

Music is not the Product

Personal branding of hip-hop artists on social media

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ABSTRACT

Personal branding has turned into a valuable tool for career development strategies. This applies, in particular, to the entertainment industry. This study specifically looks at the hip-hop industry, with the aim of understanding the branding strategy of hip-hop artists and investigating underlying and recurring themes in their way of self representation. The study considers an additional variable, that of gender. In fact, the hip-hop genre is not new to criticism of its misogynist and sexist nature, as has often been pointed out. However, in recent years a growing number of female artists have started to gain success in the hip-hop scene. This has aroused curiosity on possible differences in the personal branding of male and female musicians, which led to the following research question: “How do male and female hip-hop artists build their branding strategy and represent themselves on social media?”. Given the unique opportunity social media represents, as a tool for expression and connection, the research takes in analysis Instagram posts from the above mentioned artists. The method of analysis performed was a combination of visual critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis revealed four main themes: Hip-Hop Stereotypes (The Rapper 101), The Alternative Rapper, The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop, Authenticity and Realness (for the Sake of Hip-Hop Credibility). Overall, the research does not show numerous differences between self branding of male and female artists, if not in terms of body and sexualization, which appear to be one of the main traits in the representation of female performers but not in that of male performers. Instead, what seem to influence the way these artists represent themselves is the context itself, as most of them seem to follow the hip-hop rules in some way. By hip-hop rules we mean recurring themes in hip-hop music and culture, such as: display of wealth, arrogance, defiant attitude, and more.

KEYWORDS: *personal branding, entertainment marketing, hip-hop culture, gender, music industry*

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1.Introduction

Creative industries can be competitive and complex environments for individuals to work in, and the music industry is certainly no exception. Being able to stand out and being recognizable can turn into a major advantage for artists who are trying to carve out their own space in the industry. For this reason, personal branding has turned into a tool many artists, from all music genres, resort to. Personal branding is based on the idea of considering the self from an entrepreneurial point of view, conceiving oneself as a product to be marketed in order to mitigate the risks of an unpredictable work market (Whitmer, 2019). In this perspective, the self becomes a source of tangible value that people can use to develop a certain reputation or idea of themselves, that can then be capitalized in order for them to stay competitive (Whitmer, 2019). Personal branding has proved so useful that it has become an increasingly requested skill for professionals of all kinds. It strengthens networking capabilities, as it helps building personal relationships and a good image of oneself (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018). As revealed by Kucharska and Mikołajczak (2018), a combination of artistic identity and the skill of self-branding is fundamental for an artist's success.

With the advent of social media, the practice of branding has intensified, as these platforms represent the perfect tool for self presentation and act as a catalyst in building relationships. Social media allow people to express themselves and thus represent and present the version they want the public to see. Nowadays social media are fundamental for anyone who wants to build their public image (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018).

Especially in the music business, it is crucial to engage in strong relationships with customers and fans, which subsequently may benefit profits (Mantenge 2013). In this perspective, a good branding strategy allows the artist to engage more deeply with the audience (Lieb, 2018). To become powerful brands artists need to represent something that their public deems important (Lieb, 2018). This is why, according to Mantenge (2013), personal branding plays a central role in the music industry and for the artist's career.

Looking at concrete examples of popular music artists that successfully use self-branding, various names may come to mind: it could be argued that Beyoncé sells sexual fantasy surrounded by a sort of mystic goddess aura, though in latest years her brand has evolved in a much more politically and socially committed direction (Lieb, 2018); Lady Gaga is the provocative, self proclaimed free artist, but, again, her brand has turned in a much less controversial version of her previous self (Lieb, 2018); Drake is the hybrid

rapper (Pope, 2016); Kanye West is the controversial music genius (Christian et al., 2011); Nicki Minaj uses her own approach to feminism, her body, and her sexuality to construct her brand and gain success as few other female rappers have done (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017). These examples prove that self-branding can be used to communicate different ideas or personas, but also that these are not fixed and immutable, but rather that an artist, over the course of his or her career, can develop more than one persona.

The research for this study focuses on personal branding in the hip-hop music industry. The reason for this choice lies in the incredible popularity and relevance the genre has acquired. Born as a niche and underground sub-culture in the Bronx in New York, hip-hop has evolved in one of the most popular and listened genres in the world (Leight, 2019; Zhang, 2020). This huge popularity has led hip-hop to become not only a highly appreciated music genre but also a billion-dollar industry, attributing it a high commercial value. On top of that, hip-hop culture and music are influencing other sectors as well, among which fashion, sports, or marketing (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014). For this reason, understanding how branding is used in the hip-hop industry and how artists build their own images can be interesting both for industry insiders and artists themselves, as major players are interested in the best marketing strategies to engage with consumers (Salo et al., 2013). Given the influence the hip-hop genre holds, it represents a relevant and interesting opportunity this paper aims to research.

Furthermore, this research consciously considers the gender variable, as it equally looks at both male and female hip-hop artists. This choice was dictated by the numerous discussions surrounding the hip-hop scene over the years, which has often been criticized for its recurring sexist and explicit content, in which men would run the game and women simply play along. However, given the increasing popularity of some female artists, it is interesting and necessary to understand if and in which ways the artist's gender can influence the internal dynamics of the hip-hop business. In fact, despite the fact that hip-hop has usually been a genre predominantly led by male artists (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017), and deemed as a misogynist environment rooted in an idea of hyper-masculinity (Opie, 2019), the hip-hop scene has witnessed an increasing number of successful female artists, with performers like Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, or Megan Thee Stallion gaining a great audience. For these reasons, self-branding for both male and female artists will be investigated, as it can be useful to look at how they operate their image construction and in which way this differs between men and women.

Moreover, issues related to gender are being embraced and discussed more in the hip-hop world itself, it is thus compelling to see in which way this reflects in the branding strategy of the artists.

On top of that, the discussion also acquires a social relevance, as in latest years the debate on gender and equality has aroused interest in numerous fields. Themes like masculinity and femininity, sexuality, gender fluidity, or female representation, among others, have gained great significance, making this research paper valuable in relation to current event.

Lieb (2018) mentions in her book that the music industry is anchored in gender and sexuality conventions just as much as it is driven by profit, with the first often driving the latter. For this paper it is deemed relevant to investigate these together, with branding being a mean for profit. As branding is supposed to represent one's personality and authentic self (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018), it is a useful tool to look at the characteristics hip-hop artists use to build their own image and that they aim to highlight in themselves. Furthermore, it is interesting to analyze to what extent gender influences these features and in which ways.

Although some research about artists personal branding has been produced, there is still much that can and should be investigated. Existing literature has focused mainly on research from the musician's perspective (Zwaam et al., 2009; Haynes & Marshall, 2018), marketing in the music industry in general (Meier, 2017; O'Reilly, 2013), image and branding of single artists (Pope, 2016; Hunter & Cuenca, 2017), or exclusively on female artists (Lieb, 2018). However, career development in music and self promotion remain under investigated (Zwaan et al., 2009; Lieb, 2018; Everts, 2022), while only few works focus on the relationship between social media and the music market (Salo et al., 2013). Additionally, while research has been done on how women are represented in hip-hop productions (Fitts, 2008), in this case the goal is to investigate how they purposefully represent themselves in a well thought out and planned manner. Defining the key concepts of how hip-hop artists develop their career growth could support the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses as well of the opportunities and threats of the artist branding and, as a consequence, result in the development of new possible approaches or strategies. Investigating a genre as relevant as hip-hop could produce results that may bring benefits to experts in the sector, the music industry, academics that are interested in the subject, and to those artists who want to use themselves self-branding as part of their career strategy.

Furthermore, the research field is deliberately quite specific as it combines self-branding, gender, and a precise music genre, so that to fully understand how these intertwine with each other. At the same time, however, it is still comprehensive enough as it does not focus on one specific artist, as for other studies, but it aims to reveal recurring concepts that define self-branding in hip-hop and how these may vary or may be applied differently for male and female artists.

Driven by the wish to fill this gap, this paper aims to answer the following research question: “*How do male and female hip-hop artists build their branding strategy and represent themselves on social media?*”. In order to help answering this main research question, three sub-questions are outlined: (a) How do male and female hip-hop artists visually represent themselves on social media? (b) How do male and female hip-hop artists textually represent themselves on social media? (c) To what extent does the branding strategy of male and female hip-hop artists differ?

These sub-questions will provide a supporting structure for the answer to the main research question, making the process clearer and easier to follow. Towards answering the main research question, the study takes on a qualitative method, with a combination of visual analysis and thematic analysis run on Instagram posts of male and female hip-hop artists. Given the nature of the dataset, both the picture and the caption of each post was analyzed, motivating the first two sub-questions. Finally, the third sub-question operates a direct comparison between the branding strategy of male and female artists.

This research question investigates hip-hop artists’ construction of their personal brand and how gender is strategically used and represented therein. Although the word “gender” is not explicitly mentioned in the research question, specifying “male and female” we want to clarify the importance of the gender element in the research.

Finally, the research paper is structured as follows: Chapter 1 has offered a general introduction to the study and the paper, Chapter 2 looks at previous literature defining a theoretical framework which outlines concepts relevant for the analysis and that help answering the research question, Chapter 3 accurately describes the methodological process, Chapter 4 illustrates and discusses the results and findings produced by the analysis, finally, Chapter 5 provides a conclusion with final thoughts on the subject and research and answers the research question. Additionally, an Appendix is available for consulting further information regarding the dataset and analysis process.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Marketing in the music industry

According to Ogden et al. (2011), music marketing has followed the same direction taken by general marketing, shifting from a “product-centric to a customer-centric” approach. Music marketing starts with artists showing and promoting certain emotions, which gives commercial value to their music, relying on the reception of their audiences. What the customers are buying is the ideas and feelings a certain music is able to convey. In addition to that, it should be considered that, with the exposure they hold and the self-representation they craft, artists sell not only their music’s emotions, but also the image and idea they create of themselves for the public.

Ogden et al. (2011) define what they call “interpersonal level”, that is the first dimension of music marketing, which occurs when an artist and his or her audience are able to connect with each other. In particular, two concepts are relevant for the outline of music marketing: self-expression and the sense of belonging to a community (Ogden et al., 2011). The common feeling deriving from these concepts are used by both the music industry and music marketing to establish a connection between the artist and the consumer on a personal level. The idea of marketing on an interpersonal level is based on the nature of music as an expression, or self-expression, tool. Manifesting their identity, musicians are capable of eliciting certain reactions in their listeners, who empathize with them, creating a bond among them. In this way, people become part of a sort of community that shares their same feelings. Once this dimension is accomplished, Ogden et al. (2011) discuss “mass music marketing”, arguing that marketing has moved from an idea based on material goods, towards the abstract power of relationships. In this way, artist and consumer define and create together value (Ogden et al., 2011).

2.1.1 New technologies and social media in music marketing

The music industry has been one of the content industries most affected by the advent of the Internet (Hayes & Marshall, 2018). The industry has seen significant transformations as a result of new technology developments, downloading and streaming services, and social media. These changes have influenced all the phases from music production, to promotion and distribution (Everts et al., 2022).

Since the music market is changing, it has influenced the way artists build their career as well. Strategies thought out for a traditional market might not be instantly

successful or the most profitable anymore. Career-building techniques are shaped by the “market culture and structure” (Everts et al., 2022) and artists have to adapt their career strategy to these changes. Hayes and Marshall (2018) identify three main ways in which the Internet can be positively exploited by musicians: it provides a way for musicians to globally promote their music and gain new fans, it allows musicians to keep their fans engaged, and it is a tool musicians can use to sell their music and other products (Hayes & Marshall, 2018). In particular, new technologies can represent an opportunity for artists to gain profit from the direct contact with their audience (Everts et al., 2008). According to Zwaan et al. (2009a), artists can engage with their public in three ways mainly: through media, records sales, and live performances.

