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The Fusion of Fashion and Rap Music

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Citation

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Abstract

This project reviewed the relevant literature on the link between Hip-Hip and fashion, determined the frequency of brands being mentioned in the discographies of the artists chosen, and explained why it is important to know which brands are being mentioned by the artists chosen. The media we consume all means something, and this project determined what the Hip-hop music medium tells us about the fashion industry, and what brands artists choose to wear and endorse.

Introduction

The first commercial rap song was "Rapper's Delight" by Sugar Hill Gang in 1979. It peaked at #36 on the Billboard Hot 100, and is certified Double Platinum. This song spawned an entirely new genre of music that began to takeover at a rapid pace. As more artists from different parts of the country became active, rap became a more diverse and accessible genre. Soon, every region had its own group of representatives. Today, rap music has risen to the upper echelon of mainstream media, and is now the 4th most popular genre in the world (Herman, 2019).

During this 41-year period, rap music has rooted itself into the fashion industry. Today, every mainstream artist has a merchandise rollout to accompany album releases and concert tours. Many have collaborated with fashion brands, and some have been given their own lines. Kanye West is the best example; after leaving Nike for Adidas, he created the Yeezy brand, with a shoe that sold out in under a minute upon release. Drake had a deal with the Jordan Brand, evidenced by his "OVO (October's Very Own)" shoe colorway. A$AP Rocky has collaborated with Christian Dior, and Gucci Mane has a long overdue partnership with Gucci. It is imperative to learn why these things happen so that it will be easier to predict future trends, and better understand where cultural shifts originate. The influence of rap music has risen to the level that rappers can create trends just by being seen wearing clothes. Understanding the methods through which they have achieved this status will allow a better understanding of the changes happening in the fashion industry.

It is apparent that brand mentions are frequent in rap music, and that materialism is a staple in the content of the genre. What is more difficult to pinpoint is which brands are the most popular in the genre, and which artists mention them the most. Any combination of artists studied could yield a different result, and there is no way to make a completely accurate list of most popular brands without gathering data from every rapper in existence. For the purpose of

this study, the lyrics of four artists were studied. From these results, inferences can be made about what brands are mentioned and why.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to determine how often rap artists mentioned apparel and/or brands in their music. Anyone who has listened to rap music for a substantial period of time will notice a consistent trend in the music: materialism. A staple of rap music is telling listeners what artists own, primarily cars, houses, and clothing. The results of this study showed the frequency with which fashion brands were mentioned in music. This research is significant because it demonstrates that rap music is an alternative form of advertising for fashion brands. The research questions were as follows: (1) What brands are most popular among the rappers selected?; (2) How often do the rappers selected mention fashion brands in relevance to each other?; (3) What factors contribute to the frequency of mentions in songs?

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Literature Review

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In its early days(late 1970s-early 1980s), many figures from different walks of life came together to attach rap music to the fashion industry, and today the influence of rap can be seen in the high fashion world. In the 1980s, two distinct concurrent events kicked off the fusion of fashion and rap music.

Dapper Dan, born Daniel Day, was a prominent figure in the Harlem fashion scene. He made waves by opening a shop that created counterfeits of prominent fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton, Fendi, and Gucci. Dapper Dan would work with several musicians, including Big Daddy Kane, Bobby Brown, Eric B. and Rakim, LL Cool J, and Salt 'N Pepa (Cooper, 2017). His first store, Dapper Dan's Boutique, operated from 1982-1992. Mike Tyson, a client of Dan's, engaged in a brief fistfight with Mitch Greene, another boxer, outside the store. This drew widespread media attention. Soon after, the store met its demise at the hands of a lawsuit from

Fendi, facilitated by Sonia Sotomayor (Tfl, 2019). As a result, Dan continued his business underground, out of the public eye. Interestingly, he has opened a new store called Dapper Dan of Harlem, where he continues to make his signature pieces with raw materials supplied by Gucci as part of a legitimate collaborative deal. The collaboration came about when Gucci was called out by Diane Dixon (a former Team USA gold medalist track and field athlete and client of Dapper Dan's) for using one of Dan's designs to create a jacket without crediting him in 2017 (Houghton, 2018).

When the rap group Run DMC released the song "My Adidas" in 1986, the first high profile event of rap and fashion's fusion came to light. The song completely revived a line of shoes called the "Superstar." Angelo Anastasio, the Marketing Director for Adidas during the 1980s, stated "The Superstar shoe was dead, and Run DMC singlehandedly brought that shoe back." (Thomas , 2015, par. 5). Darryl "DMC" McDaniels also commented:

> "We went to Detroit in 1983. We had never been there. The whole city was wearing Adidas. "We were looking out the tour bus window, everybody had on Adidas. We went to Georgia—everybody was rocking Adidas. We went to Boston, South Carolina, North Carolina, Chicago—everybody started rocking Adidas because of us." (para 6).

During the Run DMC concert at Madison Square Garden in New York City, they told the crowd to hold up their Adidas, resulting in "thousands" of Adidas Superstar shoes being hoisted in the air. These events, combined with the influence of Dapper Dan, began a movement that caused the rap and fashion industries to coalesce.

