

## THE TRANSPACIFIC GAZE AND PHYSICAL CULTURAL STUDIES: THE CONSUMPTION, EXPERIENCE AND MEANING OF HIP HOP CULTURE AMONG NEW ZEALAND YOUTH

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### **Abstract**

Recent scholarly analysis of hip hop's global popularity has focused on its role in defining and expressing particular forms of identity. However, coinciding with this interest are concerns from both scholars and policy makers about particular aspects of some hip hop which has been described as being: "materialistic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, vulgar and violent" (Chang, 2007: 58). Consequently, public views influenced by the media and politicians have raised concerns and even directed blame at hip hop for social problems such as gangs, negative attitudes towards women and violent crime. Thus we have a globally popular form of physical culture that may be a key part of contemporary youth identity and lifestyles; but which has also been labelled as not only a menace, but a potential threat to society. Rarely are the positives of hip hop recognised, particularly those within youth education programs. This study examines how global/American hip hop culture has manifested itself within New Zealand youth culture, including how it influences appearance, behaviour, physical activity, sport, fashion, consumption and education. The overall research question focuses on how New Zealand youth define, consume and make sense of hip hop culture?

**Key words:** Hip Hop, New Zealand, Physical Culture, Youth, Identity.

## **LA MIRADA TRANS-PACÍFICA Y LOS ESTUDIOS DE LA CULTURA FÍSICA: EL CONSUMO, LA EXPERIENCIA Y EL SIGNIFICADO DE LA CULTURA DEL HIP HOP ENTRE LOS JÓVENES DE NUEVA ZELANDA**

### **Resumen**

Los análisis académicos recientes acerca de la popularidad mundial del hip hop se ha centrado en su papel en la definición y expresión de determinadas formas de identidad. Sin embargo, coincidiendo con este interés son las preocupaciones de los académicos y formuladores de políticas sobre aspectos particulares de algunos de los hip hop que ha sido descrito como: "materialista, misógino, homofóbico, racista, vulgar y violento" (Chang, 2007: 58). En consecuencia, la opinión del público, con la influencia de los medios de comunicación y los políticos, ha expresado su preocupación y la culpa, incluso dirigidos a hip hop para los problemas sociales como las pandillas, las actitudes negativas hacia las mujeres y los delitos violentos. Así pues, tenemos una forma global popular de la cultura física que puede ser una parte fundamental de la identidad de la juventud contemporánea y estilos de vida, pero que también se ha marcado no sólo como una amenaza, sino una amenaza potencial a la sociedad. Rara vez son los aspectos positivos del hip hop reconocidos, en particular aquellos en los programas de educación de la juventud. Este estudio examina cómo la cultura hip hop mundial / América se ha manifestado en la cultura de Nueva Zelanda, los jóvenes, incluida la forma en que influye en la apariencia, el comportamiento, la actividad física, el deporte, la moda, el consumo y la educación. La pregunta general de investigación se centra en: cómo los jóvenes de Nueva Zelanda definir, utilizar y dar sentido a la cultura del hip hop?

**Palabras-clave:** Hip hop; Nueva Zelanda; Cultura Física; Juventud; identidad.

## **O OLHAR TRANS-PACÍFICO E OS ESTUDOS DA CULTURA FÍSICA: CONSUMO, EXPERIÊNCIA E SIGNIFICADO DA CULTURA DO HIP-HOP ENTRE A JUVENTUDE NEOZELANDESA**

### **Resumo**

As recentes análises acadêmicas da popularidade global do hip hop tem focado no seu papel em definir e expressar formas particulares de identidade. Entretanto, coincidindo com esse interesse estão as preocupações tanto de acadêmicos quanto políticos sobre aspectos específicos de alguns hip hop tem sido descritos como sendo: "materialista, misógino, homofóbico, racista, vulgar e violento" (Chang, 2007: 58). Consequentemente, visões públicas influenciadas pela mídia e por políticos tem levantado preocupações e até culpa direta ao hip hop por problemas sociais como gangues, atitudes negativas contra as mulheres e crime violento. Assim, temos uma forma popular global de cultura física que pode ser elemento chave da identidade e estilos de vida dos jovens contemporâneos; mas cada um tem também rotulado não apenas como uma ameaça, mas um potencial perigo para a sociedade. Raramente são os pontos positivos reconhecidos, particularmente aqueles que fazem parte de programas para jovens. Esse estudo examina como a cultura hip hop global/americana tem se manifestado na cultura jovem da Nova Zelândia, incluindo como ela influencia na aparência, comportamento, atividade física, esporte, moda, consumo e educação. A questão mais ampla dessa pesquisa se foca em: como a juventude da Nova Zelândia define, consome e dá sentido a cultura hip hop?

**Palavras-chave:** Hip hop; Nova Zelândia; Cultura Física; Juventude; identidade.

## Introduction

Hip Hop, the latest form of youthful expression by thousands of young people around the world, has evolved over the past twenty years. Once exclusively related to rap music, this form of expression has now become a lifestyle. The influence of Hip Hop can be seen in fashion, electronic design, auto design, movies, music, literary works and hundreds of other mediums in every facet of modern society (Taylor and Taylor, 2007: 210).

