

All We Got: Hip-Hop Merchandising and the Tactical Commodification of Black Cultural Production

Alyxandra Vesey, University of Alabama

In a scene from *Atlanta*'s second season, rappers Paper Boi and Clark County compare endorsement opportunities. County (RJ Walker), a light-skinned and charismatic MC, capitalizes on his emergent celebrity by writing a catchy jingle for Yoo-Hoo and appearing in a television advertisement. Paper Boi (Bryan Tyree Henry), a dark-skinned street rapper and part-time drug dealer, rejects an offer from North Carolina-based chips purveyor Rap Snacks to help develop "Cocaine White Chedda" as its new branded flavor. This exchange follows an episode that features both artists pitching themselves to a streaming company. While Paper Boi struggles to network with the startup's workforce and modify his explicit lyrics for commercial palatability, County cannily ingratiates himself within the company's primarily white workforce and create and perform music with a marketable pop sensibility for their platform. When they discuss their business prospects during a recording session, County encourages Paper Boi to pursue commercials for easy money because white-owned media companies offer black performers few opportunities for success. In order to maintain a living as musicians, they have to sell themselves.

While these sequences originate from a fictional television show, they dramatize the power struggles endemic to hip-hop merchandising, or the processes associated with rappers' creation and sale of branded consumer goods. From its emergence as party music invented by black and Afro-Caribbean immigrant communities in New York City during the mid-1970s, hip-hop has always operated as a commercial genre. At the beginning of *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, journalist and industry veteran Dan Charnas posits that "[i]f hip-hop has four elements (DJing, MCing, graffiti, and breaking), and perhaps a fifth (style), then I argue for the recognition of a sixth: marketing" (2010, x). Yet hip-hop artists' grip on consumer culture's brass ring is often elusive or slippery, largely because of companies' and advertisers' reticence to work with hip-hop artists due to institutional racism. Unlike rock music, a genre that Timothy D. Taylor argues was co-opted by advertisers as a means to commodify post-war youth culture during the 1960s and capitalize upon Boomer nostalgia during the 1980s (2012), hip-hop was not an expression of hegemonic white masculinity and therefore was undervalued as a commercial artform. While agencies like Leo Burnett exploited the genre's perceived faddishness during the mid-1980s with campaigns like McDonalds' "Big Mac Attack" and "We Are Chik'n," with the latter spot featuring rapping McNuggets, rappers did not initially benefit from television advertising through music licensing and endorsement work. Furthermore, they struggled to attract corporate sponsorship as touring acts, a source of financial support rock 'n' roll and country acts long enjoyed. In 1983, Fat Boys' manager Charlie Stettler netted endorsement deals with Swatch and Diet Coke that risked diminishing the trio as a novelty act and undermining their humanity by mocking their size. Three years later, Run-DMC's

manager Lyor Cohen harnessed the commercial potential of the group's streetwise aesthetic and single "My Adidas" into a million-dollar endorsement deal with the German sneaker company (Charnas 2010, 185).

These early endorsement ventures facilitated the mainstreaming of hip-hop culture. This presentation posits that advertising has shaped hip-hop through its uneven allocation as a revenue source and a promotional outlet for rappers in three respects. First, I posit that hip-hop became an integral part of television and print advertising after 1991, when *Billboard* began using SoundScan data to calculate its singles and albums charts. This decision helped quantify hip-hop's commercial appeal. One particularly illustrative byproduct of SoundScan reporting is Sprite's 1994 "Obey Your Thirst" campaign with Pete Rock & C.L. Smooth, which was created by Lowe & Partners' brand manager Darryl Cobbin. In the 2010s, savvy artists like Chance the Rapper, Lil Yachty, and Cardi B have quantified their robust social media presence and streams into high-profile commercials for Kit Kat, Target, and Amazon. Second, I argue that hip-hop merchandising encompasses a range of participation. We can recognize endorsement work as top-down merchandising, as when Ludacris, Kanye West, and the Game traded regionally-specific verses for Boost Mobile's 2006 "Where You At" campaign. We can consider brand partnerships like Kendrick Lamar's forays into footwear design for Reebok and Nike as middle-range merchandising. And we can identify entrepreneurial ventures like D'USSÉ, Jay-Z's branded cognac, as bottom-up merchandising that promises musicians control over the means of production. This last merchandising approach is an especially important business tactic within hip-hop, because while many rappers trumpet luxury brands as expressions of aspiration or material wealth such fondness is not always reciprocated because of companies' racist misperceptions that a black consumer base will tarnish a brand's luxe image. Finally, I advocate that we interrogate female-identified artists' underrepresentation in hip-hop merchandising as spokeswomen, brand partners, and especially as entrepreneurs of self-branded consumer goods.