While Dapper Dan and Run DMC may have started the fusion of fashion and rap, a more recent artist has begun to exponentially speed progress. Keana Alden stated: "From 1892-2012,

Vogue magazine produced 1,416 issues, fourteen of which had a person of color gracing the cover" (Alden, 2019, pg. 110). This fact signifies that people of color, let alone rap artists, were being ignored by the most popular fashion magazine. A$AP Rocky, by being featured in multiple Dior advertising campaigns, has created a space for rap artists to work with fashion brands. In the short time since 2012, there has not only been a significant increase in collaborations between fashion brands and rappers, but also with people of color in general. Rocky's involvement in high fashion signifies that mainstream culture has become increasingly more "black", and is making subtle progress to normalize blackness (Alden, 2019). The Hip-Hop subculture has gained traction in mainstream media, and respect has been earned for the culture it represents. However, the community that A$AP Rocky represents does not necessarily benefit from this change in tangible ways on a micro level. in the South Bronx (the birthplace of hip hop), 40% of the residents currently live below the poverty line and will likely never own a Dior product (Alden, 2019). This reality brings up the question of who benefits from this cultural shift, and what it means for the members of the hip-hop culture.

Consumers respond positively to the products their favorite artists, athletes, and celebrities are seen using (Fields, 2014). Consequently, advertisers and brands began to realize the marketing value of celebrities and rappers specifically. Most of the time, rappers advertise products for free. As a result, the company receives a quantifiable benefit in sales and/or recognition, and then the company offers the rapper a formal endorsement deal. Rappers may endorse the products for free either because of legitimate fondness for the products, or an intentional maneuver to gain sponsorship. Rap artists' emergence into mainstream success has forced marketing executives to be more creative with how they craft brand image. As a result, the music video became a secret weapon of marketing strategy. This is because young consumers spend little time consciously

deciphering the messages conveyed in commercials, making them an inefficient use of resources. Music videos, however, are played over and over on networks like MTV and BET, putting the products right in the faces of the target audience. Sprite is a company who was able to tap into the market of young people by utilizing the Hip Hop culture. When Sergio Zyman developed the slogan "Image is nothing. Thirst is everything. Obey your thirst.", and recruited rappers Heavy D and Curtis Blow, the company went from an indistinguishable clear soda to a highly recognizable brand that is a favorite among youth (Fields, 2014). The song, "Pass the Courvoisier" by rapper Busta Rhymes was released in 2001 without any form of indorsement from Allied Domecq, the company responsible for the alcohol.

>"The song's main chorus line contains the word "Courvoisier" and was played 97,000 times on radio stations across the country. There was also a video to accompany the song which aired on hit networks BET and MTV a total of 600 times. In the video, both Busta Rhymes and rapper P. Diddy can be found drinking the cognac, dancing with provocative women, and socializing at large scale parties. Stephanie DeBartolomeo, the brand manager for Courvoisier expressed her gratitude for the free advertising when U.S. sales for the beverage climbed to double digits immediately after the song's release" (Fields, 2014, pg. 23).

A similar effect could be seen with celebrities' endorsements of fragrances (the effect being that people are influenced to buy products that their favorite artists endorse). Researchers saw that the image of the artist or celebrity used to promote the fragrance directly impacted its sales. P. Diddy, mentioned earlier, was selected to be the face of the Estee Lauder fragrance "Unforgivable", which was highly profitable. Once artists began to show themselves as alternative

branding options, fashion companies began to draw influence from the Hip-hop Culture in order to communicate a sense of inclusiveness to members of that community.

Two researchers found an intriguing correlation between rap and fashion. Bug and Dao used the Top 5 Billboard songs that had music videos from the years 2015, 2016, and 2017 as the subject of their research. From this research, they wished to determine (1) How many music videos featured recognizable fashion brands and products being displayed; (2) How many articles about those products were written; (3) How many different outfits were featured in the videos; (4) If there was a correlation between the number of outfits shown in videos and the number of articles written about said videos pertaining to the outfits that were shown; (5) The amount of lines in the songs that mentioned fashion brands, and; (6) All of these instances in the videos of Kanye West, A$AP Rocky, and Travis Scott specifically. The results of the study were that the average number of brands shown in the videos were 1 in 2015, 0.6 in 2016, and 1.2 brands in 2017. Kanye West and A$AP Rocky had an average of 1.3 recognizable brands per video, and Travis Scott averaged 3 brands per video, more than double that of any other category (Bug & Dao, 2019).

The average number of fashion related song lines per video was 0.2 in 2015, 1.0 in 2016, and 2.6 lines in 2017. It can be noted that the amount of fashion brands mentioned in song lines per video has increased significantly in the three years studied. As for the artists, Kanye West had the highest with 4 brand mentions per video, A$AP Rocky and Travis Scott both averaged 3 brands mentioned per video (Bug & Dao, 2019). The average number of outfits per video were 2.8 in 2015, 3 in 2016, and 5 in 2017. The average number of outfits per video for the artists were 1.67 for Kanye West, 5 for A$AP Rocky, and 7 for Travis Scott (Bug & Dao, 2019). The next metric was the average number of articles written about the fashion items featured in the music videos, with 1.8 in 2015, 2.2 in 2016, and 2 in 2017. For the artists, it was 2.3 for A$AP Rocky, 3.3 for

Travis Scott, and 9.7 for Kanye West. The authors went over all eligible songs used in the study and determined that the correlation between outfits per video and articles written about outfits in videos was inverted. The less outfits there were, the more articles were written about said outfits. The authors inferred that having a higher number of outfits makes each one of them less distinct, and less likely to be written about. In summary, the authors found that over time, brands were mentioned more often in songs, the amount of brands featured in videos was relatively constant, the amount of outfits featured had a negative correlation to the amount of articles written about them, and that Travis Scott featured the most outfits in his videos out of the artists studied.

