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# Yeezy Taught Me: Race, Gender, Class & Identity Through Rap Music

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YEEZY TAUGHT ME: RACE, GENDER, CLASS & IDENTITY THROUGH
RAP MUSIC


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Master's Program in Communication


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## DEDICATION

For my family, Mom, Dad, Eric, Dani, and Victor. I wouldn't be where I am today, without your

love and support.

YEEZY TAUGHT ME: RACE, GENDER, CLASS & IDENTITY THROUGH

RAP MUSIC


by


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THESIS


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# ABSTRACT

This study will explore identity construction by examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within rap music, specifically the music of Kanye West. It will expand current research by exploring social themes within rap music and how they impact the construction of one's identity. The primary goal of the study is to analyze rap music and intersectionality within the lyrics, following how they interconnect to shape and influence a listeners identity. Furthermore, this study will analyze lyrics of a popular figure within the rap genre and the messages that are communicated through an artist's music career.

Key Words: rap music, hip-hop, identity, race, gender, class, intersectionality

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has the ability to reach and impact a wide audience. As media and communication technology have continued to evolve, the practices and messages that are being shared and the channels being used have become a significant topic for study. Popular culture has a way of influencing individual choices, beliefs, and attitudes, ultimately impacting how one identifies themselves. Music has become one of the most significant forms of popular culture creatively used to express ideas and perspectives in society. Studying popular music reveals underlying assumptions, power structures, and social norms that are produced and consumed. James Lull (1985) reinforces the idea that music allows the listener to view and assume different perspectives on topics and lifestyles of cultures. As music plays a variety of roles in social construction and as a form of entertainment for listeners, music aids in constructing identity through the repetition of ideas that are being listened to on a daily basis.

In 2017, according to Nielsen Music's year-end report, rap music became the most listened to genre of the year. What was once labeled a fad, hip-hop surpassed rock as the most popular genre in the United States. Rap music appeals to various audiences across demographics.[1] What was once a tool of expression by individuals who were socially and culturally marginalized based on race and class (Gosine & Tabi, 2016) has now become a multi-billion dollar industry that is often described as a genre that glamorizes drugs, violence, sex, and misogyny. The intention of this study is to expand the discussion of rap music by examining characteristics within rap songs, that influence the formation of one's identity. Much of rap music emphasizes images that are driven by and reflect black experiences in the U.S. Rappers present "real life" experiences that often come from a male perspective, including observations on poverty, violence, drugs, and misogyny. As previous scholars Tricia Rose, bell hooks, Jeff Chang, and Kimberlé Crenshaw have observed, rap music is an important location for understanding identity in the public sphere.

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[1] To differentiate hip-hop and rap, hip-hop is defined as a culture that is comprised of four elements: breakdancing, music, deejaying, and graffiti. Rap falls under the element of music and overall umbrella of hip-hop.

This study will explore identity construction by examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within rap music, specifically the music of Kanye West. It will expand current research by exploring social themes within rap music and how they impact the construction of one's identity. The primary goal of the study is to analyze rap music and intersectionality within the lyrics, following how they interconnect to shape and influence a listeners identity. Furthermore, this study will analyze lyrics of a popular figure within the rap genre and the messages that are communicated through an artist's music career.

## 1.1 CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNICATION AND POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE

Popular culture is a deeply rooted phenomenon that has the ability to influence modes of communication for decades (Best & Lynch, 2006). Popular culture has the ability to influence attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors for many consumers. In particular, music has played a prevailing role for many youths. Music has influenced identity development, perhaps more so than any other form of popular culture medium. "Identity, rather than being fixed and static, is a process of becoming, which is developed out of points of similarity and difference, involving both self-description and social ascription" (Shuker, 2008, p. 177). Connected to popular culture is identity formation and music consumption for individuals. As a form of communication, music presents multiple meanings varied by artist and the audience consuming the music. Shuker discusses how music consumption has been closely related to age, class, ethnicity, and gender and how there has been an "increasing appreciation of the intersection and overlap of these social categories in the construction of social *identities*, rather than simply a singular *identity*" (p. 179). The study of popular music culture has become important in providing a clearer understanding of music and its relation to society. Over time, music genres have reflected society at specific moments in history. As society changes, so does music, ultimately impacting the construction of social identities. Popular music and musicians have furthered social change; "its mobilization within social movements, and the place of music and musicians in relation to issues of gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity" (Shuker, 2008, p. 211).