For the purposes of this study, media holds the main relevance. Salo et al. (2013) highlight the central role social media play in the current music industry. As a consequence of the incredibly fast advancement of technology, music marketers now have many distribution channels they can use for their goods and services (Ogden et. al, 2011). The rise of social media is particularly exciting from a marketing standpoint, because thanks to the digitalization of music, marketers can now directly make contact with audiences through social networks. Social media becomes important as it allows both content production and interaction, “between record labels, artists and consumers, and between consumers”, with marketing actions usually relying on posting textual and visual content users can interact with (Salo et al., 2013). Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat, allow musicians to constantly interact with their fans, maintaining an audience that will most likely buy their products and make a revenue for them. Hayes and Marshall (2018) affirm that social networks has enhanced the already existing tendency of fans to form communities around their favorite musicians, in particular, they point out how social media can develop a stronger relationship between musicians and fans. Ultimately, the music industry has changed its marketing strategies to make the most out of the current polyhedric media landscape and the many platforms it has to offer, taking on transmedia campaigns with actions both online and offline (Ryan Bengtsson & Edlom, 2021).

For the reasons mentioned above, it has turned into a necessity for artists to be active and promote themselves on social media. The main interest of this study is to investigate the image artists are capable of providing in order to establish a connection with their customers and what are the themes and features they leverage on. In particular, the focus is on how they craft this image on social media, since it is a tool for musicians to gain and

engage with fans, which can subsequently be monetized in a number of ways (Hayes & Marshall, 2018).

2.2 Personal branding

The notion of personal brand, or self-branding, was firstly introduced by Tom Peters, in 1997, in the article “The Brand Called You” published by Fast Company (Rangarajan, 2017; Whitmer, 2019). In the article, Peters encouraged people to take actions in order to make themselves distinguishable in the work market. This idea was then applied at an individual level to the notion of self-branding. People do not anymore simply advocate their skills, but they create a steady and marketable image of themselves, with the intention of building relationships from which they can then gain profit. “Self-branding discourse frames the “authentic self” as a source of material value which workers can leverage to build a reputation, which they can later capitalize” (Whitmer, 2019, p. 01). Self-branding is the result of a meticulous “manipulation” of the audience, in terms of selecting certain personal aspects that one wants to display, showing to a certain extent their personality but always keeping control over the image that is being crafted (Whitmer, 2019).

According to Hearn (2008), “brand” refers to a certain type of marketing strategy that uses narratives and visuals to connect products and services to relevant cultural meanings. The creation of a branded persona has become a crucial approach in the complex marketing environment for someone to gain success. In order to produce a branded image of the self, one needs to be able to establish a separable and sellable image or story that is capable of transmitting values (Hearn, 2008). Self-branding is the deliberate creation of a “meta-narrative and meta-image” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198) of oneself with the objective of generating cultural value and material wealth. Individuals hold a sort of natural personal brand that is the outcome of their experience and personality traits. In order to make it profitable one should be able to manage it in a strategic way (Rangarajan, 2017). The branded self builds on personal experience for the sake of marketing and profit.

Hearn (2008) distances her idea from that of other scholars on personal branding as an act of freedom and empowerment of the individual. She states, instead, that a personal brand is meant to follow a series of rules that restricts the possibilities of authentic expression, diminishing the self to a set of attitudes and limiting its meanings to that of the market.

According to Hearn (2008), branding tactics have shifted from directly influencing the consumer tastes to indirectly establishing specific relations between the good or services and the consumers. That is how branding functions, it creates a certain environment that can influence the customer's practice. Branding is not about the truth, but rather about attracting attention and building relationships. The branded version of the self is "an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment" (Hearn, 2008, p. 201). Rangarajan (2017), as well, argues that self-branding allows individuals to connect and build relationships with others, like branded goods, they are able to distinguish themselves from others for the emotional value they cause in consumers.

Lieb (2018) states that, when the public interacts with a brand, they combine the meanings of the brand's authors with their own perceptions. When the brands are people, this process is much more complicated. Person brands differ from product brands, as people are dynamic and thus more difficult to control (Lieb, 2018). Crafting a brand for a person is particularly complicated, as traditional branding aims to keep the consistency of things but people are inconsistent and this will, sooner or later, be disclosed. For this reason one should make a decision and choose whether they want to position themselves as consistent or human. This distinction is one of the main discrepancies in branding products and people (Lieb, 2018).

Additionally, the unique characteristics of people bring users to different ways of utilizing social media to foreground their personal brands (Rangarajan, 2017). As personal branding is the set of impressions conveyed by a person, it comes quite natural to think that probably social media is the main tool through which these impressions are displayed (Ogden et al. 2011). As mentioned, social media and new technologies play relevant roles in the music industry and artists are strategic in the way they use them and how they present themselves on online platforms.

2.2.1 Brand and Human Personality

An interesting and valuable perspective on the concept of brand is given by Aaker (1997). In her article, Aaker discusses the concept of brand personality, and is particularly interested in understanding how brand personality is capable of relating to that of the consumer and thus effect its behavior. Brand personality is defined as "the set of human

characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). In order to stand out, the establishment of brand personalities has turned into a popular practice for marketers to connect brands and customers. In fact, consumers frequently attribute human personality features to brands. In this way, a connection between consumer and brand is made, as consumers may look for brands with which they share some personality traits. Sometimes brands may as well have traits that consumers would like to acquire, and they are led to believe that purchasing from those brands they will be able to obtain them. The research by Aaker (1997) revealed five brand personalities: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. Sincerity gives the idea of reality, acceptance, honesty; Excitement is characterized by the notions of energy, activity, sociability; Competence connotes attributes such as responsibility, confidence, reliability; Sophistication is associated with the concepts of glamorous, sexy, upper class; finally, Ruggedness concerns the ideas of strength and masculinity. These personality traits allow brands to create a durable reputation and differentiate them from the competition (Pendergrast, in Aaker, 1997). More the real or ideal traits of a person are similar to those of a brand, the higher will be the preference (Aaker, 1997). In this way, consumers look at brands as if they were famous people and as if they were capable to relate directly with the consumer (Aaker, 1997).

However, it should also be noted that the study by Austin et al. (2003) reveals that Aaker's scale is not as universally generalizable as the original research suggested. Indeed, they recommend the use of the framework in situation researchers expect to be successful, and encourage caution in situations that may present difficulties.

2.2.2 Personal branding in the music business

Garner (2019) affirms that to have success in the music industry, one should have constancy in both brand identity and social media usage. A personal brand is the self-positioning of the individual person and it refers to all the traits an artist possesses (Macy et al., 2016, p. 104).

The study from Everts et al. (2022) states the importance of self promotion as a mean for musicians to build their careers. They highlight the importance of reputation for artists, in order to build a successful career, as it contributes positively to their relationships, in terms of support and opportunities, with other industry stakeholders. For this reason Everts et al. (2022) take into consideration cultural intermediaries, who are capable of

defining the artist's success and who base their decision on the reputation of the artist. Musicians should be able to create a reputation for themselves that can compel consumers as well as industry representatives. Creating a brand allows artists to be recognizable and distinguish them from other artists (Garner, 2019).

Music artists are a great example for image creation in the assistance of crafting a recognizable name or style, as they are constantly working to promote themselves as valuable "products" (Lieb, 2018).

Auslander (2021) uses the term musical persona to reference "the artists' representation before their audiences". He looks at the matter from a social perspective, considering it as an interaction between the artist and the audience, from which the artist's musical identity is formed. Of course, this persona is different from the real person and is the product of the performance context. Auslander (2021) is interested in the meanings artists generate through the performance, as well as the way they create such performance. He states that artists adapt the representation of themselves to the specific environment and perform a social identity. Auslander (2021) also uses the term *multiselfing*, with which he describes the transforming of artists' identities to fit different social traits.

Marketing yourself

Hip-hop artists promote themselves as much as their work (Wilson, 2011). Successful artists do not perceive branding anymore as opposite to artistic authenticity, they have embraced it as part of their career development plan. Lieb (2018) states that musicians' brands are made to capitalize on the possible revenues, but also for them to connect with the public. In order to gain success, artists mix their personal and professional image, making it difficult to distinguish these two spheres. As a result, the user gets the feeling of a close relationship with the artist without realizing that this familiar impression is the product of an image purposely constructed (Lieb, 2018) and musicians can gain profit from the direct interaction with fans (Everts et al., 2022). However, when engaging in branding activities, artists should be careful as for as long as they contribute to building their public image, they do not have the complete control on the branding process and how people will perceive them (Lieb, 2018).

Social media is a fundamental tool to create a branding strategy. Thanks to the large amount of people that use these platforms, social media has a significant impact on how artists brand themselves (Garner, 2019). Maintaining a coherent brand identity and

engaging with the audience can help artists expand their public and result in the production of profit (Garner, 2019).

2.3 Gender in the hip-hop industry

In this study, the concept of gender and the related thematic and issues are taken into account. Although Lieb (2018) focuses her study exclusively on female pop artists, she refers to gender differences as well and highlights how female and male pop stars are presented to the public in different ways. In fact, despite few similarities, the way men and women's image is built for the public is fundamentally different (Lieb, 2008). Her discourse focuses extensively on sexualisation of both men and women, but particularly highlights how this is much stronger in the representation of the latter. She also states that differences in image building begin early in an artists' career, with the aim of constructing their public figure in a way that meets specific fantasies and expectations. The study from Hunter and Cuenca (2017) comes to similar findings. In particular, it is argued how a female artist can use her body in favor of her image promotion, making it "available" to the consumers. Many female artists focus their work on delivering the idea of women empowerment, but they often do so "branding their own feminism", through the construction of a whole narrative around their bodies and sexuality (Mendoza, 2022).

2.3.1 Hip-hop reputation

Both the hip-hop industry and hip-hop music generally hold a bad reputation when talking about gender, with hip-hop often being regarded as a misogynistic, homophobic, sexist environment that is hostile to women.

Gourdine and Lemmons (2011) define misogyny through the words of Adams and Fuller (2006) as "the hatred or disdain of women, that reduces them to objects for men's use" (p.939). Looking at these words it may sound like an overall accurate description of many songs and subgenres of hip-hop and rap. This is particularly true for gangster rap, a subgenre of hip-hop music popular in the 1990s, characterized by themes such as violence, outlaws, rebellious conduct, all enclosed by an exaggerated and aggressive style (Tate, 2013). Hip-hop, and more specifically rap, has gained this negative reputation because of the rather usual exaltation of sexist and patriarchal ideologies (Gourdine and Lemmon, 2011). As men have generally dominated the hip-hop world, this sexist attitude can be seen

in many lyrics, acts, or music videos, in which women are generally addressed with comments and adjectives that aim to diminish the female figure to a mere object available for the fantasy of man, or represented as such.

White (2013) uses the concept of objectification theory in her study, in order to better explain and understand the effects of the sexual objectification of the female body in the hip-hop culture. The female body only acts as an object being used for commercial or promotional purposes. Moreover, gender stereotypes can enhance the female objectification, considering it only from a sexual perspective. Additionally, the objectification lived by women through media can induce self-objectification as well.

However, it should be notice that this discourse is clearly, broad and generalist, as hip-hop music includes examples of politically and socially committed works, but it is undeniable that the themes discussed above are among the most popular that made the genre as successful as it is.

Sexism in hip-hop lyrics and music videos

According to Cundiff (2013), music is the media that contains the most sexual references compared to others. In particular, explicit and offensive lyrics are especially prevalent in rap music, which has been often strongly criticized for the depiction it makes of women. This type of music reduces women to object, feeding the narrative that has for long demised and stereotyped them (Cundiff, 2013). The study conducted by Cundiff (2013) looks at the culture of hip-hop music analyzing the lyrics of 20 hip-hop and rap songs. The research identifies different categories, classifying the lyrics as direct references to acts of physical violence against women, as offensive language aimed at demeaning women, or as representation of women as sexual conquests and disposable beings.