Genius is a website designed to record and decipher the lyrics of musical artists. It also has a media branch that allows artists to come on the YouTube show and explain their lyrics themselves. The author takes research gathered by the lyrical analysis website to roughly determine which designers were most popular among rappers. The data was gathered from rap songs released in the years 2000-2015. A notable limitation was that multiple mentions of the same brand in one song do not count (contrasted to the proposed research, where those mentions WILL count. This was done to give a more complete picture to how prevalent mentions are and better illustrate the popularity of the top brands in relevance to the others). The findings of this research were as follows (the unit of measurement being word frequency): 1. Gucci (0.01987) 2. Versace (0.00708) 3. Prada (0.00351) 4. Chanel (0.00206) 5. Louis Vuitton (0.00206) 6. Fendi (0.00149) 7. Dior (0.00114) 8. Givenchy (0.00099) 9. Ralph Lauren (0.00083) 10. YSL (Saint Laurent) (0.00076). The difference in word frequency between Gucci and all other competitors is significant, and the difference between Versace and Prada is also notable. The article also created a list of brands and the year they reached their peak in terms of lyrical mentions:

Brand/Designer	Year
Manolo Blahnik	2000
Moschino	2001
Prada, Karl Lagerfeld	2002
Burberry	2003
Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, Pucci	2006
Gucci, Dior, Ralph Lauren, Mulberry, John Galliano, Phoebe Philo	2008
Fendi, Lanvin, Vivienne Westwood	2009
Christian Louboutin, Marc Jacobs, Valentino, Isabel Marant, Rick Owens, Jeremy Scott, Missoni, Betsy Johnson, Hermes	2010
Versace, Tom Ford, Hedi Slimane, Michael Kors	2011
Yves Saint Laurent, Michael Kors	2014
Chanel, Givenchy, Balmain, Margiela, Alexander McQueen, Phillip Lim, Diane von Furstenberg	2015

The core group of brands mentioned changes completely in the time frame studied. The top designers transition from Louis Vuitton, Dior, and Ralph Lauren in the 2000s to Marc Jacobs, Valentino and Rick Owens in the 2010s, with Chanel, Balmain, and Margiela today (Gayomali, 2017).

Many rap fans could think of notable lyrics that reference fashion brands that they are familiar with. A similar theme is explored here, where a journalist denotes 5 times brands were mentioned in notable songs from rappers. There does not seem to be criteria for the songs chosen, it appears they were just the author's favorites. The first quote comes from A$AP Rocky in the song "Fashion Killa", where he says "Rocking, rolling, swagging to the max/ My b**** a fashion killa, she be busy popping tags/ She got a lotta Prada, that Dolce & Gabbana/ I can't forget Escada, and that Balenciaga." In this quote alone, there are 4 brands mentioned. The second quote comes from Kanye West in his song "The Glory", where he states, "My hat, my shoes, my coat Louis Vuitton stitch with Donatella Versace, that's Louis Vuitton's b****." Kanye West and A$AP Rocky are both well known for their fondness of high fashion brands, and these quotes are great examples of that. The third quote comes from the song "Versace" by Migos featuring Drake. The entire song is a tribute to the brand, and the quote in question reads ""Versace, Versace, we stay in the mansion when we in Miami/ The pillows Versace, the sheets are Versace, I just won a Grammy." The fourth quote on the list is from the song "Thought it was a Drought" by Future. In this song, the hook goes ""I just f***** your b**** in some Gucci flip-flops". This song contributed heavily to the increased frequency of mentions of Gucci, as well as the popularity of the Gucci flip flop product. The last quote comes from Schoolboy Q's "Gangsta in Designer", where he raps "Always rocking s*** I never seen or I never known/ Name grown overseas, fitter Sergio Tacchini shirt, real creeper slippers YSL see the logo on my zipper". In

this quote, Schoolboy Q mentions that he wears brands he knows little about, including Sergio Tacchini, which is a lesser known luxury fashion house. (Saunders, 2016).

Many rappers have been recruited to appear in ad campaigns and collaborate in creative capacities as well. Kanye West worked on an ad campaign for Balmain that was centered around his song titled "Wolves". Kanye West and A$AP Rocky frequently collaborate with brands such as Alexander Wang, Balmain, Dior Homme, and J.W. Anderson. The origins of these partnerships can be traced back to Dapper Dan. Dapper Dan states that "We weren't getting the recognition from these stores, so I decided to expand on what they were doing. They saw rap music and saw people who were part of the rap culture as negative for their brands." (Sanchez, 2016, par. 6). Rachel Johnson, a stylist that frequently works with rappers, had issues when trying to collaborate with Burberry. She claimed that "I started putting him in Burberry and this whole Burberry craze happened. Kids started wearing it. This love for Burberry emerged in urban communities, so I thought that Burberry would want to start working with me [and Ja Rule] in a more official capacity. That was not the case." (Sanchez, 2016). Both Dapper Dan and Rachel Wood agreed that Pharrell Williams was instrumental in earning more respect for rappers. ""It's crazy, because the same [fashion] houses that would say no, never said no to Pharrell—ever," adds Johnson, who styled Pharrell in the mid-2000s. "Fashion loved him. There was something about his appeal and his ability to cross over. It opened up the gates for Kanye and A$AP [Rocky]."" (Sanchez, 2016).

