How does their music make you feel about being a xx-er (eg. Beijinger)?

### **Meaning-making of hip-hop music**

10. Among your favorite Chinese hip-hop songs/artists that you mentioned before, what are the topics that were touched upon in their music?
11. How do their approaches of such topics influence your understanding or interpretation of these topics?

### **Hip-hop culture and community**

12. Would you identify yourself as a member of hip-hop community? From music, lifestyle etc. What does it mean for you to be part of the hip-hop community?
13. What makes you feel belonged to hip-hop community?
14. How do you define subculture? And how do you identify yourself as a subcultural youth?
15. What do you think is the hip-hop spirit? And how do you practice it in real life?
16. How does hip-hop influence your self-expression?
17. Personally speaking, what are the values of hip-hop to you?