On top of that, music videos offer a material representation of the depiction of women made in hip-hop and rap songs. In these videos women are often hyper sexualized, wearing revealing clothes while dancing on the background while the man features as the main act. Even in videos by female artists they often depict themselves in a similar way, but without the male component. Hunting and Cuenca (2007) argue how the over sexualization of female artists may have contributed negatively to their career in the hip-hop industry, relegating them to the role of sexual oboject. These women are typically depicted as means for the male attention and used to augment the man's display of masculinity. Interestingly,

the study by Hunting and Cuenca (2007) also highlights how female artists contributed as well to their own sexualization in hip-hop lyrics and music videos. Frisby and Aubrey (2012) state that female artists have pushed the limits of gender and sexuality standards.

However, in opposition to that, it may be argued that in recent years women have been able to turn this in their favor. Many of the female hip-hop artists that became successful are actually acknowledged for using their bodies and sexuality as part of their self-representation and own brand (Hunting & Cuenca, 2007; Lieb, 2018). Apparently, they were capable of taking the role men have chosen for them and make it a source of power and value.

2.3.2 Masculinity and femininity in hip-hop

Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2015) introduce the term “hegemonic masculinity”, which is used to refer to hip-hop industry being dominated by male artists, for sales, songs, and popularity in music charts. As previously discussed, Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2015) support the thesis that hip-hop is highly responsible for female sexualization and stereotyping, and how this has sparked debates about the complex links between race, sexuality, gender, and more. Although the 1980s witnessed the rise of feminist movements in the hip-hop genre, it looks like many female hip-hop artists have been pushed to “embrace” this traditional hyper-sexualized version of themselves. Many popular artists, despite their gender, appear to walk along the lines drawn by these stereotypes, leading to the hegemonic masculinity connotations that are part of hip-hop (Mohammed-Baksh and Callison 2015). Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2015) continue their discourse on hegemonic masculinity highlighting the role of power relations, in hegemony the dominant group has power and influence over the subordinate group, resulting in the latter’s attempt to imitate the first in order to augment their own power. Which might explain why female rappers have resulted in following the stereotypes imposed by male artists, producing similar content.

It could then be added that apparently masculinity in the hip-hop culture coincides with the display of power, while femininity is closed mostly to the idea of sexuality.

However, in contrast with this view, White (2013) claims a new idea surrounding femininity. Harvey and Grill (2011) state that in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, “modernization of femininity” has created a new topic, the “sexual entrepreneur”, meaning

an insertion of women's sexual freedom and the pursuit of independence from the male discourse. White (2013) applies this concept to the female hip-hop artist, who is capable of defining her own sexuality and use it to trace her image, becoming herself the "sexual entrepreneur". The author borrows from Harvey and Grill (2011) over the debate among scholars on whether the women's take on their sexual representation has actually changed the way female sexuality is interpreted or simply follows a different path that put them again in the same subordinate position. However, the current representation of women could show a change in the direction from previous representations in which women were passive and objectified, now showing them as active, desiring and taking charge sexually in a way that clearly reflects feminism's aspiration for female sexual self-determination" (Harvey & Grill, 2011, p. 54). Sex becomes trendy, a tool for forging identity, self-expression, and a way for personal fulfillment, related to a wide series of implications that advocate a new, modern, emancipated sexuality for women (White, 2013).

This means that the line between female empowerment and self-objectification can be extremely thin. Some female artists are capable of accomplishing empowerment in this way, defying the stereotypes and making a difference in women's position in the industry. Some successful examples being Nicki Minaj or Missy Elliott, that have been capable, in different ways, of defining their own sexuality and use it to build their persona as powerful women (White, 2013). In this context, women claim their power and get in charge of their own representation.

2.3.3 Something is changing

Despite hip-hop remaining a genre mainly dominated by men, more and more female artists have started gaining success and popularity, both in terms of sales and music charts. Nicki Minaj probably still represents one of the most successful examples (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017), but recent years have seen the rise of other female artists, like Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, or Doja Cat that became extremely popular, with some of their songs and collaborations topping the charts. They are building scenes that relate to and embrace the experiences of individuals, despite their gender or sexual orientation, while boosting and reigniting the popular sounds of hip-hop (NPR, 2020). Although sexuality seems to be still a fundamental part of their public image, new ideas of empowerment have also come to play a big role in their self-expression.

In addition to that, the concept of masculinity has been nuanced by artists like Lil Nas X, Young Thug, Kid Cudi, or Brockhampton, just to mention a few. It seems like the role and representation of male hip-hop might be changing. These artists have been pushing the boundaries of gender stereotypes and opening new thematic for the hip-hop world. The traditional image of the tough violent man does not seem to completely fit the genre anymore. Hip-hop has turned into a genre that goes beyond the concepts of gender, race, and sexual orientation, displaying a more “human” side. Of course, this does not mean that the previous concepts of masculinity and femininity are completely gone, especially because it is a type of mindset that sells and makes profit. It rather looks like a change might be on the horizon (Philips, 2018).

Given this hint of change, we are curious to investigate the current status of the hip-hop industry in relation to gender and self-representation. This theoretical framework will provide a structure both for the process of analysis and for answering of the research question, helping to understand the mechanisms behind branding process, artistic persona, and self-representation on social media.

3. Methodology

This chapter provides insights on the methodological design that was used in order to answer the research question. First, the chapter starts with a description and explanation on why a qualitative approach was chosen and why it represents a fitting method for this type of research. Furthermore, it is also discussed the reason for choosing a combination of visual critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis, as well these two methods more in detail. Moreover, follows a description of the sampling method and the process of data collection, explaining how the final complete dataset was obtained. The third paragraph carefully illustrates the process of analysis, describing how the visual analysis and the thematic analysis were carried out on the dataset. Finally, the chapter ends with some considerations regarding the trustworthiness of the research.

3.1 Choice of method

In order to investigate the different ways in which hip-hop artists undertake personal branding and provide an answer to the research question, qualitative research analysis was used. Qualitative analysis allows to interpret research data, deriving ideas and themes from them (Boeije, 2010, p. 88). It allows to organize the data in a relevant and understandable way. The idea behind qualitative research analysis is based on segmenting and reassembling the data. Data is segmented in what are considered to be relevant and meaningful parts, which are then reassembled considering the relationships occurring between them (Boeije, 2010). The data is first dissected into small fragments, keeping the research question as a guideline, to be later reassembled in a meaningful way.

In particular, this research project combines two different methods to analyze and sort the data: visual critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis.

Visual critical discourse analysis allows to understand the role played by images in communicating power relations, which are often derived from the implicit connotations of these images. This method focuses on disclosing the implicit meanings that lay in images through visual investigation, looking at a deeper level and considering images' elements and the way they engage with each other (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Given that the data set consists of posts retrieved from Instagram, whose concept is based on photos and images, visual analysis represents a suited method as it meets the need to investigate patterns underlying in these visual elements.

Thematic analysis, instead, is used to identify, analyze and report themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It helps in summarizing the key elements of a large dataset and generates clear and organized results (Nowell et al., 2017). This method allows to analyze a dataset and unfold patterns of meanings, or themes, from it. As the aim of this research is to investigate certain relations and patterns in the way hip-hop artists strategize their image, thematic analysis seems a useful tool. One of the main advantages of thematic analysis is its flexibility, which allows its application in different types of studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, it should be also mentioned that in some cases this flexibility might lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence when constructing the themes based on data (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2012) designed a “six phase approach to thematic analysis”. The six phases they identify are: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing potential themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (p. 60-69).

In this research, visual analysis was used to “segment” the data in smaller parts carrying certain meanings, while thematic analysis was used to “reassemble” these blocks, looking at the relationships that link them. Visual critical discourse analysis resulted almost necessary as a method to bring out the underlying themes and implicit messages in the visual representation of the artists. Thematic analysis was run concurrently with the visual analysis to dissect and analyze the caption of each post. Once this first part of the process was completed, thematic analysis helped go through all the results and sort it in an organized way.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The data set is made up of social media data, in the specific posts collected from the platform Instagram. The choice to use this type of data lies in the main focus of the research: investigating recurring patterns in the branding strategy of hip-hop artists. Given the fact that branding is about self representation, looking at how artists depict themselves for their public seemed a suitable tool. Additionally, social media platforms like Instagram have revealed to be not only useful marketing tools for people to engage in self-branding, but also an accelerator of this practice (Liu & Suh, 2017). For artists in particular, social media, is the mean through which they get to communicate with their fans and share their image, or brand in this case.

In addition to that, given the nature of the research question, two distinct sets of data were gathered: one set for male hip-hop artists and one for female hip-hop artists. According to the provided guidelines, a total of 170 Instagram posts were gathered and analyzed. Each set is made of the same number of posts, 85 posts for male artists and 85 posts for female artists, divided for an equal number of artists, with 5 posts each. The data was gathered according to a purposive sampling technique. This type of sampling consists in a targeted choice of the data to be analyzed based on the features this data possesses that can help answering the research question. Meaning that the researcher decides which data will be collected and which specific features this should have (Etikan, 2016). Due to the specific nature of the research question, a purposive sampling allowed to identify data that would be relevant for the purpose of the study.

The data collection was organized in two main phases, first the selection of the artists to be included in the research and then the collection of the actual Instagram posts for each of them. The male and female samples were constructed separately, however the techniques and criteria used were the same for both sets.

First, two lists of male and female names were created, these were the result of a search among the Instagram profiles of various hip-hop artists, looking at their activity on the social media and type of content. The artists were selected both based on the researcher's personal knowledge and on artists' popularity. Attention was paid to the following criteria: the artist's genre is mainly hip-hop, they are active on Instagram (measured by the amount of posts published on their profile), and relevance of profile and posts for the purposes of the research. The final lists were a combination of some of the most popular hip-hop names as well as less known artists who represented interesting cases to look at. A complete list of the artists can be found in the Appendix.

At this point, the two datasets were assembled. The data for the male set was gathered first, while the data collection for the female set was carried on in a second time. For each artist, the Instagram profile was first examined in its entirety and, in a second moment, the single posts were considered. Once the data selection was completed, screenshots of the posts were organized and numbered in a table in a Word document, which is also included in the Appendix.

However, determining in which images personal branding is actually being operated by the artists can be difficult, and as much as it could be argued that especially popular artists' actions on social media are probably rarely unconscious, this research uses

Aaker's theory to provide a basis for the posts' selection. Based on the idea of personal branding as crafting one's public image exactly like brands do, the posts were selected looking at the classification provided by Aaker (1997). The five dimensions of brand personality determined by Aaker (1997) are: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These are all considered to be attributes that brands try to embody in order to create a stronger bond with consumers. For this research, this idea was transferred to the concept of personal branding. We argue that, as brands use these five dimensions to create a personality consumers can relate to, artists can do the same and portray these attributes in order to build their personal branding. However, we consider also the contribution by Austin et al. (2003) on the generalizability of Aaker's framework and carefully use it for sampling purposes.

3.3 Data analysis

As thematic analysis aims to recognize overarching themes in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this method allows to identify recurring themes and patterns that illustrate the way in which artists portray themselves and construct their brands on social media. An inductive thematic analysis in combination with visual analysis was conducted for the purpose of this research. The picture and the caption that make up an Instagram post were subject of the analysis.