The articles included were chosen because of their relevance to the research topic. They explain background information on the culture of rap music, and explain the role of important figures in the culture. From a cultural perspective, mentioning high fashion brands do not

necessarily benefit the culture these artists represent, meaning fans of the artists and people from the neighborhoods in which artists were reared. The use of the music video as a marketing tool was a modern adaptation on the part of advertisers to reach a specific customer base. Over time, brands began to acknowledge the marketing capabilities of endorsing rap artists, which heavily impacted the frequency of collaborations between companies and artists.

This research sought to show which brands were most popular among the artists selected. A top 10 was created to illustrate the brands that were most favored by the artists. The results also showed which artists mention brands the most. In contrast, the research focuses more on the brands being mentioned than the working relationships artists have with said brands.

Methods

A content analysis was conducted on the discographies of Kanye West, A$AP Rocky, Lil Uzi Vert, and Playboi Carti. This entailed evaluating the lyrics of every song in the artists' discography to find how many times brands are mentioned. Next, a calculation was performed to determine how many times brands are mentioned per song, followed by a calculation of the average mentions per song on each album. The research concluded with a determination of which brands are mentioned the most by this group of artists. The artists were selected because of their impact on the current trends of rap, their involvement in the fashion industry, and their tendencies to mention fashion brands in their music. In addition, how the frequency of brand mentions changes over the course of an artist's career were highlighted. The criteria for the selection of these artists was as follows:

- Artists who have been featured in promotional material for a fashion brand
- Artists who have been the subject of an article in a fashion magazine

- Artists who have participated in a fashion show

- Artists who have collaborated with a fashion brand to create a line of clothing

- Artists who would be classified primarily as rappers

In this project, the music used was strictly rap, all other genres were excluded. Only the artists mentioned in objective one were subject to a full discography review.

Data Analysis

Of the data collected, the goal was to find how many brands were mentioned, how many times, which brands were most popular among the discographies reviewed, and how the frequency of mentions per artist changed over time.

Results

In this section, the results of the content analysis are illustrated in the form of graphs, and the results are expanded upon. Each graph includes an explanation of the data presented.

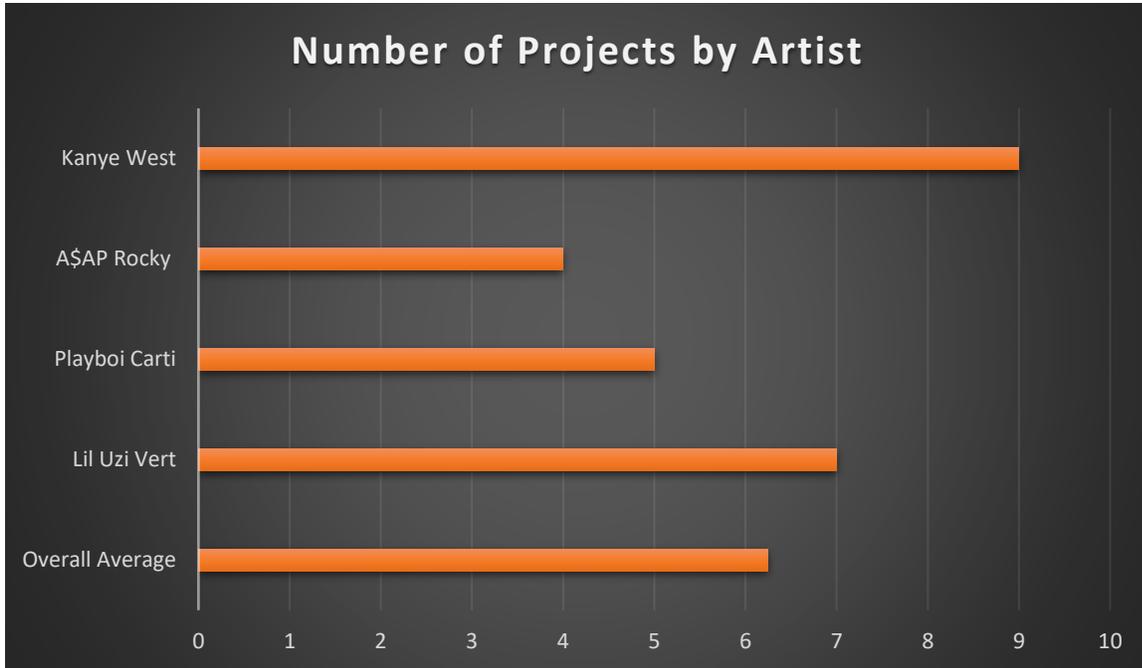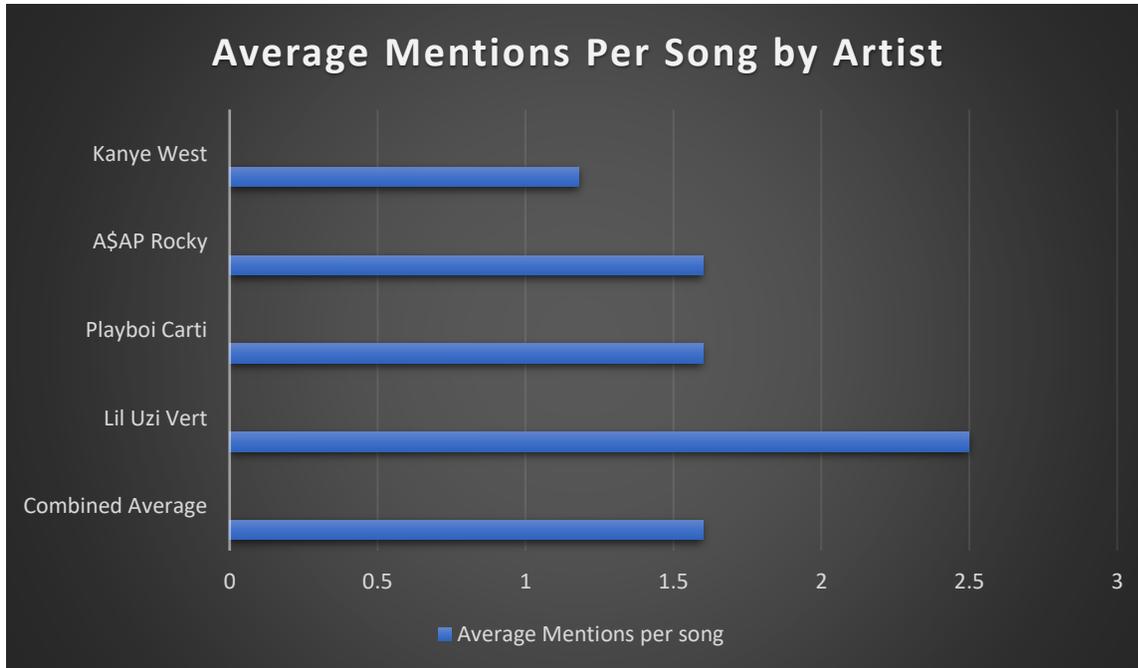**Figure 1**