Originating in New York, hip hop culture emerged out of a context of neglect and poverty that faced young African-Americans, encompassing issues such as racism and religion (Bennett, 2000). Through a range of factors and global media exposure in particular, hip hop has grown rapidly around the world and is now a prominent part of the lifestyles of many youth, including those in New Zealand. However, while hip hop is clearly a global phenomenon, ultimately it is localised within the many global locals where they be in Europe, Africa, Asia or Latin and South America. As Bennett (2000: 137) notes:

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

Arguably, hip hop is more than just a form of popular culture; it provides the basis of a thriving source of contemporary consumerism. Hip hop is having a significant impact on youth cultures, influencing individual behaviours, fashions, lifestyles and even social policies. As one of the world's most accessible and popular global cultures hip hop has grown to span ethnic, linguistic and cultural boundaries (Motley and Henderson, 2008).

Not surprisingly hip hop has attracted the attention of scholars across the academic spectrum:

Hip hop is being studied all over the globe, and the methodologies of its examination are rightfully all over the map. They are multidisciplinary in edifying exemplary fashion, borrowing from sociology, politics, religion, economics, urban studies, journalism, communications theory, American studies, transatlantic studies, black studies, history, musicology, comparative literature, English linguistics, and many more disciplines (Dyson, 2004: xiv).

In part, scholarly analysis has been driven by hip hop's global popularity, but also by (?) its role in defining and expressing particular forms of identity. However, coinciding with this interest are concerns from both scholars and policy makers about particular aspects of some hip hop which has at times been described as being: "materialistic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, vulgar and violent" (Chang, 2007: 58). Consequently, public views influenced by the media and politicians have raised

concerns and even directed blame at hip hop for social problems such as gangs, negative attitudes towards women and violent crime. Within New Zealand, Māori party co-leader Pita Sharples exemplifies this view blaming hip hop culture for rising violence and drug problems, particularly among urban Māori and Pacific Island communities (Stokes, 2005). However, whether hip hop is the subject of controversy or dismissed as the latest youth trend, according to Waiti (2004: 115), this only fuels the popularity of hip hop among youth: “Writing off hip hop as a fad merely compels young people to embrace it even more”.

Thus we have a globally popular form of physical culture that may be a key part of contemporary youth identity and lifestyles; but which has also been labelled as not only a menace, but a potential threat to society. Rarely are the positives of hip hop recognised, particularly those within youth education programs. These programs aim to utilise young people’s interests in hip hop thereby redirecting them away from undesirable behaviours. Such programs are timely given the decline in physical activity amongst youth in many nations and the search for alternative solutions.

## **Purpose**

This study examines how global/American hip hop culture has manifested itself within New Zealand youth culture, including how it influences appearance, behaviour, physical activity, sport, fashion, consumption and education. The overall research question of the study is: “In the context of globalisation, how do New Zealand youth define, consume and make sense of hip hop culture? The important reasons why New Zealand is a valuable site of analysis include: (1) its remote location in the Southern Hemisphere; (2) the acknowledgement of New Zealand as a multi-cultural nation but one with a unique history of indigenous Māori settlement, and furthermore the apparent links between Polynesian youth culture and American hip hop culture; and (3) New Zealand’s success at 2011 World Hip-Hop Dance Championship in Las Vegas where it won two silver and three gold medals confirming Penrose's Palace Dance Studios as one of the most successful hip-hop dance companies in the world (Sundae, 2011).

## **A brief social history of hip-hop**

There is a general consensus amongst both academic and popular accounts of hip hop that the style originated in the Bronx, New York during the early 1970’s. According to Bennett (2001) this era saw America emerging from a decade of struggle concerning the civil rights movement. For many African Americans the disappointment of the economic and political advances of this movement only enhanced the prominent reality of poverty amongst their communities. The Bronx was a prime representation of this struggle, particularly in its southernmost section. In addition to economic

disparities, the Bronx was surrounded by gang and drug activities. The definition of hip hop remains contested and often the term rap is used interchangeably. However Rose (1994) argues that rap, also known as MCing is an integral part of hip hop culture that consists of break dancing, graffiti art and also DJing, combining to comprise a cultural art form. This commonly adopted definition is recognised by many scholars including Dimitriadis (2001) who believes that hip hop is a situated cultural practise dependent on a series of artistic activities such as dance music and graffiti. However, in today's hip hop culture this definition appears dated as it fails to include the element of fashion, which, according to Waiti (2004), has become a critical element of hip hop.

At this point we turn our attention to locating hip hop within a New Zealand context.

### **Context of hip-hop in New Zealand**

Hip hop initially arrived in New Zealand an American cultural export via mass media. According to Arthur (2006), early versions of New Zealand hip hop were largely imitations of American styles and brands. However, gradually New Zealand hip hop developed its own local sensibility. According to Mitchell (2001) New Zealand-produced hip hop began in 1984 when the Patea Māori Club produced "Poi E" a mix of Māori chanting, poi dancing, rap and break dancing. Mitchell links this local adaptation as an important symbol of identity for Māori youth. He describes the use of the hip hop culture such as break dancing as a means of gaining status and recognition that has previously been denied to Māori people through conventional channels such as school and social position. A second argument recognises the failure of New Zealand media to engage with Māori culture and history. This encouraged Māori to seek other sources and other ways of articulating their identity. A transpacific gaze offered American hip hop as an alternative.