The implicit level holds many of the meanings of visuals, which can only be exposed by carefully looking at the details (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Visual analysis is interested on how things express ideas and values and what messages they convey, as much as the way they are portrayed (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

As mentioned by Hall et al. (2013), visual critical discourse analysis is based on two levels, namely denotation and connotation. The first is the basic and descriptive level, whereas the second requires the interpretation of elements in terms of wider aspects, such as social ideology, cultural elements, and value systems. This second level of significance is broader and more diffuse (Hall et al., 2013). As meanings on the visual level are frequently implicit, it is crucial to analyze visual features, investigate denotation and connotation, and see if and in which way the picture represents deeper meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Additionally, this method provides a systematic way of interpreting what is being observed. Looking at these two levels assures that all the visual elements are analyzed following a structured and clear pattern.

The visual analysis of the posts was carried in the following way: first, for the denotation level, an observation phase allowed to familiarize with the picture which was then described as carefully as possible. The image was considered in its entirety and, after a general look, immediately noticeable elements and initial impressions were noted. In a second phase, a deeper analysis was undertaken and the picture was looked at more closely. All the objects that appear in the picture were noted, in this phase the setting and background are taken into consideration as well. In the next phase, colors and lighting were analyzed, together with those elements that are meant to stand out, looking thus at foregrounding and overlapping, and all those features that aim to make certain elements emerge. Finally, all the remaining elements were considered, such as the tone, particular symbols, etc. Once the denotation part was concluded, the analysis moved on to the connotation level, trying to attribute certain meanings and significance to the elements previously identified. What stood out in the initial analysis is taken into consideration once again, and possible meaning are attributed to these objects and settings, focusing especially on the features that may be relevant for the purposes of the research. Secondly, the objects in the image were interpreted individually and as a whole. Third, a reflection was made on the reason why certain objects and features are more relevant and a possible meaning was given.

Once the visual analysis was concluded, the results were a bulk of different and sometimes repetitive concepts. Thematic analysis, at this point, helped to organize and reassemble the main findings.

Main themes and sub-themes identified from the analysis of the posts were coded following an inductive approach. Inductive coding, or data-driven, is a type of coding in which the data is coded without the support of a pre existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (p. 83). Inductive coding does not try to fit the data into an already existing coding frame, but rather directly looks at the data. However, this does not mean that researchers can completely detach themselves from a theoretical background (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The male and female datasets were analyzed independently, although following the same procedure. First, the results of the visual analysis were scrutinized once

again, in a phase of open coding. In this case, we could also argue that the visual analysis represents, to a certain extent, the process of open coding, as it allowed to dissect, evaluate, compare, interpret and classify the data (Boeije, 2010). Afterwards, through the axial coding, the dominant concepts were identified, and started a phase of reassembling. At this point, themes and sub-themes started emerging and it was clear that the two dataset could be combined under a single coding frame. The final phase of selective coding allowed to better define main themes and sub themes. A coding tree which summarizes this process can be found in the Appendix.

At this point, the identification of themes and recurring patterns helped to provide a solution to the research question, which will be answered in the concluding chapter.

3.4 Reliability and validity

The quality of the research is evaluated also in accordance to its credibility, justifying why a reflection on the matter is necessary.

According to Nowell et al. (2017), to determine the trustworthiness of qualitative research, this should show that data analysis was done in a precise, consistent and thorough way by documenting, systemizing and exposing the analysis techniques employed in detail. For this reason, validity and reliability need to be taken into account as, according to Silverman (2011), these make up for the credibility, and thus the quality, of a qualitative research.

Credibility refers to “careful scholarship, commitment to rigorous argument, attending to the links between claims and evidence” (Silverman, 2011, p. 359). For its discussion, two central concepts are considered: reliability and validity. Reliability is defined as the degree to which a study’s conclusions remain unaffected by the conditions under which they were produced (Silverman, 2011). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a clear process and explanation of the method is fundamental for the credibility of the work, for this reason the process adopted for the analysis is explained in this chapter as clearly as possible. Both the sampling and the data gathering are described in an explicit and transparent way, along with the methodology, explaining why this method was chosen and the steps that were followed. The data that was retrieved is easily accessible and verifiable. The theoretical perspective also aims to be clear and coherent. In order to increase the reliability of the method, it was also kept a research diary documenting the sampling and analysis process.

Validity, instead, is the degree to which the result properly portrays the social realities to which it refers (Silverman, 2011), or whether these are an accurate representation of the phenomena that is being investigated. In order to meet validity requirements, the data was constantly compared throughout the analysis, the coding frame was continually modified and adapted. Additionally, deviant cases that may confirm or deny the results were also considered. Furthermore, the validity of the results in critical discourse analysis can be evaluated through the explanation of how meaning is retrieved from the data (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014). Accurate explanation and transparency of the visual analysis process ensures that the transition from textual data to represented meaning is clear and accessible. Moreover, the process for visual analysis was based on well established literature, see Machin and Meyr (2012) and Hall et al. (2013), which guarantees quality and a certified method to draw meaning from the data. Furthermore, the theoretical framework offers a valuable support in the process of sense-making and seeking meanings.

4. Results and discussion

The results chapter will discuss the findings emerged from the thematic analysis that was conducted in order to organize and make sense of the results that surfaced from the visual analysis of the Instagram posts of both male and female artists. Unlike the data collection and visual analysis, for which the male and female dataset were processed separately, the thematic analysis was used to compare and arrange the recurring themes that surfaced from the examination of the pictures and captions of the artists' Instagram posts. The analysis revealed a total of four themes and ten sub themes. These themes and sub themes will be presented and discussed below, laying the foundation for the structure of the current chapter.

The four main themes identified are *Hip-Hop Stereotypes (The Rapper 101)*, *The Alternative Rapper*, *The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop*, and finally *Authenticity and Realness (for the Sake of Hip-Hop Credibility)*. At first glance, many of the pictures analyzed seem to disclose the general and stereotypical idea one could have regarding rappers, that is why materialism and flex culture, as well as body and sexualization were merged under the first overarching theme of *Hip-Hop Stereotypes*. Opposed to the artists that portray mainstream ideas of the hip-hop culture, the second theme, *The Alternative Rapper*, identifies the characteristics of those artists that distance themselves from the more stereotypical image mentioned above. The third theme, *The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop*, focuses on some of the terms and language used by hip-hop artists in their captions and ideas conveyed by their body language. Finally, the *Realness and Authenticity* theme mentions those features that make the artists more authentic to the eyes of the public and sometimes more credible in the hip-hop game. Overall, these themes and their sub themes appear to be related to and influence each other.

4.1 Discussion on the general appearance of the artists' profiles

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the artists were selected based on their activities mainly as hip-hop artists, their frequency of use of Instagram, and type of content shared on the platform. Type of content refers to posts in which they are the main subject and are somehow representing themselves. The final dataset is made up of some of the most popular artists in the current hip-hop scene, such as Drake, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, but also of less famous or emerging artists, like TOBi, Aminé, or Tierra Whack. Some overall considerations can be made on their Instagram profiles. The artists seem to have common

reasons for using Instagram, among the main ones there are promotional activities, for example of upcoming releases or television appearances, pictures in which they want to express themselves and their style, or to share moments from their personal sphere.

Aaker's framework revealed as a useful tool to draw the sample of Instagram posts that make up the final dataset. The brand personalities identified by Aaker (1997) are indeed present in the pictures analyzed. The first dimension, Sincerity, is visible in those photos that, for example, depict the artists with their family, in a private moment, or without any filter, or maybe sharing messages that they deem important. Excitement is represented in pictures in which artists are provocative, show their unique style, or dare to do and show something different. A recurring theme in the posts was the musicians showing themselves performing on stage or working in the studio. This type of settings show the artists in a reliable and intelligent way, thus confirming the Competence trait. Sophistication is shown by the many posts in which artists display their wealth, body, and lavish lifestyle. Finally, Ruggedness is exemplified through artists vaunting a tough and defiant attitude, or masculine traits.

In terms of activity, most of the artists post frequently on their Instagram profiles, although there are also some artists who do post less regularly. Due to the number of artists taken into consideration, the final dataset was quite heterogeneous, with some of the profiles resembling each other in appearance and content, and others that stand out and seem to have been designed specifically for that reason.

4.2 “Rich is Gangsta”: Hip-Hop Stereotypes (The Rapper 101)

The first main theme revolves around the common vision many people share regarding the figure of the hip hop artist. For this reason, the theme was labeled as “Hip-Hop Stereotypes”. Two sub themes were identified, namely *materialism and flex culture* and *body and sexualization*. In particular, these two sub themes represent the main and most recurring ones emerged from the analysis.

4.2.1 Materialism and Flex culture

Even from a preliminary analysis of the posts collected, one of the most notable characteristics is the great display of wealth that is present in these pictures. Whether that is through diamond rings, necklaces and grills, cars, or high fashion brands, most hip-hop artists will make sure their status is clear and well represented. Materialistic attitudes have

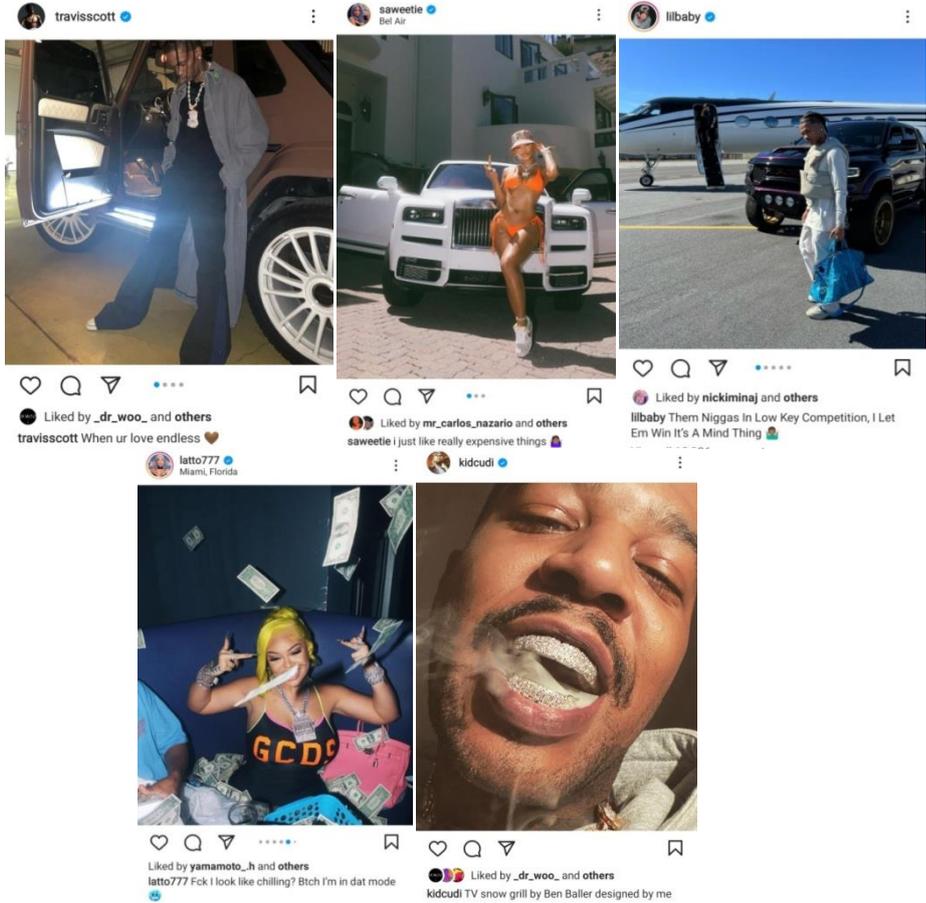
always been recurring among hip-hop artists and status symbols have been an important aspect of hip hop artists' public image. Through the analysis of hip-hop music videos, Burkhalter and Thornton (2014) reveal the strong presence of materialism in the hip-hop culture, which has witnessed a growing number of artists exalting themes related to “conspicuous consumption” (Podoshen et al., 2014). Many hip-hop musicians exhibit expensive products to demonstrate their improved socio-economic standing, which was once mostly out of reach due to American institutional biases (Podoshen et al., 2014). When it comes to materialism and display of wealth, the analysis does not reveal a substantial difference between male and female artists. The theme is recurring in a relevant number of posts from both datasets. The modality in which these are displayed, as well, is mostly similar, with the ostentation of luxury cars, private jets, and shiny jewelry being the preferred medium. Instead, it is interesting to note that this theme appears to be less common in the posts of those artists who mainly identify with features belonging to the second main theme, *The Alternative Rapper*, which will be better discussed later.