Number of Projects by Artist

Figure 1 illustrates how many projects each artist has released, and the average number of projects released from the group. This can be used to infer the impact on number of references per artist by comparing the relative size of each artists' respective discography.
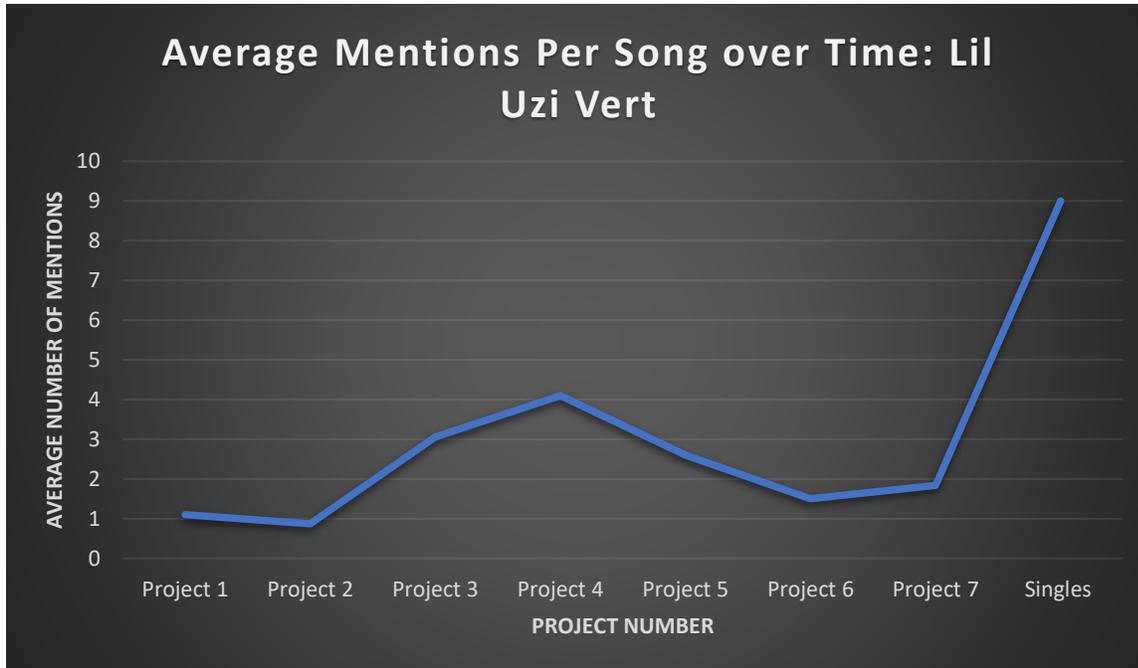
Figure 2