Mitchell (2001), for example, recognised the commonalities shared by New Zealand Māori and African Americans by comparing the political, social, economic and racial struggles they had both faced historically. However, Zemke-White (2004) sees the influence of hip hop on New Zealand differently by stating: "Rap music's presence in Aotearoa could be read as Western cultural hegemony, Americanisation, homogenisation, and yet another episode in a long history of the colonisation of Pacific peoples" (p.209). This clearly indicates the contested nature of hip hop as a form of physical culture between the global and the local.

At present the adaptation of hip hop by Māori and more recently Polynesian musicians in New Zealand has brought a strong degree of commercial success (Mitchell, 2001). Yet, despite local success hip hop culture continues to derive primarily from the USA, especially with respect to music and fashion. One reason for this pattern is identified by Lealand (1994: 34) who suggests that:

American popular culture continues to be foreign because it is not New Zealand culture. Therein lies the source of its potency and attraction.

(...) Youth dress themselves in the garb of American basketball stars not necessarily because they want to be little Americans. They seek a more vivid, fantastical world that is beyond the constraints of their age, family, neighborhood. They may be increasing the profits of global marketing interests, but their real loyalty is to a global tribal network.

Furthermore, confirming the localised meanings of hip hop as a cultural practice in New Zealand Wilcox (1996: 123) asserts that:

Maori and Polynesian youth (...) tend to identify with the music, dress, and styles of their African-American counterparts [where] they find (...) a focal point of resistance, a means of challenging the hegemony of New Zealand's overwhelmingly white power structure through membership in a transnational tribe.

Nevertheless, hip hop is becoming an important education tool amongst New Zealand youth, predominantly those of Māori and Polynesian origin.

## **Methodology**

Given that this study is concerned with understanding individuals' interpretations and understandings of the world, a qualitative research approach was adopted. With a concern to understand multiple realities of New Zealand youth, the research is informed by an interpretive paradigm which attempts to understand how individuals construct and maintain their social worlds through the intricacies of lived experience (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). The interpretive paradigm advocates that meaning is created by the individual, consequently "it is impossible to develop a set of universal rules which explain why humans act, think and behave in specific ways" (Curtner-Smith, 2002: 42). In order to encompass the depth of hip hop culture this study adopts multiple methods of data collection including contextualisation and focus group interviews in order to account for both historical and cultural representations.

## **Participant Recruitment**

Participants were selected via purposeful sampling in order to provide information rich participants (Morse, 1994). Participants with the following characteristics were targeted:

1. Youth aged between 13 - 18
2. Have an understanding and involvement in hip hop culture.
3. Able to communicate and contribute in a group situation

After speaking informally to known secondary school teachers in a small south island town links were made with three key students who identified as actively involved in hip hop and having the personal skills to contribute in a group situation. During introductory communications the basis of the research project was outlined and the participants were also asked to recommend others who might also be valuable sources of information. In total participants were recruited from three secondary schools holding decile rankings six and seven (Ministry of Education, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Due to the informality of the networking, the nature of the participants and their unforeseen commitments, three separate focus group interviews were conducted with two people at each session. Although there were only two participants in each interview it was considered a focus group as the participants were selected from a purposeful sample and the presence of others, including myself, created an environment for interaction and social influence.

### Participant Profiles

Participant Name	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Favourite Activities
Vinnie	M	16	Cook Island/Maori	Rugby/Hip Hop
Kayla	F	16	Maori	Hip Hop
Zoey	F	17	Maori	Hip Hop/Salsa, Photography
Shaun	M	13	Maori	Hip Hop/Basketball
Amber	F	16	NZ European	Dance
Renee	F	16	NZ European	Dance

Vinnie is sixteen and identifies as Cook Island Māori. In his spare time he plays competitive rugby and touch rugby for his school and occasionally likes to draw. Hip hop is an informal activity for Vinnie who actively listens to hip hop music, engages in graffiti and enjoys break dancing at local parties and with friends.

Kayla is sixteen and grew up in the North Island before recently moving to Nelson. She lives with a caregiver and enjoys sports, music and Māori studies. Kayla identifies as Māori and part of the Rongomaiwahine (Te Mahia) iwi (“tribe”). School attendance and academia are not a high priority for Kayla who has a poor record of attendance and is involved in a youth recovery programme at school.

<sup>1</sup> A school’s decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile one schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile ten schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. A school’s decile does not indicate the overall socio-economic mix of the school (Ministry of Education, 2008).



She is informally involved in hip hop, especially dancing, and recognises hip hop culture as a very big part of her life.

Zoey is seventeen and identifies as New Zealand Māori. Throughout her youth she was highly involved in dance classes and dance competitions including hip hop and salsa. She has taken a step back from dance classes in order to focus on her heavy workload and extensive leadership responsibilities at school. Zoey particularly enjoys design subjects such as photography and graphics and aims to attend University next year.