Figures 1 – 5



To show their possessions, artists often share pictures in which they purposely display their wealth and emphasize their luxurious lifestyle. With the clear intention of showing off, many artists depict themselves wearing large diamond jewels (see Figures 1 to 5), posing in front of luxury cars (see Figure 6, 7) and private jets (see Figure 8) or even literally showing stacks of money (see Figure, 9, 10).

Figures 6 – 10



This ostentatious style clearly emerges from the picture of Cardi B with her wrists and neck completely covered in diamond bracelets and necklaces (see Figure 1), Saweetie putting her hand in the foreground to show the diamonds bracelets and rings adorning it (see Figure 2), Latto posing under a rain of dollar bills (see Figure 9), and Lil Baby standing in front of an expensive car, in front of a private jet and holding a Louis Vuitton bag (see Figure 8). In addition to that, grillz should also not be left out. As worn by Tierra Whack, 6ix9ine, or Kid Cudi (see Figure 10), grillz are a type of teeth jewelry popular in

hip-hop culture that can be made of gold and decorated with diamonds and other precious stones. These are often purposely displayed by rappers and became a signature style for many.

The same theme often emerges also from the captions of the posts, with the artists making statements like “I’ve Been Getting Richer And Richer My Whole Career” (see Figure 1 in the Appendix), “I just like really expensive things”, or more “Im in love with yellow diamonds, that’s how I’ve been bulging my set up lately [emoji] all custom Just for me” (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). Some artists more than others base their image on their material belongings and are as much as explicit about it, but the theme is significant also for those artists who do not clearly display it, as it appears to be an underlying concept in many of the pictures analyzed. All this display of wealth, ostentation and showing off is part of the so called “flex culture”, which has become incredibly popular not only in hip-hop culture but also on social media in general. However, the flex culture in hip-hop does not stop at jewels, other features like face tattoos and extremely long nails have come to symbolize someone’s status. As stated by (Mendoza, 2022), flexing is a form of signaling, which refers to the transmission of information between parties. This signaling is supposed to be expensive, so that it cannot be imitated. In hip-hop, flexing becomes a means for a rapper to show off his money and abilities.

According to (Podoshen et al., 2014) the continue showing of a lavish lifestyle may also belong to the competitive aspect inherent to hip-hop culture, as a sort of competition among artists to establish themselves as the wealthiest, and therefore indicating also personal affirmation.

4.2.2 Body and Sexualization

As previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, it is no secret that the hip-hop scene has earned a fame of being misogynist and mainly ruled by men, which explains why this sub theme was placed under the “Hip-Hop Stereotypes” main finding. This sub theme resulted to be representative mainly for women, with a few exceptions among male musicians, but precisely for those who are known to be defying gender stereotypes, as Lil Nas X or Kid Cudi, whose cases will be further discussed later on. What emerged from the analysis is that body image is still a key point for the representation of many and, interestingly enough, the most successful female rappers.

Selling sex has turned into a very successful marketing tool in the hip-hop industry (Mendoza, 2022), a tool that especially female rappers have used to brand themselves. While some female rappers have refused the form imposed by men of portraying women in a degrading and highly sexualized way, others, instead of rejecting it, have embraced it and turned it in their own favor (Mendoza, 2022). Some of today's most successful female rappers purposely emphasize their femininity, attracting the male interest and that of the big public. According to Mendoza (2022), they do so to reclaim control over their own bodies and sensuality, as well as to empower other women. Instead of contrasting the male gaze, many female rappers embraced it to fit in with the hip-hop culture. Additionally, Mendoza (2022) affirm that exploiting this sexuality gives female rappers "street credit", which is fundamental in the hip-hop culture, showing that they are fitting the image male artists have portrayed of them. Artists like Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B, Saweetie, Latto all have prosperous bodies, wear revealing clothes, and often pose mimicking sexual expressions. Figure 11 is a clear example of this: Megan Thee Stallion is wearing a tight and revealing mini dress, she is posing in a way that shows off her breast, her eyes are half closed and she is showing her tongue in a provocative way, suggesting an extremely sexy attitude. Other examples include Cardi B in a pink bikini sitting with her legs open (see Figure 3 in the Appendix) and a picture of Saweetie from behind showing her bottom body in a quite explicit way (see Figure 12).

Figures 11 – 15





As far as it can be argued that these rappers “choose to own their sexuality” (Mendoza, 2022), it should also be noted that this idea of woman is still highly sexualized and revolves mainly around their appearance. When looking at these pictures the first impression is linked to the concepts of body, sex and sensuality. The reflection on empowerment and sexual independence only comes later to mind.

However, while some female rappers appear to purposely leverage on their bodies and sexuality for the sake of success, other artists, that still display body, nudity and sensuality, appear to be less explicit about it and seem to be simply comfortable with their own bodies. In this cases, like for Princess Nokia, Junglepussy or Ashnikko, sensuality is present but it is not what defines them.

There also cases in which this approach to the female body is taken with the intention of delivering a certain message. Looking, for example, at Figure 13, Lizzo is posing in a bikini, shot from below and with her hands on her head, completely discovering her physique. In this case, what emerged from the visual analysis is again body and sensuality but, since Lizzo is overweight and known to have talked about body positivity numerous times, the connotation analysis reveals confidence, empowerment and a specific message on body positivity. This is shared by other artists as well, who show their bodies in unflattering ways, as in the case of Doja Cat see (Figure 4 in the Appendix), or in a natural way, with the imperfections all bodies have (see Figure 5 in the Appendix).

Other female artists, on the other hand, choose not to display their bodies using baggy clothes, as for Tierra Whack (see Figure 14), or adopt a more masculine and tom-boyish style, as for the case of Chika (see Figure 15). In this cases, it comes to think that they may be trying to distance themselves from the idea of hip-hop woman created by male

rappers, reclaiming equality in the hip-hop industry. They do not want to sell their bodies, but rather only their abilities as musicians. []

4.3 “Industry Baby”: The Alternative Rapper

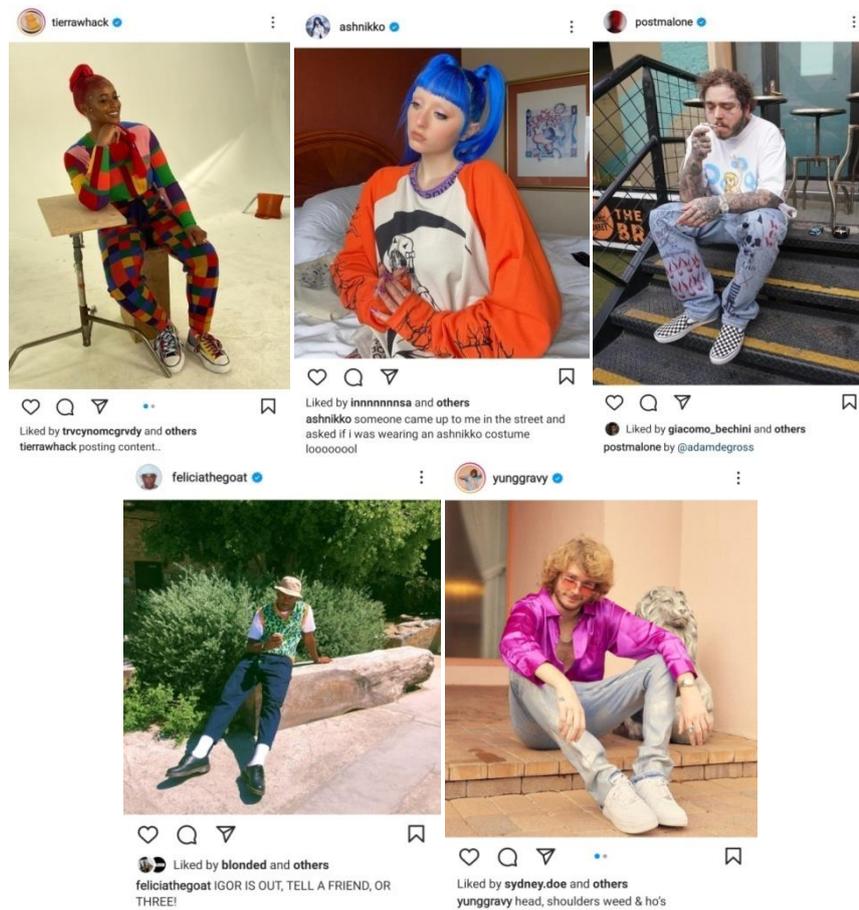
While some artists seem to represent a more stereotypical idea of rapper, others choose to express themselves in their own way and stand out embracing an “alternative” style. The analysis shows that this can mainly occur through their fashion style, the way they communicate on social media, or through offering a completely different rendition of the male/female rapper. Hence, three sub themes were identified: *Distinctive Style, Funny and Humor, Challenging Gender Norms*.

4.3.1 Distinctive Style

Fashion has always played a great role in the music industry and on how artists express themselves. The way one dresses can say a lot about him or her, and musicians are no exception. As mentioned by Auslander (2021) as well, an artist’s style carries some connotations. Artists often “study” their persona in a way that can reflect their music, personality, or more generally the image they want to convey of themselves. This sub theme comprehend both the way of dressing and general appearance of the artists analyzed, including make-up, setting, and general atmosphere of their pictures. It is representative of those aesthetics that are peculiar, unique and different from more common looks in the hip-hop scene.

The reason why one would dedicate time and effort into creating a unique style, is because this could make them easily recognizable to the public and hence distinguish them from the great plethora of hip-hop artists that populate the music industry. Most probably it will be easier for people to remember those artists that are able to create and own a personal style. As declared by Miller (2011), fashion has become a way for artists to build their personal brand.

Figures 16 – 20



Some of the artists analyzed in this study have proved to have their own distinctive style more than others. Looking at the Instagram profile of Tierra Whack, this comes quite obvious to the eyes of the observer. Her style is colorful, eccentric, and creative. One do not often see a hip-hop artist in a jumpsuit with colored squares (see Figure 16) or a suit covered in sunflowers. This style makes her unique and recognizable to the public, and also reflects her odd personal style. Ashnikko, instead, has taken the concept of signature style quite far. Not only because her fashion looks resemble more those of rock or punk artists, but also because she is extreme, different, and constant. Her blue hair, along with everything else, make that people can instantly recognize her, as she claims under one of her post “someone came up to me in the street and asked if I was wearing an ashnikko costume loooooool” (see Figure 17). Post Malone with his numerous tattoos and punk-rock style shares some similarities with the previous one (see Figure 18). But, speaking of style, one cannot fail to mention Tyler, The Creator. His colorful, “schoolboy like”, surrealistic visuals turned him in a real brand (see Figure 19). So much so that he created not one, but

two clothing lines, first with Odd Future and then starting his personal line, Golfwang (GQ). His aesthetic is bold and apparently this has paid him off. Others worth mentioning are Aminé with his colorful style, Doja Cat with her signature e-girl look, and Yung Gravy, who has turned the hip-hop playboy into a Casanova look from the 80s (see Figure 20). Finally, with his exaggeratedly colored looks, 6ix9ine has created his own signature cartoonish style, which is actually quite distant from his raw and often sexist lyrics and music videos. He wears rainbow colored long hair and clothes which, together with the cartoon shark showing on many of his clothes and videos, have turned into one of his symbols.