Average Mentions Per Song by Artist

The results of the content analysis demonstrate that every artist has a brand frequency mention of at least 1.1 mentions per song. The combined average of all artists is 1.6 mentions per song, and there are no albums that are completely without any mentions (however there is an album with only one mention). While there are many songs without any references, there is one song with 33 references, and two songs with 27 references. The artist with the highest average is Lil Uzi Vert, at 2.5 references per song. The lowest average belongs to Kanye West with 1.18 mentions per song. Playboi Carti and A$AP Rocky both had an average of 1.6 mentions per song.
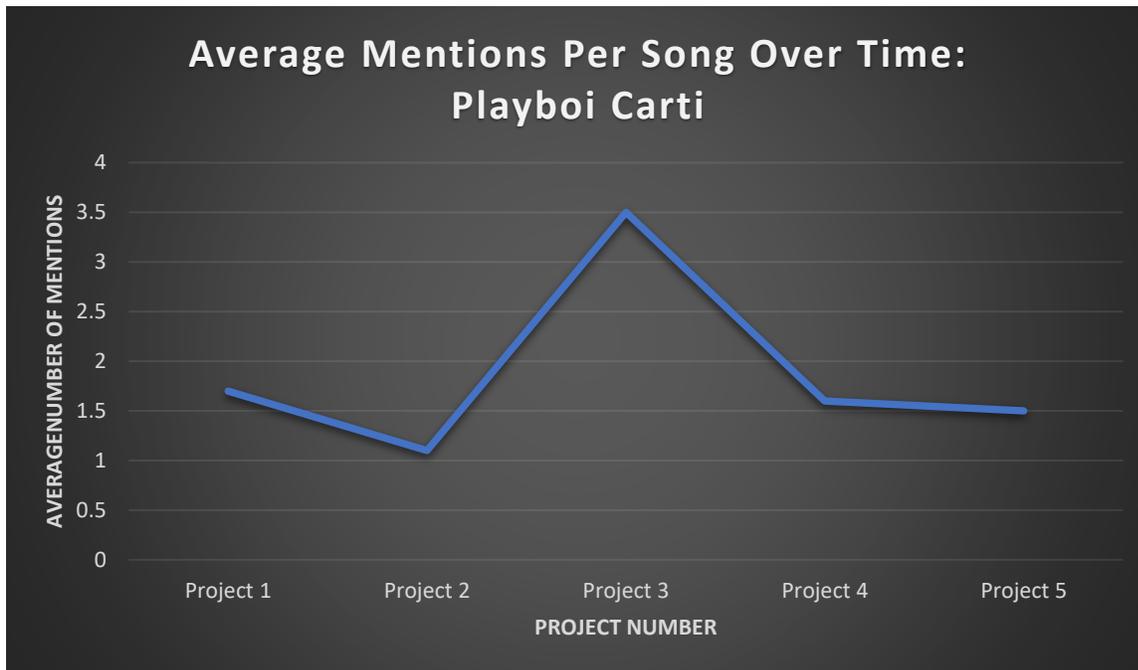
Figure 3

Average Mentions Per Song Over Time: Lil Uzi Vert

The focus of Figure 3 is the average number of brand mentions per song for each of the projects in which the songs were featured. A project was defined as an album, official mixtape, or EP released by an artist. The "Singles" category was used to include individual songs that have been officially released but were not apart of any official project. In Figure 3, we see that over time the number of mentions per song by Lil Uzi Vert remains relatively the same in the first two projects, increases significantly by the fourth project, drops to its lowest point since the second project in project #6, increases slightly in the seventh, and skyrockets in the singles category.
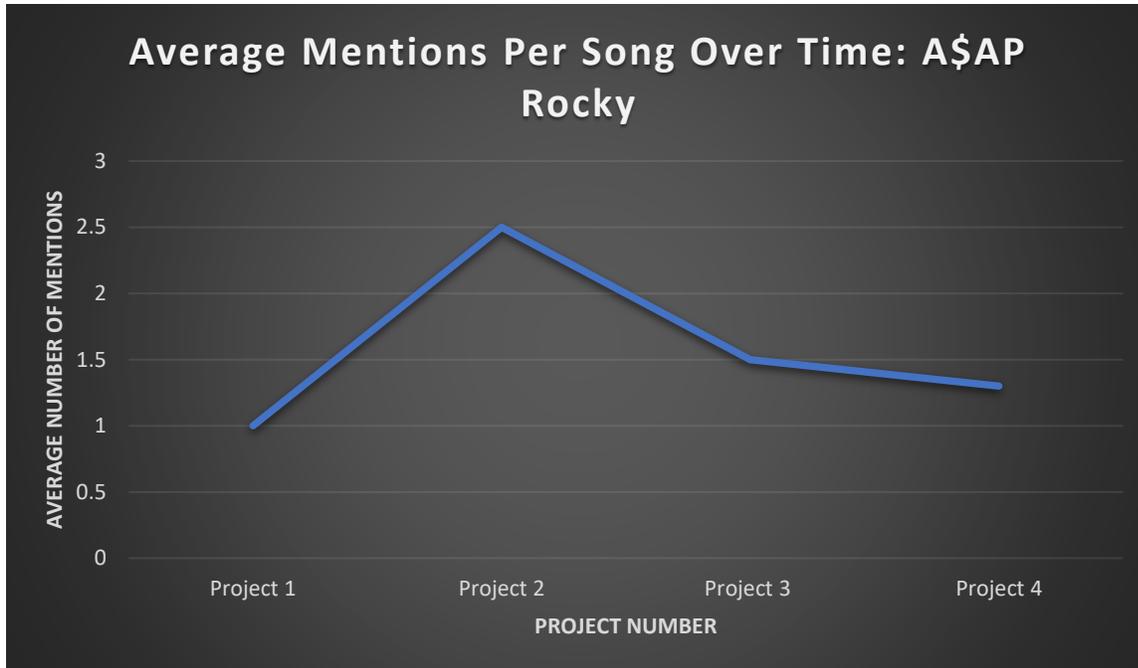
Figure 4