Shaun is thirteen and lives with his Mum and Step-Dad who run a hip hop dance school. Shaun is of Māori background and studies Māori language and culture as his year nine option. Although Shaun loves basketball he doesn't have the time to play as he practises and instructs hip hop dancing at his parents dance school most days.

Amber is sixteen and identifies as New Zealand European. She is involved in a number of hip hop dance classes and also sits dancing exams. Ambers dancing commitments leave her little time for sports, however she enjoys sewing and studies textiles at school.

Renee is sixteen and identifies as New Zealand European. She enjoys art and dancing and is also highly involved in hip hop dance classes and hip hop exams.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews are guided discussions which rely on the interaction between the group, consequently eliciting more of a participant's point of view in comparison to researcher dominated interviewing (Mertens, 2005). In this study the focus group interviews were conducted either at school lunchtimes or after school in school meeting rooms or at a participant's house. The interviews followed a semi-structured, open ended approach, using prepared questions but the exact wording and order of these questions emerged during the interview (Berg, 2001). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed in relation to the key theoretical and conceptual categories developed for this study.

### **Results and Discussion**

Given that this study is part of a larger project our results focus on three key areas of analysis: (1) Exploring what type of physical cultural practice youth consider hip hop to be (eg. Dance, music, fashion, graffiti, sport etc.); (2) The role of hip hop as performative identity; and, (3) the global-local context of hip hop in New Zealand.



## **What is hip hop?**

To gain insight into the understandings of New Zealand youth the six participants interviewed were asked questions such as “how would you describe hip hop” and ‘what does hip hop mean to you?’”

In contrast to scholars the majority of participants described their understanding of hip hop as mainly a style of dance:

- Hip hop is a way of expressing yourself, emotionally and physically through dance movement (Zoey)
- It's like a language that you use with your body instead of speaking (Shaun)
- It's freestyle, you just kind of relax and move with the music (Renee)
- It's just a fun way of dancing and getting exercise (Amber)
- It's like expressing yourself in moves pretty much (Kayla)

This strong link to the break dancing element of hip hop is not uncommon, Zemke-White (2001) and Mitchell (2001) note that break dancing was the first element of hip hop culture that provoked large scale local manifestations in New Zealand. With African American and American Samoan origins this strong connection of dance expression is particularly notable amongst Maori youth who used break dancing as an important symbol of youth identity from the early 1980's (Mitchell, 2001). Reflecting on hip hop as mainly a dance and performance ritual simply extends Tamati's (2004) point that definitions of hip hop are generally shaped by individual interpretations.

As four of the participants were heavily involved in formalised aspects of hip hop dance culture one must immediately acknowledge this as a potential influence shaping their interpretation. Further hip hop as a growing dance form is well represented in New Zealand with New Zealand hip hop crews continually achieving high standards at the world hip hop championships. Waiti (2004) also argues that Māori and Pacific youth will always hold a special attachment to hip hop because historically “other forms of personal achievement were beyond their reach and breaking was an art form they could be successful in” (Waiti, 2004, p.83).

To further explore the participants' understandings of hip hop culture they were asked about DJ'ing and Rapping. Bennett (2001) notes that within America, rap is a particularly important form of expression and Chang (2006: 545) denotes that the most obvious definition of hip hop is “rhymed lyrics that are mainly rapped, rather than sung over sampled beats.” Contrary to the view of some scholars participants were not so supportive of the rap element:

- People think it's all about the rapping and stuff but it's not, it's about the music of the beat (...) hip hop can be done to lots of different music like we do hip hop salsa, which is

salsa dancing, which is Cuban music integrated with hip hop so it doesn't always go back to that rapping (Zoey)

- Some raps have a lot of swearing in it and yea, but some raps are good (Shane)
- Raps is more negative (Vinnie)
- There is a lot of rap out there that's really bad and I wouldn't rate it (Zoey)

Participant responses illustrate the diversity of hip hop culture and although rap is considered a key element, many who strongly associate themselves with the culture are unwelcoming to certain elements. In this case Zoey who is heavily involved as a hip hop dancer, felt rap was not a major part of hip hop culture, she believed hip hop dance is and can be performed to other types of music. On reflection, participant's comments may indicate that rap clearly articulates negative elements. In recognising the many negative features and elements of rap, participants may be identifying diversities within rap music and are choosing to discard those which they see as inappropriate to their individual interpretations of hip hop culture.

In regards to personal preference of rap artists Kayla and Vinnie expressed that they mainly listened to artists that they felt they understood and could relate to such as American artists Tupac (deceased) and Soldier Boi. Shane said he listened to stuff he considered 'low-key' in terms of rapping such as Chris Brown. However, the other three females said although they enjoyed hip hop music as such, they weren't really into hard rap or 'gangster rap' and were more accustomed to artists like the Black Eyed Peas and Beyonce:

- They all kind of sound the same [rappers] (Renee)
- It's kind of dance to anything kind of thing (Amber)

Notably, no New Zealand artists were identified in this discussion. Mitchell (2001) recognises that Māori youth identify with the African Americans they see in the media. He notes that Māori culture within New Zealand has created such a mystique through the absence of Māori role models and enforcement of *tapu* (taboos) that Māori young people are forced to seek African American role models and cultural icons. However, in challenging this statement, early New Zealand Māori hip hop artists such as Upper Hutt Posse became reference idols to many New Zealand youth (Shute, 2004). More recently New Zealand has established a successful base of international hip hop artists, mainly of Polynesian ethnicity. The popularity of artists such as Scribe, King Kapisi and Che Fu points towards possibilities that New Zealand hip hop is emerging as a Polynesian identity. This is consistent with Grainger's (2008) observations that the advent of Pacific representations within New Zealand hip hop reflect their prospering status as part of New Zealand identity.