4.3.2 Funny and Humor

Next to those artists that go for a more classic “tough guy” look, and most probably fall under the first main theme discussed, other artists choose a different approach for representing themselves on social media. As discussed in the theoretical framework of this work, social media is a tool that has the potential to narrow the gap between artists and their public. For this reason, some musicians may want to convey an image of themselves that is more approachable and relatable, and not so distant from the realities of their fans. They may use social media to complement their music in order to build their public image, thus showing a side of themselves that is usually not covered in their production. A funny approach is a great way to connect better and more easily with people. Hip-hop music is surely known for being straight forward, unpolished and for the raw description of reality it offers, leaving less space to a humoristic style. In such cases, social media comes in handy and artists use it in a way that one would expect more from a friend than from a famous musician.

Figures 21 – 23



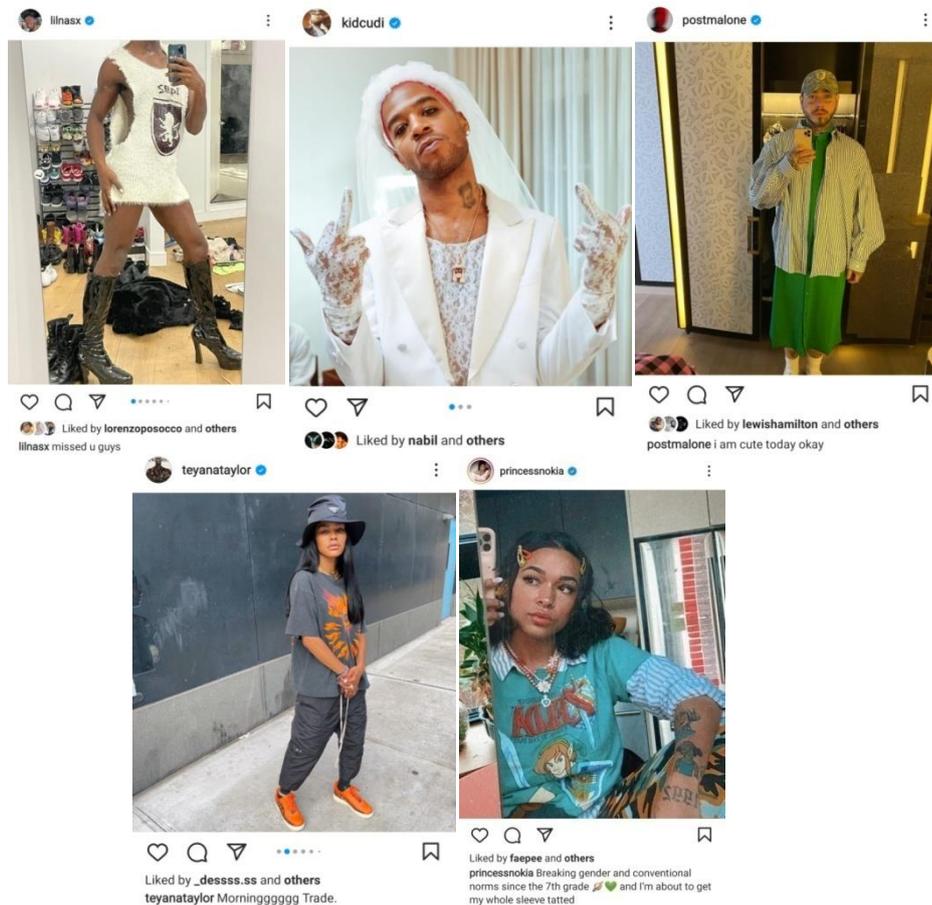
Looking at the Instagram profile of Rich Brian, for example, this theme is quite recurrent. The young artist often shares pictures of him in “random” situations, with humoristic captions, creating fun content for his users. This include him making funny expressions while taking a selfie at the mirror with the caption “trying 2 find myself...” (see Figure 6 in the Appendix), making fun of his skinny body while posing in his underwear holding a plastic position, stating “feeling #flexible !” (see Figure 7 in the Appendix), or wearing a pink wig while playing videogames to “get his mind off things” (see Figure 21). Aminé shares a similar style, posting pictures of him in “weird” and funny ways, including peculiar poses, out of context captions, and funny expressions. His style is also interesting because he does so combining symbols belonging to the hip-hop culture with a more ironic style, as can be seen in Figure 22, in which he is wearing a durag and has a joint in his nose, while the caption says “dad said stop smokin, this ones for you baba”. This is obviously not limited to men, some interesting cases of artists using humor as part of their persona’s construction were also detected in the female dataset. Doja Cat wearing a Pikachu bikini, with Pikachu ears and colored cheeks (see Figure 8 in the Appendix) is absolutely “random” and funny, as if that was not enough, the photo is blurry and shaken, adding a natural effect to the post, as something that is not staged. Chika, as well, uses irony and humor very often in her posts. In a selfie of her wearing lingerie she writes “the best part of a diet is choosing not to participate” (see Figure 9 in the Appendix), and this, coming from a curvy woman, has, beyond a clear connotation of self-acceptance and body positivity, a touch of self-irony. In the picture in Figure 23 she mocks sensuality wearing a beard and mimicking sexy poses with a hand on her breast and a finger in her

mouth, all described with the words “the art of seduction. few of us are blessed with it. I’m just here to acknowledge my privilege.”. Chika uses an ironic and humorous approach on social media, sometimes even teasing in a playful way stereotypes and external expectations. Overall, humor can be a successful tool for an artist to communicate with his or her public and strengthen and integrate their public image.

4.3.3 Challenging Gender Norms

It looks like there might be a shift taking place in the hip-hop world. With a growing number of people getting more sensitive to gender issues, this has of course reflected in the music industry as well. Many artists have started to challenge gender roles and move towards more hybrid visuals and lyrics. In an environment mainly ruled by hyper masculinity as hip-hop is, this holds a particular relevance. In recent years, has emerged a countercurrent of artists who have contributed to blur the distinctions between genders, mainly defying gender norms and stereotypes.

Figures 24 – 28



Hip-hop artists, especially male, are more open to show vulnerability and emotions, or adopt new aesthetics. Lil Nas X is, in this moment, one of the most successful artists doing so. Openly declared homosexual, he has not feared to show himself in a world that is often deemed homophobic, instead, he has been able to turn this into his public persona and make it a strength. Since his first successes, he has been breaking manly hip-hop rules one after the other. One of his posts, visible from Figure 24, is quite representative of his style. In the photo he is taking a selfie at the mirror while wearing a short dress and high heels leather boots, the background is a messy room with shoes and clothes around the place. Also the pose he has is quite feminine, contributing to the narrative of the picture. In other posts he can be seen doing lapdance in high heels, wearing pink and skirts. Lil Nas X is probably one of the most explicit artists when it comes to challenging gender roles. Kid Cudi has also been often recognized to be having a new approach to masculinity in hip-hop. He uses nail polish, dyes his hair pink and in Figure 25 he put the attitude of a gangster in a bride dress. Both these artists show a type of sensuality and body expression that comes close to the one analyzed in the previous sub theme Body and Sexualization. In Figure 10 in the Appendix, for example, Kid Cudi posted a picture of him shirtless, with a nipple piercing and nail polish, referring to himself as “sexy” in the description of the post.

Some concepts related to gender stereotypes are also present in the female dataset, because if Post Malone can wear a dress and define himself “cute” (see Figure 26), Teyana Taylor can wear baggy clothes (see Figure 27) and Chika and Princess Nokia can have a more masculine look and tattoos sleeves, as she points out in one of her posts, “Breaking gender and conventional norms since the 7th grade [emoji] and I’m about to get my whole sleeve tatted” (see Figure 28).

4.4 “ Walk It Talk It”: The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop

Language plays a fundamental role in any culture, as it allows communication between people, forging relationships and the creation of communities. This is particularly relevant for hip-hop, as a music genre which highly relies on linguistic expression and lyricism. Language is the main tool of expression for rappers, so much that it has generated curiosity in academia and encouraged the production of numerous studies on the topic (Cutler, 2007). In this case, the language was retrieved and analyzed from the descriptions of the Instagram posts included in the dataset. However, this theme is not limited to verbal

language, but it includes also concepts surfaced from the analysis of the body language held by the artists in their pictures. The theme includes three sub themes: *The Rapper's Vocabulary, Confidence and Defiant Attitude, Connecting with the Fans*.

4.4.1 The Rapper's Vocabulary

As mentioned above, hip-hop artists have their own vocabulary and expressions, which they use not exclusively in their music but also in everyday life and thus social media. Hip-hop language is characterized by the use of slang and usually raw and direct expressions. They do not fear using a strong language, swearing, or adopting a style close to the reality of street life, anything that will make them sound and look more authentic. This sub theme will focus specifically on some words and expressions that were deemed interesting or that were recurring during the analysis phase. These include: “bitch”, “niggas”, derogatory language for identifying women.

Bitch

The word “bitch” occurs multiple times in the captions of the posts taken in consideration. It is a slang word used to reference someone, usually women, in a derogatory way. It describes someone who is malicious, aggressive, or mean. The word, especially at the dawn of the hip-hop genre, had an incredibly misogynistic undertone and was used by male rappers to address women in a disrespectful and offensive way (Elan, 2018).

However, at some point in time female rappers started reappropriating the word and used it to describe themselves. Suddenly “bitch” was turned into a word of empowerment, with the term referring to female rappers claiming their power in a male-dominated environment (Elan, 2018). The analysis seems to support this claim, in fact in this case the word “bitch” was found exclusively in posts from the female dataset, with the artists using terms such as “bad bitch” or “pretty bitch”. *Urban Dictionary* (2017) defines the term as “a woman who is confident. She is independent and strives for herself”. Some examples from the dataset include a post from Lizzo stating “Aye remember that day I was the finest bitch in the universe no filter just bad bitchtune ... ?!?! face card on unlimited !!!!!” (see Figure 11 in Appendix), or Saweetie describing her picture as a “pretty b*tch trip” (see Figure 12 in the Appendix). However, in contrast to this, sometimes the word is used with a negative connotation, very often to reference rival rappers as shown by Nicki Minaj's caption “I'm bout to make you regret you chose me as an enemy btch” (see Figure 13 in the Appendix). This discrepancy generates some degree of confusion around the term, fueling the same

doubt that earlier emerged around the discourse on the female body. Have female artists, adopting the labels given by men, really managed to free themselves from them, or are they instead they contributing to the same depiction of women in hip-hop culture

Niggas

The use of the word “nigger” or “nigga” is a very complex and delicate matter that would need its own paper to be discussed. In here we only want to address the extensive use that is being made of such term in the hip-hop language. Although not that common, this emerges from the analysis of some of the posts as well, used to reference oneself as well as others. Examples include 6ix9ine’s “I’m starting to love myself for being the disrespectful nigga that I am :)”, or Lil Baby saying “Them Niggas In Low Key Competition, I Let Em Win It’s A Mind Thing” (see Figure 8). The term is surely more present and prevalent in music lyrics than on social media, this may be due to a sort of “artistic license” or to the community rules many social media platforms have for the use of the term.