Average Mentions Per Song Over Time: Playboi Carti

In Figure 4, we see that Playboi Carti starts around 1.7, dips to 1.1, skyrockets to 3.5 mentions, leading to his two official albums staying around 1.5 mentions per song. The large peak is due to the fact that Playboi Carti's third project, *Death In Tune,* only has two songs and seven references between them which led to a high average.
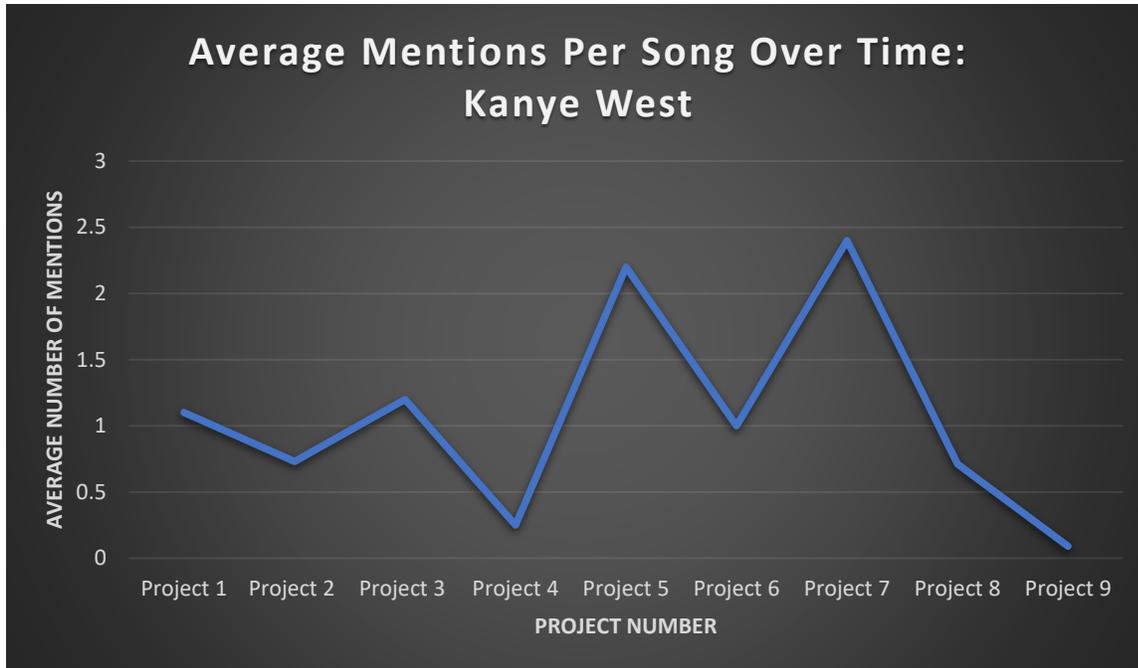
Figure 5

Average Mentions Per Song Over Time: A$AP Rocky

As seen in Figure 5, A$AP Rocky starts his first project with an average of 1.0 mentions per song, peaks with 2.5 mentions per song in his second album, drops to 1.5 mentions per song, then ends at 1.3 mentions per song. The reason for the decline in the last two projects is a significant change in subject matter. His third project, "AT.LONG.LAST.A$AP", was dedicated to Rocky's recently deceased friend A$AP Yams. As a result, the project is less about what he owns and more about his life and his relationships. His fourth album, "Testing", is also less about ownership and continues to talk about A$AP's life experiences, as well as his views on family dynamics, romantic relationships, and the like. Essentially, the back half of his discography is about creating a sense of normalcy in the midst of fame.