## **Involvement in Hip Hop**

With the participants focused on the dancing elements of hip hop, we sought to identify how they viewed their involvement in hip hop with questions such as ‘how would you say you are involved in hip hop’ and ‘what do you do in relation to hip hop?’ Responses were mixed but confirmed some patterns noted in the literature. Generally the findings suggest that hip hop is often an informal activity but is becoming more institutionalized as evidenced by the rise of competitions and commercial dance classes:

Vinnie and Kayla emphasised that they had no formal involvement in hip hop, however most of their day was influenced by elements of hip hop and it constituted a large part of their life:

- It’s a little more like do what you know and then take it to the streets (laughs) (Kayla)
- Yea, just do it (Vinnie)

They elaborated that they wouldn’t consider their involvement to be ‘competition’, but:

- We used to have dance offs on the street, but it was more like the little kids (Kayla).
- Like say you were at a party or something.....you just get up and dance and do what you know and then everyone will join in (Kayla)

Vinnie and Kayla pointed out that within their youth program at school (a special classroom for troubled teens) they listen to hip hop music throughout their school day:

- Like there’s a hundred songs in here (points to her cellphone) and they’re full songs (...) we listen to it all the time (...) it like gives you this high, you want to listen to it more (Kayla)

Vinnie also commented that hip hop culture extended into his rugby:

- Like before a rugby game we listen to it to get amped up... Little Jon, when he says ‘wat’ (laughs), yea, we say that in rugby

In comparison Zoey, Shane, Amber and Renee have been highly involved in organised hip hop dance classes:

- We started off just really informal, just mucking around with (Shane’s parents). Um, and then it formed into a group (...) and they plan to take further involvement in competitions and stuff. But the main idea is to get kids off the street. So we kind of do it, were the teachers there (...) so it’s quite formal in a way but not really (Zoey)
- Yea I do some teaching at DHS (name of dance school) with my parents (Shane)
- Um, taking classes and things like that (Amber)
- Studying and doing exams (Renee)

Clearly hip hop is a big part of the lives of these youth. Although the participants represent very diverse levels of involvement all acknowledge that hip hop has a strong impact on their lifestyles.

### **Is Hip Hop a Form of Sport and/or Exercise?**

Five of the six participants agreed that hip hop dancing could be considered a sport; Vinnie was hesitant at the idea and concluded he was not sure.

- It keeps you fit (Shane)
- Dance is a sport, yea I'd consider it a sport (Amber)
- I suppose you could call it a sport (Renee)

The comments of the participants are consistent with a new school of thought within the hip hop community. Hip hop dance as a form of exercise uses your whole body and can be a high intensity workout which is exciting and fun (Gilbert, 2007). It offers a new exercise commodity which can be a lot more eventful than the likes of a treadmill or cross trainer (Brown, 2007). The recent surge in participation comes as no surprise to many, for years dance teachers have reaped the benefits of high intensity cardio workouts, a term considered by many as an alternative way of keeping in shape (Brown, 2008).

Given the scientific benefits of exercise and in the advent of an obesity epidemic it seems only common sense to embrace and encourage movement opportunities in which New Zealand youth hold positive affiliations. Facing a decline in physical activity rates, policy makers are actively seeking alternative initiatives to encourage youth participation and involvement. To date, it appears hip hop has been overlooked as a beneficial form of physical activity. In considering the comments of the participants above and hip hop's growing appeal, one must consider the possible benefits of promoting hip hop dance as a legitimate form of healthy exercise.

### **Hip Hop as Performative Identity**

Understanding the self-consciousness of behaviors exhibited by hip hop youth involves a consideration of performance identity. According to Butler (1991: 24) one's identity is "performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express," and further action does not represent an identity; instead it creates it. Thompson (1997: 1) recognises that "the production and consumption of cultural representations affects the construction of identities," including national, ethnic and gender. In contesting the regulation of culture and the search for identity one must seek meaning and interpretation (Thompson, 1997). This section examines how New Zealand youth constitute 'hip hop identity' and the implications of these understandings. Findings are illustrated



through the following themes which were derived from the data including the following: gender, race, violence/ gang activity and fashion.

### **Masculinity and Sexism/ Misogyny**

Hip hop has received significant criticism for its gender representations, at one end of the continuum hip hop often demonstrates overt sexual representations of women, an aggressive construction of hyper-masculinity and a frequent use of misogynist and violent lyrics. Scholars such as Taylor and Taylor (2007) and Price (2005) recognise the contested nature of gender in hip hop culture. Women are exploited and subordinated to the point where they are often referred to as 'whores' and males are portrayed as sexually dominant characters with a central role in society (Price, 2005). Perry, (2004: 128) asserts that "too often hip hop portrays women as gold diggers seeking only to take advantage of men, as disease carriers and self-hating, hypersexualised animals who take their stuff off for the camera, and as symbols of capitalist acquisition." Levande (2008) extends this argument to classify what we see in hip hop culture as simply mainstream pornography.