Derogatory language

This category identifies those words that are generally used to address women in an offensive way, such as “hoes”, “coochie”, “pussy”, “titties”. The first is a quite common term in the hip-hop genre, an example comes from the post of Yung Gravy (see Figure 14 in the Appendix), in which he writes “all my hoes handpicked with a sense of poise and rationality”. In this case he objectifies women as a tool uniquely for his own sexual pleasure. Words like “coochie”, “pussy” or “titties” identify women uniquely with their physical and sexual attributes. However, interestingly, these terms are often used by female rappers, as in the case of Junglepussy’s caption stating “this coochie not ur commodity” (see Figure 15 in the Appendix), opening a complicated perspective on the matter. Referring to herself as a “coochie” she is using a misogynistic term, but the message she is giving is of independence and empowerment. In this case, as well, such words are sometimes used by female rappers in a negative way to refer to possible rivals, with expressions like “Wtf these pussys thought that I was playin?” (see Figure 16 in the Appendix) or “I will put u out hoe u must think u Latto” (see Figure 17 in the Appendix).

The discourse on hip-hop language proof to be rather complex. All these terms seem to reinforce the discourse around the misogynistic nature of rap, leaving the question of whether the use by women is able to eradicate such nature.

4.4.2 Confidence and Defiant Attitude

This sub theme emerged both from the analysis on the body language of the artists, and from the captions to their posts. Confidence, but in particular a challenging and competitive attitude is recurrent in hip-hop culture. Since the birth of the genre, rappers competed to establish themselves as the best MC. Feud is a popular concept in hip-hop, with the genre being shaped and influenced by some of the most iconic beefs. The rivalry between East and West Coast marked several years of the rap history, with the feud between Tupac and Notorious B.I.G being one of the most iconic and tragic of all times. Although the tones have softened compared to that time, rivalry, competition and feeling or determining the best have remained as important themes in the hip-hop culture. At least one post, if not more, from each of the artists considered, shows such attitude either in the picture or in the description, or most probably in both of them.

Figures 29 – 30



A proof of defiant attitude can be seen in Figure 29, where Nicki Minaj has her arms opened lying on the armrests of the chair she is sitting on, her legs are crossed and she is wearing sunglasses indoors. Overall, it conveys an idea of power, of someone that is in charge. In another post (see Figure 18 in the Appendix), she states “I got da [crown emoji] lil bitch u just da runner”, thus declaring herself as the best, or the queen, while everybody else cannot reach her status. Drake in one of his posts shows his confidence writing “You can have your 15 minutes of fame...I’ll take the other 23 hours and 45 mins”, proving a defiant attitude and comparing himself with others (see Figure 19 in the Appendix). Or again, Junglesppusy says “they cant entangle wit me” (see Figure 20 in the Appendix),

implying she is on another level. Examples include artists stating how they are unique and others cannot compete with them, how they do not care about others' opinions, or pictures in which they show themselves with a certain arrogance and looking down on people. The sub theme is completed by a slew of photos depicting the artists intent on showing the middle finger. This may signify simply a trend or a form of disobedience and rebellion, of not caring about the system and anything or anyone else. This is proved by the numerous posts of both male and female artists doing such pose (see Figures 25, 29, 30 and Figures 21, 22, 23, 24 in the Appendix).

4.4.3 Connecting with the Fans

This sub theme indicates those cases in which the artist tries to establish a connection with his or her fans, which can happen either by showing a specific moment of their life and more personal sphere, or by referring directly to them in the description of their posts. Through the latter they do so that their fans feel included because directly addressed by their favorite artists and thus they are encouraged to interact and comment on their posts. For example, in her post Little Simz wishes her fans a “wicked week” (see Figure 25 in the Appendix), Aminé asks his followers to “name this hairdo (be Rude)” (see Figure 26 in the Appendix), or more commonly they make announcements about their new releases, tours, music videos, and anything that concerns their production.

Figures 31 – 33



On the other hand, a connection with the public can be made also showing a intimate and different side of the artists, something their fans can actually relate to. This is

the case when they share pictures of their children and family (see Figure 31 and Figures 27, 28 in the Appendix), or when they reveal their pregnancy as in the case of Nicki Minaj, who does without losing her signature style (see Figure 32). Moreover, the same effect is sometimes obtained by the artists showing themselves in a vulnerable way or communicating an important message. In fact, it is not common for a rapper to show himself crying and bringing people's attention on mental health issues (see Figure 33) or proudly affirming her autism (see Figure 29 in the Appendix). After all social media is the perfect medium for this purpose, if these artists make the right use of it, they can make audiences see them for exactly what they want to be seen.

4.5 “ Truth Hurts”: Realness and Authenticity (for the Sake of Hip-Hop Credibility)

Since the beginning of the hip-hop genre, much emphasis has been placed on authenticity. Williams (2007) highlights how this is distinctive of this music genre and how this is linked to the nature of hip-hop as a form of artistic expression of marginalized African-Americans. When facing the incredible popularity hip-hop music gained and its turning into a mainstream genre, authenticity became a way for rappers to preserve their identity (Williams, 2007). On top of that, authenticity also has to do with the credibility of MCs. Although it is difficult to clearly define authenticity in the hip-hop culture, Williams (2007) provides a few definition from different scholar which, although not at all exhaustive, may be summarized as “staying true to oneself”. Because of the strong link between the artist and this concept, according to Wright (2010), authenticity could be used both to preserve already established relationships with fans, both as a marketing tool for record labels to recruit new fans and increase sales. Under this main theme, two more sub themes were identified: *The Hustle to Make It* and *Roots and Heritage*.

4.5.1 The Hustle to Make It

Hustle is a recurring theme in hip-hop culture, it represents the hard work, commitment and struggles through which artists are able to get to the success. This concept can be associated to that of “making it”, when a hip-hop act finally gains that success it means he made it, and both these themes are often emphasized in hip-hop production. This sub theme emerged from the data looking at the many posts published by the artists in which they are either working in the studio or performing on stage. In Figure 30 in the Appendix, Sampa the Great shows herself intent on working in the recording studio, just

like Drake (see Figure 31 in the Appendix), or Jack Harlow (see Figure 34), who promises great things saying “Watch what happens next”.

Figures 34 – 35



In the case of already great and established artists, this can be a form of showing that even if they have already achieved great results, they keep staying focused and working on what really matters, their music. In the case of emerging acts, instead, like TOBi (see Figure 35), this represents exactly what mentioned above, they are working hard and are committed to obtain what they want, exemplified by the description “We got work to do”. The “we made it” type of attitude, instead, can be partially shown by what already analyzed and discussed above, for example the display of wealth and the defiant attitude, as a way to affirm their influence in the industry, but it can also be read in some of the artists’ posts. Drake affirms “I’ve seen things that ain’t on nobodies vision board or list of goals” (see Figure 32 in the Appendix), thus pointing out that he has been able to achieve things unlike many others. While BIA states “I can feel my abundance growing daily” (see Figure 33 in the Appendix). These concepts, that belong more broadly to the hip-hop culture, are present in both dataset, with no particular differences between male and female artists.

4.5.2 Roots and Heritage

Recalling the definition of authenticity provided by Williams (2007) as “staying true to oneself”, this sub theme acquires a certain relevance, as it literally focuses on the artists’ origins and heritage, but more precisely on how they show it in their social media and how they become part of their public persona. Sometimes more explicitly, other times

less, artists like to show their background and their roots. This helps them affirm their authenticity and make them more credible, especially in the case of black artists reclaiming their history. This process can take place through a clear statement, or also through symbols they wear or show that recall their heritage. These statements usually come with a sense of pride for one’s roots.

Figures 36 – 39



In Figure 36, Princess Nokia wears traditional make-up and symbols of the indigenous culture, clearly affirming her heritage with the caption “It’s a good day to be indigenous”. Bas, who has Sudanese origins shared a picture of him sitting in a quite simple and “poor” room, in Sudan, writing “pray you find a place that grounds you, revisit often.” (see Figure 34 in the Appendix). Also here the attention is both on the setting that looks real and genuine, and on the caption, particularly on the word “grounds”, which literally expresses the idea of roots and being attached or coming from a certain place. Moreover, TOBi, reclaims his origin posting a picture of him wearing a football shirt of the Nigerian national team with a Nigerian flag over his head. The caption says “Never forget where you came from and what you came to do.” (see Figure 37).

It is also interesting to look at the symbols that may recall a certain culture. Many hip-hop artists often wear durags, a headpiece made for African-American hair to form waves. The durag turned into a fashion accessory when rappers started wearing it, black artists in particular (Garcia, 2018). From the dataset, two black artists, Aminé (see Figure 22) and TOBi, can be seen wearing it, thus hinting at their African-American roots. In other two very similar photos, Tyler, The Creator (see Figure 38) and TOBi are both

depicted working in the recording studio, this time with an afro comb in their hair. Before being used as an accessory, the afro comb represented a political symbol, civil rights and a sign of contrast against oppression (Heywood, 2018). In this way, wearing an afro comb represents black history and constitutes an act of fellowship among black people.

5. Conclusions

In the concluding chapter we further discuss the results of analysis in relation to the theoretical framework and answer the sub-question and finally the main research question. As hip-hop music has turned into one of the most listened music genre in the industry, its growing popularity and profitability makes it an extremely interesting reality to investigate. In order to stand out in such a competitive world, personal branding represent a valuable tool for musicians. The aim of this study, indeed, was to understand how hip-hop artists represent themselves on social media, as part of their branding strategy, with a particular stress on the role played by gender in this marketing activity and in this industry.

As mentioned by Kucharska & Mikołajczak (2018), the diffusion of social media pushed forward branding, as it made easier for artists to connect with their public and to create and advertise their image. For this reason, the dataset was made of posts retrieved from the Instagram profiles of male and female hip-hop artists. A combination of visual critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis revealed four main themes, which will help answering the three sub-questions first, and then the main research question. The main themes that resulted from the analysis are: *Hip-Hop Stereotypes (The Rapper 101)*, *The Alternative Rapper*, *The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop*, and *Authenticity and Realness (for the Sake of Hip-Hop Credibility)*. The first and the second theme can be considered as the counterpart of each other. The first one describes those artists that are considered to represent a quite stereotypical image of hip-hop musicians, who base their image on displaying wealth and on a sexualized perception of the female figure. On the other hand, “The Alternative Rapper” includes all those artists that are somehow different, who distinguish themselves for their personal and unique style. This very often coincides with fashion style, but not only, as it includes also personality traits that do not fall under the first theme. Moreover, “The Language of Hip-Hop” includes both the linguistic and body expression of hip-hop artists. While most of these themes emerge from the visuals of the profiles, the language emerges from the analysis of the captions. Finally, Authenticity and Realness is the set of those sub themes that contribute to create an image of the artists that is credible and that can establish his or her figure in the industry.

The definition of these themes helps answering the initial research question. (a) How do male and female hip-hop artists visually represent themselves on social media?. These artists visually represent themselves mainly following one of the first two themes. Most of them choose what type of persona they want to communicate to their audience, if

closer to the hip-hop stereotype, or if they want to carve their own style. The visual representation of these artists takes place through what they wear, what they show, and their body expression. Moreover, we find confirm on what mentioned by Lieb (2018) in the theoretical framework. In order to have success, artists merge together their personal and public image, making the distinction difficult. In this way, the audience has the feeling of knowing the artist on a personal level. They do so either showing private and intimate moments from their lives, showing themselves in natural settings or unfiltered, or more simply communicating directly with them in posts' captions for example. The definition of musical persona by Auslander (2021) is also applicable here. In fact, the artists may not be performing in the literal way he intended in his study, but when sharing something on social media he is indeed showing himself to a wide audience, much broader than that of a regular performance. And what they show is exactly their persona, what they want the audience to see, influenced by the context they are “performing” in, in this case Instagram. An important concept is linked to the sense of community mentioned by Ogden et al. (2011). They state that branding is about the sense of belonging to a community. This is particularly relevant if we think at those images in which the artists carry some type of cultural symbol, that is recognizable to other members of that community. Doing so, they show themselves as belonging to that community and, at the same time, they create one around them.