Figure 6

Average Mentions Per Song Over Time: Kanye West

In Figure 6, the trajectory of Kanye West's mention frequency visually fluctuates at a much higher rate than any other artist included. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that Kanye West has a larger discography than the other artists. Another reason is that West's personal life has a larger impact on his content than the other artists. His fourth project, *808's and Heartbreak,* was written in response to the relationship with his then fiancé breaking down due to her unhappiness and infidelity. That album only has three mentions to fashion brands as a result. The eighth and ninth projects, *Ye* and *Jesus is King,* respectively, best signify the drastic shift in priorities Kanye West experiences. In the album *Ye,* he talks about his struggles with mental health, his marriage, and the world his children are growing up in. *Jesus is King* is his attempt at creating a gospel album, which leaves little to no room for materialism.
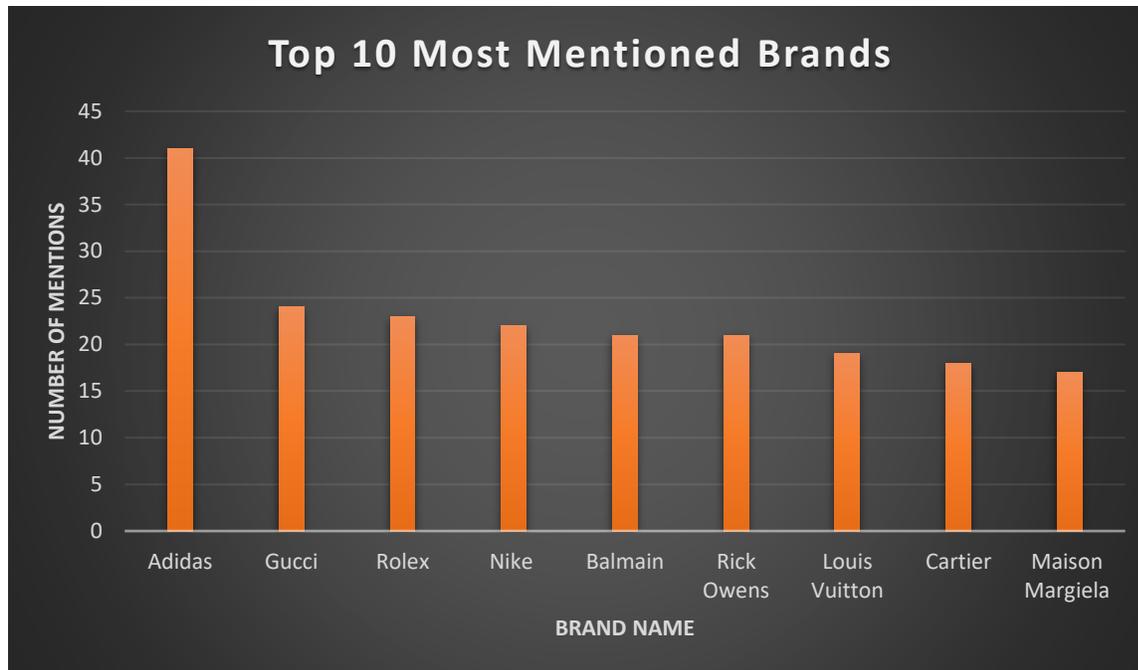
Figure 7

Top 10 Most Mentioned Brands

Figure 7 shows that Adidas is the most mentioned brand. Gucci is second, followed by

Rolex, Nike, Balmain, Rick Owens, Louis Vuitton, Cartier, and Maison Margiela. The results of

these graphs represent only the top brands among the four artists selected, and cannot be used to

make any inferences about the entire genre. The prevalence of Adidas can be attributed almost

solely to Kanye West. In one song alone, West mentions Adidas products twenty-four times. The

song *Facts,* featured in the album *The Life Of Pablo,* is a celebration of the Kanye West designed

Yeezy brand, launched under Adidas. He also uses it to insult his former employer, Nike. This

song is an outlier due to the high number of mentions it contributes to the list. If the data from

the song *Facts* were to be thrown out, it would drop Adidas to tenth on the list of the top 10

brands mentioned. Gucci, in second place was a group effort between artists, and the same can

be said about Rolex, Nike, and Balmain. These brands were among the most popular in the

world, and they all would have been higher if it wasn't for Adidas, who benefited from employing Kanye West. Rick Owens' placing can be attributed to his popularity among Playboi Carti, Lil Uzi Vert, and A$AP Rocky. Louis Vuitton had a heavy cosign from Kanye West early in his career, and even referred to himself as "The Louis Vuitton Don". Most rappers are fond of Louis Vuitton, especially the scarfs and bags. Cartier and Maison Margiela were surprising entries into the top 10, over brands like Prada, Yves Saint Laurent, and Christian Dior. However, A$AP Rocky is notably fond of Maison Margiela.

Conclusion

A$AP Rocky and Kanye West were the artists most frequently mentioned in almost all of the literature, but ended up having the lowest average mentions per song out of the four artists selected. Much of this is because these two artists have been active for a considerably longer time than the other two artists.

The top 10 brands were surprising because they were not all the first brands that come to mind. The literature created an expectation that luxury fashion brands would dominate the top 10, and that brands like Nike and Adidas would not have made the list. The materialistic themes that are prevalent in rap music would suggest that more expensive brands would receive more references than brands that operate at lower price points.

In addition, the research results show that the preferences of the artists are affected by generation and career length. Kanye West is at least 11 years older than all the other artists, and has been active for longer, which impacted the brands he preferred and chose to mention. The research would also suggest that out of the four artists chosen, the two youngest artists (Playboi Carti, 23 years old and Lil Uzi Vert, 25 years old) have a higher average of mentions per song.

The results may indicate that the younger artists are more concerned with clothing brands than are older artists. Also, the artists chosen were the biggest factor in which brands were mentioned. If a different group of artists were selected or included, the results may be much different from what was found here.

It is important to examine the top brands featured in these artists' music because we can understand how far the hip-hop culture has come. Perhaps this research suggests that the high fashion industry is becoming more inclusive. In addition, rap artists could begin to gain access into these spaces. Research like this can also bring light to trends, as well as imminent changes to the fashion industry. As stated earlier, rap is now the 4th largest genre in the world. If most rap artists were to mention brands as frequently as these four artists do, that would be a powerful advertisement tool. The literature established a precedent for the hip-hop community being a potentially lucrative market. It showed that artists have the power to influence consumers, and to glamorize brands in their music. The research tells us that artists have preferences for the brands they choose to mention, and that endorsements can affect the brands that are mentioned. As mentioned before, the group of artists chosen has a significant impact on the top ten brands mentioned, and different groups of artists would most likely yield different top ten results. This tells us that the hip-hop community, like any other large community, is not a monolith. Representation matters, and the breakthrough that rap artists have made in the fashion industry could serve as a motivation for other minorities to continue to work toward achievement in their field.

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