Within this study, participants, females in particular, identified with the subordination of women in hip hop culture. Concurring with Price (2005), Renee and Amber suggested hip hop culture objectifies women, making them hypersexual objects.

- There just objects I'd say (Renee)
- Yea there not really worth anything, they're just women (Amber)

Renee and Amber's responses support the findings of Byerly and Ross (2006) who identify that for over thirty over years academic evidence has recognised women in the media are disproportionately emphasised through traditional domestic roles or treated as sex objects. Within hip hop culture women "appear in the videos quite explicitly as property, not unlike the luxury cars, Rolex watches, and platinum and diamond medallions also featured" (Perry, 2004: 175). Perry (2004) observed that every time MTV is screening one encounters the same thing: a black male rapper surrounded by black and Latina women dressed in bathing suits or scantily clad in some other fashion. "Some take place in strip clubs, some at the pool, at the beach, or in hotel rooms, but the reoccurrent [sic] theme is dozens of half naked women" (Perry, 2004: 175).

In my questioning regarding these media portrayed images and the use of the terms 'bitch' and 'ho' all female respondents noted that they were offended but the reality was they felt couldn't do much about it:

- Yea I find that offensive. (...) But in most cases it's usually the case (laughs) (Kayla)  
[discussing women as 'hoes' in hip hop culture]

- I think that's just how it is, like no-one can really change it. Even if you don't like it, like when your listening to a song like you just forget about that word and move onto the next (Kayla) [in relation to the terms 'bitch' and 'ho']
- No it's not OK, it should be different, but it's portrayed as alright (Renee)
- It (derogatory terms) doesn't mind me, but when you think of it in real life it does (...) like cos they're just saying it on the tape, it doesn't make an influence until it happens in real life (...) when it comes out of the music and it's in the streets, then that bothers you (Kayla)

Responses suggest the young female participants tolerate the lyrics and images portrayed within hip hop culture, but they do not personally experience these extreme displays. These findings support Taylor and Taylor's (2007) claim that the most disturbing aspect of the portrayal of women in hip hop is the acceptance of this representation by young females. Further this acceptance and the use of terms such as 'bitch' and 'ho' simply diminishes the work of women and feminists who have fought long and hard to gain gender equality (Prince, 2007).

Once my discussions with the participants established 'that's just the way it is' I probed as to why they thought things turned out this way:

- They're all slutty and promiscuous girls aren't they. It's just, it's what they call hot in America. All this kind of stuff is American influence so, and it's not to do with hip hop base, like they put the label hip hop on it but hip hop dancing and hip hop music, well rap music's quite different (Zoey).
- Mmm, ahh, I don't know, they might not treat girls right [in America] (Shane)
- They just think it's ok so it's what they sing about (Amber)

Notably the participants identified the problem as American and failed to reflect on problems within their own backyard. However, research within New Zealand indicated that although a lot of domestic violence goes unreported, one in three women suffer some sort of abuse in their lifetime. Seemingly the problem of 'not treating girls' right' cannot just be likened to American influence (Scott-Howman, 2007).

As a form of popular culture hip hop culture sends messages to youth on how to behave towards the opposite sex and the roles of gender within society. Consequently, un-realistic and potentially damaging gender representations and interactions are embedded within society (Taylor & Taylor, 2007). Although many blame hip hop culture for this negative influence others argue that hip hop culture simply expresses the reality of everyday life (Dyson, 2007).

Regardless, the majority of participants recognised the negative messages and representations of gender relations within hip hop culture. Although they were offended by these representations, particularly the females, they conceded that as individuals there was little they could do about the

situation. Ultimately the best solution may be education, and in this case participants seemed well informed about principles involving gender portrayals. They appear happy to accept these gender portrayals as a form of performative identity in their hip hop social worlds; however it is likely that other influences in the lives of my participants, such as family and education, mean the young woman participants do not tolerate these gender behaviors in their lived worlds.

## Race

Despite the fact that its audiences today are more diverse in terms of race, class and region than any other music, the reception of hip-hop continues to be a centralized element in highly polarized arguments about race from both white and black communities (Potter, 1995, p.26).

Much of the early work on hip hop culture examines how elements of hip hop acted as a voice for a range of issues relevant to African American populations (Bennett, 2001). Whilst Perry (2004) argues that even with consistent contributions from non-black artists and its borrowing from other communities hip hop is an African American culture, he also acknowledges that this assertion is in some ways radical and unpopular. With the largest consuming audience of hip hop in America being young white men, Reese (1998) argues it has become a culture and a lifestyle for people worldwide. Therefore, with its growing global appeal hip hop can no longer be considered an exclusive 'black' cultural form (Bennett, 2001).