The second sub-question asks (b) How do male and female hip-hop artists textually represent themselves on social media?. The textual representation is less complex and more direct than the visual one. What emerged from the captions of the posts is very often direct communication with the audience, in the attempt to build a profitable relationship. However, another recurring concept that comes across in the text, but is more subtle in the visuals, is the defiant attitude and arrogance that most of these artists use to depict themselves. Showing off, feeling the best and unattainable. The textual representation also shows a tough and explicit language, very similar to that used in hip-hop music.

The third sub-question compares male and female hip-hop artists, asking (c) To what extent does the branding strategy of male and female hip-hop artists differ?. The results of the research do not show many differences, but they show one main discrepancy in the representation of body and sexuality for male and female artists, asserting as mentioned by Hunter and Cuenca (2017) and Mendoza (2022). In fact, the analysis proofs that female artists do use their body much more and to construct their image, making it

available to the audience. In the male dataset, instead, this trait is almost inexistent. What emerges upon a reflection on the results is that women seem to have embraced this depiction of them, instead of contrasting it, in order to reclaim their sexual independence and power on their body. However, in some cases, the hyper-sexualization on them is so strong that it looks like they are succumbing under their own weapons, rather than proving their feminist beliefs.

How do male and female hip-hop artists build their branding strategy and represent themselves on social media? To provide a comprehensive answer, we argue that the branding strategy of hip-hop artists is influenced by the hip-hop culture itself. They act, talk, dress exactly how they are expected to. Wealth, arrogance, defiant attitude are all recurring themes in the hip-hop genre, and are all present in the results. At the same time, sexuality is a theme that belongs much more to women rather than men in hip-hop and this is reflected in the analysis. What this may imply is that these artists represent themselves in a way that make them feel and, above all, legitimize to do what they are doing in the hip-hop industry.

5.2 Theoretical and societal implications

This research holds academic relevance as it provides a contribution to the lack of academic research on personal branding of hip-hop artists. With research being limited on the topic of personal branding as a marketing tool applied to the music industry, this study lays the basis for further research. Unlike other studies that focused exclusively on the marketing side of the question (Meier, 2017; O'Reilly, 2013), or other research that are more concerned with the cases of specific artists (Pope, 2016; Hunter & Cuenca, 2017; Lieb, 2018), this study brings together these elements looking at the matter from a more general point of view. It offers findings that are not necessarily limited to the cases of the artists taken in consideration, but which can be, up to a certain extent, extended to other cases. In this way, the research provides results that can be used in other studies and contexts, making it rather versatile. At the same time, as it looks specifically to the hip-hop industry, the research also offer a basis for other studies and scholar, who have interest in the matter, to draw from.

Regarding the societal implications, the study allows to comprehend better the process of self-branding for music artists and how gender may influence it. This topic becomes particularly relevant when looking at the increasing discussion gender related

issues have caused not only among scholars, but in the society in general. On top of that, the study may be relevant to anyone interested on personal branding, who might be any expert operating in the music panorama or even anybody from different industries who wants to develop or simply learn more about personal branding strategy.

5.3 Limitations and further research

This research, as any other, has to take into account some limitations. One of these concerns the size of the study. The limited size dictated a choice between the number of artists and the number of posts to be considered in the analysis. In order to guarantee more diversity, it was chosen to look at a larger number of artists considering less posts for each of them. However, for the future, it would be valuable to realize a study on a larger sample. This would allow more heterogeneity and new interesting findings.

A second limitation of the study is represented by the decision of taking in analysis exclusively Instagram posts. As hip-hop music is highly linked with authenticity and the depiction artists give of their own reality, the research would have been more complete with an analysis of music videos and lyrics. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include these elements in the dataset as it would have represented a substantial and challenging workload. However, in case future research allows it, it would certainly be interesting to see how the artists' production complements, or contradicts, the image they portray through social media.

A further limitation is represented by the fact that the artists considered in this study are mostly Americans or English-speaking only. This choice was made, first of all, for the popularity and the relevance the United States hold for hip-hop culture, but also because comparing artists from very different cultures may have represented a bias in the research. However, this limitation lays interesting grounds for future studies, which may look at other cultures or even realize a comparative research on artists from different backgrounds. In addition to this, academic literature was sometimes limited and hard to find, proving the necessity for more attention from academia on the topic. However, despite some limitations, this study represents a valuable contribution to fill the academic gap, laying the ground for future research, as well as valuable insights on the social implications that influence the branding process of hip-hop artists.

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Appendix

Appendix A

List of artists' names

	MALE ARTISTS		FEMALE ARTISTS
1)	Drake	1)	Megan Thee Stallion
2)	Lil Nas X	2)	Lizzo
3)	Kid Cudi	3)	Nicki Minaj
4)	Tyler, the Creator	4)	Cardi B
5)	Lil Baby	5)	Doja Cat
6)	Jack Harlow	6)	Sampa the Great
7)	Aminé	7)	Little Simz
8)	JPEGMafia	8)	Saweetie
9)	Travis Scott	9)	Tierra Whack
10)	Tory Lanez	10)	CHIKA
11)	BAS	11)	Princess Nokia
12)	Yung Gravy	12)	Junglepussy
13)	Rich Brian	13)	Ashnikko
14)	TOBi	14)	Latto
15)	Post Malone	15)	B.I.A
16)	A Boogie wit da Hoodie	16)	Teyana Taylor
17)	6in9ine	17)	Stefflondon

Appendix B

Example of table used for the visual critical discourse analysis

Table for Visual Analysis (n)

	Denotation	Connotation
General (the image as a whole)		
Objects (every object in the picture)		
Setting (background information)		
Salience (what calls your attention in terms of colour, tone, foregrounding, size, focus, overlapping, cultural symbols)		

Appendix C

Coding tree of the thematic analysis

Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
Hip-Hop Stereotypes: The Rapper 101	Materialism and Flex culture Body and sexualization	wealth – luxury – showing off – ostentation provocative – sensual poses – showing off body – explicit
The Alternative Rapper	Distinctive Style Funny and Humor Challenging Gender Norms	recognizable – unique – signature style weird – random – irony masculinity – femininity – provocative
The (Body) Language of Hip-Hop	The Rapper's Vocabulary Confidence and defiant attitude Connecting with the Fans	slang – explicit – derogatory language arrogance – better than you attitude – defiance personal moments – direct communication – relatable
Realness and Authenticity for the Sake of Hip-Hop Credibility	The Hustle to Make it Roots and Heritage	studio – stage – performance – made it attitude – determination symbols – personal background – culture

Appendix D

Posts mentioned in the text, examples

n.	Post
1	<p data-bbox="491 376 837 405">lilbaby</p>  <p data-bbox="491 808 837 837">Liked by killermvmy and others</p> <p data-bbox="491 862 837 904">lilbaby I've Been Getting Richer An Richer My Whole Career 🍀</p>
2	<p data-bbox="491 920 837 949">theestallion</p>  <p data-bbox="491 1451 837 1480">Liked by lorenzoposocco and others</p> <p data-bbox="491 1505 837 1570">theestallion Im in love with yellow diamonds , that's how I've been building my set up lately 💛 all custom just for me 😁 outfit @fashionnova</p>

3

 iamcardib








Liked by lilnasx and others

iamcardib Hard like candy 🍬

4

 dojacat








Liked by manuu0_o and others

dojacat Don't make me cause a scene baby lol 🤪🤪

5

 princessnokia
Fairy Trails









Liked by macklemore and others

princessnokia The witch of your dreams 🧙‍♀️🌟

6

brianmanuel



Liked by qhadafia_ and others
brianmanuel trying 2 find myself..

7

brianmanuel



Liked by abcdhee_ and others
brianmanuel feeling #flexible!

8

dojacat



Liked by mariamhassany and others

9



Liked by kierasmls and others
 chikalogy the best part of a diet is choosing not to participate. 🙏

10



Liked by _dr_woo_ and others
 kidcudi I usually don't do this but I felt sexy and I wanna start the New Year off right 🥰👉❤️ can I have my moment please?

11



Liked by mahdiyya_sarah and others
 lizzobeating Aye remember that day I was the finest bitch in the universe no filter just bad bitchtune ...?!?! face card on unlimited !!!!!

12



Liked by [j0shua.gram](#) and [others](#)
saweetie pretty b*tch trip.

13



Liked by [marcoooo_polo](#) and [others](#)
nickiminaj 🗨️ I'm bout to make you regret you chose me as an enemy btch #WeGoUpVIDEO OUT NOW 📺
#FendiFur #BalenciagaShades
#VersaceMedusaChainSandals

14



Liked by [alishadg22](#) and [others](#)
yunggravy all my hoes handpicked with a sense of poise and rationality

15



Liked by [trinitumtum](#) and [others](#)
[junglepussy](#) this coochie not ur commodity

16



Liked by [trinitumtum](#) and [others](#)
[junglepussy](#) this coochie not ur commodity

17



Liked by [_oerin_](#) and [others](#)
[latto777](#) I will put u out hoe u must think u Latto 😏

18



Liked by [its.priscilla](#) and others
nickiminaj I got da 🍷 lil bitch u just da 🏃 runner 🏆
#WholeLottaMoneyREMIX w/@bia OUT NOW 🎉🎉
👉👉 #FoundThesePicsInTheArchives ❤️
#StyledByOnika #HairByTae #PhotoByTae

19



Liked by [vanessahong](#) and others
champagnepapi You can have your 15 minutes of fame...I'll take the other 23 hours and 45 mins

20



Liked by [divin333gbo](#) and others
junglepussy they cant entangle wit me 🍷

21

saweeie 
 Somewhere You Not



Liked by **braidg08** and **others**
saweeie face card solid

22

ashnikko 
 Life is Beautiful Festival



Liked by **innnnnnsa** and **others**
ashnikko vegas

23

yunggravy 
 Minneapolis, Minnesota



Liked by **sydney.doe** and **others**
yunggravy whoopsie daisy

24

aboogievartist



Liked by [darianasantana1590](#) and others
aboogievartist S.o to all the superstars

25

littlesimz



Liked by [dazed](#) and others
littlesimz Have a wicked week

26

amine
Hogwarts



Liked by [ph1boyyy](#) and others
amine name this hairdo (be rude)

27

 nickiminaj



Liked by [angel_dengle254](#) and others

nickiminaj | sprinkle holy water upon the vampire
In this very moment I'm KING
In this very moment I slay Goliath w/ the sling 🇺🇸🇵🇷🇵🇸

28

 iamcardib



Liked by [kimkardashian](#) and others

iamcardib Forever

29

 junglepussey



Liked by [shahd.a.kat](#) and others
junglepussey proud #autizzzy #blacktuallyautistic
#autismawarenessmonth

30

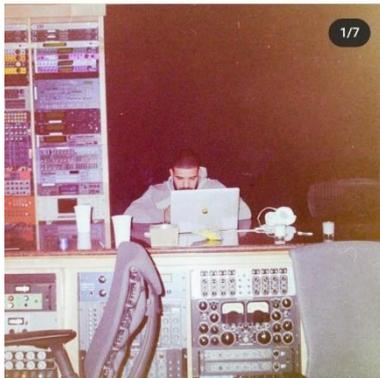
 sampa_the_great
Universe City



Liked by [promise_mikahs_love_](#) and others
sampa_the_great Studio Mode

31

 champagnepapi



Liked by [jakegyllenhaal](#) and others
champagnepapi Some Skudra TBT's
@theo.skudra

32



Liked by **lorenzoposocco** and others
champagnepapi I've seen things that ain't on nobodies vision board or list of goals...I would go more in depth if I wasn't dealing with shallow souls

33



Liked by **nickiminaj** and others
bia I can feel my abundance growing daily
#HAPPYNEWYEAR

34



Liked by **carterfoxwell** and others
bas pray you find a place that grounds you. revisit often.