Questioning the participants on hip hop and race brought mixed results which notably were reflective of the participants identified ethnicities. Those who identified as Māori felt that hip hop was for anyone regardless of ethnicity:

- I think hip hops for everyone though (...) anyone can do it (...) it doesn't matter (Kayla)
- Kayla and Vinnie added that they have a few white kids in their hip hop circles that were accepted just as much as the others and they admittedly listened to white hip hop artist Eminem, Kayla even declared "he's just the same as any other hip hop."
- Conversely the two girls who identified as European acknowledged at times they felt excluded and frowned upon within their hip hop involvement:
- Yea we get looks, like white people doing it [referring to hip hop dancing] is like ohhhhhh (Renee).

Perry (2004) suggests that the popularity of hip hop culture amongst urban white youth may be linked to boredom and yearning for the status associated with the apparent risky life in the fast lane of non-white youth. Reese (1998) extends this argument in stating that suburban white kids disapprove



of the material success of their parents and to express their disregard they associate themselves with the sinister image of the street, essentially romanticising the ghetto life that so many black kids want to escape. This is one possible explanation as to why white suburban males have become the largest consumers of gangster rap.

Consequently young whites emulate black cool, appropriating hip hop culture to become the primary audience for hip hop culture (Kitwana, 2005). Conversely although whites dominate hip hop consumption, unless it is legitimated by black culture it is not validated by white culture, meaning ultimately black hip hop enthusiasts remain the trendsetters for hip hop culture (Kitwana, 2005).

### **Globalisation versus Localisation**

A key consideration in regards to hip hop culture in New Zealand questions if New Zealand hip hop is unique or if it is simply another reproduction of a homogenised global culture. This section seeks to examine if New Zealand hip hop culture is a product of globalisation / Americanisation or can it be considered a transformation and localisation of this form of culture?

Within the literature Zemke-White (2001) states that New Zealand hip hop music creations can be read as musical borrowing, hybridisation, world music, micro music and Americanisation. On the other hand it could be considered that global hip hop culture has led to more variety rather than a feared homogenisation. In posing this argument New Zealand scholars such as Tamati (2004), Waiti (2004), and Zemke-White (2001, 2004) recognise New Zealand hip hop culture to include the values of American hip hop, yet also explore and construct local identities by appropriating and localising it within New Zealand. This is exemplified by New Zealand hip hop artist K.O.S. 163, a member of Footsouljahs who states: “hip hop is like religion in a way... you can’t be a Muslim and not respect Mecca, same thing, you can’t do hip hop music and not respect, you know New York and respect the Bronx where it came from” (Sima, 2003).

When asked about the perceptions of global influence in New Zealand hip hop, participants agreed with the idea of an American-based local hip hop:

- We change it in a way that we don’t have the attitude towards it like, if you were to go to the States and have a battle, like a dance battle, they would be like really poor losers, in your face and we take that and we’re really positive about it. We’re accepting of others, um, we let anyone have a go, whereas they’re really negative about it and they’re really just feisty people (Zoey).
- We’ve made our own sort of hip hop in New Zealand I think (...) it’s like American based but we can’t really do what they do (...) they’re better dancers... Everyone makes it their own, like not everyone dances the same when it comes to hip hop (Kayla)

- We're just copying Americans, but in a positive way, we do it in a way that doesn't offend anyone (Shane)
- We've got our own style that suits us better (Vinnie)
- You learn hip hop from someone who they've learnt from someone, so it's like a train and when you teach it to someone else you teach them the way that you've been taught. And the way that we teach it is positive, it's to do good things, it's to keep kids off the street, it's to have fun, it's exercise. We don't portray it as being like and American gangster with Bloods and Crips<sup>2</sup> or all that kind of stuff (Zoey)

Feedback from the participants above are in agreement with scholars such as Zemke-White (2005) who believe that New Zealand hip hop is based on globalised American hip hop ideologies and converted to suit local people and struggles. Therefore we cannot assume a notion of a colossal, mono-cultural America, simply a localised culture which remains authentic to the original culture by representing core elements and maintaining the whole culture.

A useful model in understanding the cultural mobility of hip hop is Lull's (1995) concept of 'cultural reterritorialization' which considers cultural forms as malleable resources that can be inscribed with new meaning in relation to particular local contexts in which such products are appropriate. Lull (1995: 159-160) argues that "the foundations of cultural territory –ways of life, artifacts, symbols, and contexts –are all open to new interpretations and understandings (...) because culture is constructed and mobile, it is also synthetic and multiple." In agreement, Bennett (2001) argues that hip hop culture is particularly conducive to the process of 'cultural reterritorialization' due to its street culture and its largely improvised origins. Gilroy (1993) challenges the identification of hip hop music as exclusively African American when he asks: "what it is about black America's writing elite which means that they need to claim this diasporic cultural form in such an assertively nationalist way" (Gilroy, 1993: 34).

Waiti (2004, p.100) characterises the local adaptations of hip hop conveyed by New Zealand artists stating that: "they [American rappers] talk about people in the streets whereas New Zealand hasn't been exposed to that type of lifestyle so we're gonna be talking about the Treaty of Waitangi and coming from the islands to New Zealand." Although this is true amongst New Zealand rap artists one must take into account that although New Zealand has attempted to offer a local version of hip hop to the consumer, the majority of hip hop music consumed and listened to in New Zealand is imported from America (Zemke-White, 2001).

Both Renee and Amber, the two European participants felt that New Zealand had no localised hip hop culture,

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<sup>2</sup> Two street gangs originating from Los Angeles.

- I think it's just trying to copy it, but it's not the same (...) It's not as hardcore (Amber)
- Well New Zealand's trying to have their own hip hop culture. (...) But really all the gangs in New Zealand are just trying to be like the gangs in America (Amber)
- I'd say like it's more like a Maori thing trying to change it for them, that's what they want to be associated with like the black culture and American (Renee).
- Yea trying to give themselves that kind of reputation as well. They want to be associated with the like gangs and hardcore (Amber)

Similarly to Renee and Ambers comment scholars recognise the impact of hip hop culture on New Zealand youth, particularly those of Māori and Polynesian ethnicity. Zemke-White (2004: 209) asserts "rap music's presence in Aotearoa could be read as Western cultural hegemony, Americanisation, homogenisation, and yet another episode in a long history of the colonisation of Pacific peoples." Thus we must consider whether hip hop is a passive form of American colonisation and if so should New Zealanders and particularly Māori be afraid or under threat?

Without a doubt New Zealand hip hop artists exert local adaptations of hip hop culture drawing on their own experiences within New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Although the majority of participants felt New Zealand hip hop culture embraced local adaptations of its American counterpart, ultimately their reflections as hip hop consumers only recognised American artists and fashion labels. Grainger and Jackson (2005) highlight evidence which suggests that aspects of African American culture, "including music, fashion and speech elements – are sources of fascination among New Zealand youth. Ultimately the interaction between the global/American and New Zealand facilitates a reshaping of cultural spaces and identity. This in turn encourages New Zealand youth to look across the pacific for cultural reference points and role models a process termed the 'trans-Pacific gaze.' (Andrews, Carrington, Jackson, & Mazur, 2001).

These reflections upon the localised and highly politicised spaces in which global production and local consumption occur may facilitate a better understanding of the cultural dynamics which assists in the concurrent embracement of, and resistance to, American popular culture (Grainger & Jackson, 2005). Ultimately this research has real world implications, as a research project which has taken extended periods of time to contextualise the next step is policy and all of this has to occur within a highly charged racial/social context.

## **Conclusion**

As a global commodity hip hop is consistently argued to be localised within particular cultural contexts (Motley & Henderson, 2008). For the participants in this study there was a general consensus that hip hop style was generated in America, particularly through famous hip hop artists and hip hop

fashions. Although they claimed to acknowledge the existence of a localised hip hop culture, the American influences are pervasive. Thus, we are left with an interesting perspective in relation to discussions about the global-local nexus. In this case New Zealand youth hip hop consumers are seeking their own local identity but despite the availability of local hip hop culture they continue to seek out the American produced version. This raises several questions to be explored including: Is this simply a fact that global popular culture is often US produced and will therefore have US flavour wherever it goes? Or are New Zealand hip hop consumers simply little Americans, undergoing subtle processes of American assimilation?

Although expressed in different ways, all participants considered hip hop as a dance form and expression of the body. Beyond simple fashion, music and movement participants were able to identify and dissect meanings and implications of the words and images portrayed through hip hop culture and also appeared to make a conscious choice about their involvement.

Within New Zealand it is Māori and Polynesian youth who identify the strongest with the styles of hip hop culture. Wilcox (1996) and Mitchell (2001) classify this connection by comparing the political, social, economic and racial struggles undergone by both the New Zealand Māori and African Americans. This reflection of a common struggle creates a cultural alliance, enabling Māori and Polynesian youth to adopt hip hop and to use it as a vehicle to express their identity and politics. Further their acceptance of hip hop may serve to challenge the hegemony of New Zealand's Europeanised power structure. As a country entrenched in a history of colonisation, the indigenous Māori have experienced a cultural vacuum, creating space for new Diaspora such as hip hop. Although those participants of Māori ethnicity asserted hip hop culture was for everyone regardless of race, those of European ethnicity emphasised that within New Zealand hip hop was a black cultural form.

As outlined by scholars including Penfold (2005) and Stokes (2005) hip hop is often blamed for social problems such as violence, sexism and misogyny, and as a strong Polynesian and Māori identity this creates negative stigmas and creates grounds for blame. However we must consider the ability of hip hop to offer a positive avenue for New Zealand youth to lead a physically active, healthy lifestyle as well as a source of identity and cultural expression.

This study is but one of many that are beginning to recognize the increasingly important role of hip hop culture as a form of global popular culture and a physical cultural practice. With hip hop spanning countless political and cultural frameworks, areas for study are endless, and as a prominent youth culture hip hop provides a rewarding area for future research. Future research could focus on the use of hip hop dance within physical education and exercise classes to identify new outlets of physical activity, especially with such a strong popular appeal. Such a study would take into account the current declining participation rates of youth in physical activity, the concern of an obesity epidemic and the

current SPARC initiatives to encourage physical activity. Working closely within current forms of physical education and youth sport programmes this could investigate hip hop dance as a new physical activity to counteract these worrying trends and programmes that are perhaps not working as well as they could be. To this extent, hip hop may hold the potential to contribute to a healthy, active lifestyle and new form of identity rather than becoming just another global commodity under the control of large multinational corporations.

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