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An area within popular music that has created debates on social structures and identity politics, is hip-hop. The cultural phenomenon of hip-hop has encompassed the social, fashion, music, and dance subculture of America's black and Latino youth (Shuker, 2008). Since the launch of hip-hop, about 40 years ago, it has only continued to progress over the years and become integrated with all aspects of American culture. *Forbes* contributor Ogden Payne (2018), discussed this integration of hip-hop culture, highlighting the three primary areas as being: (1) politics, (2) education, and (3) corporate America. For the first time ever this year, hip-hop surpassed rock and was named the biggest music genre in the United States, based on Nielsen Music's 2017 year-end report (Ryan, 2018). Integrated with hip-hop, is rap music. Rap music is described as cultural expression "imbedded in powerful and dominant technological, industrial and ideological institutions" (Rose, 1994, p. 2). Rap music, is often associated with negative labels and stereotypes. Hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994) discusses how rap music has been represented in the media as violent, sexual, and sexist. Rose argues the meaning of hip-hop and rap within black and Latino communities is an expressive cultural response to urban America. She defines rap as poetic voice that is deeply political in content and argues the struggle of black cultural politics stays indivisible. In Eric Dyson's book, *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*, the introduction includes work from Jay-Z, a famous and talented rapper from Brooklyn, where he explains how:

> Hip hop is a vital arts movement created by young working-class men and women of color. Yes, our rhymes can contain violence and hatred. Yes, our songs can detail the drug business and our choruses can bounce with lustful intent. However, those things did not spring from inferior imaginations or deficient morals; these things came from our lives. They came from America (2007, p. v).

Previous hip-hop studies have also found the musical discourse as a way for artists to create messages representing culture, social awareness, and political mobilization (Gosine & Tabi, 2016). Hip-hop has influenced "everything from art forms to social movements and political organization" (Brooks & Conroy, 2011). Christopher Malone and George Martinez Jr. (2010) have argued that hip-hop is an "organic globalizer," that holds important lessons for global political and

social transformation. The lessons hip-hop holds showcase a powerful tool that demonstrates attention for further studies and discussions.

Nonetheless, the fan base of hip-hop and rap music has grown all over the world, which is worthy of recognition and further study. Music is heavily consumed by a wide range of individuals on a day-to-day basis, in particular, the youth, thus the exploration of rap music and its relationship to society and the listener is of great importance. "Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as the expression of African-American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world" (Mitchell, 2001: introduction). The growth of rap music has been the focus of various studies, focusing on the "politics of rap/hip-hop; its commodification by the culture industries, along with its incorporation into the wider/white culture; its relationship to ethnicity; the role of place and space in its development; and the innovative production and performance techniques associated with the genre" (Shuker, 2008; Forman & Neal, 2011). Analyzing rap music, and including the works of current popular artists for many listeners, is significant.

Understanding how identity is constructed through and within music is a critical part of popular music culture that should be explored in a communication framework. However, due to the amount of social themes that form one's identity, I will focus primarily on race, gender, and class. I seek to further the discussion of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, by analyzing how the themes are being communicated through rap music and influence identity formation.

## 1.2 KANYE WEST

Kanye West is a producer, a rap artist, writer, creative director, fashion designer, and public persona best known for his outspoken and controversial views (Chambers, 2015). Throughout his career, West has gone from a no-name beat producer to a twenty-one Grammy Award-winning artist, and a definitive name in popular culture. From his successful music career as a rapper and owning record label G.O.O.D. Music (Getting Out Our Dreams), marriage with reality TV star Kim Kardashian, partnership with Adidas, and expanding clothing and footwear brand YEEZY,

West has received significant mainstream attention. He is arguably one of the most controversial and talented figures in the 21ˢᵗ Century. West is a Chicago native who was raised by Ray West a photojournalist, ex-Black Panther member, and a church counselor, and Donda West, an English professor and the first black female chair member of the English Department at Chicago State University. West grew up in a middle-class neighborhood and gained an appreciation of rap, art, and poetry early in his life (Chambers, 2015). Entering middle school, West began making musical compositions which he sold to other artists and began rapping and producing with local Chicago hip-hop. After graduating high school West received a scholarship to art school, where he eventually dropped out, moving to New York City to pursue music full-time.

West helped produce gigs that ended up leading him to become a breakthrough star in music, discovered and promoted by rap artist Jay-Z (Neal, 2014). West developed a signature sound through his "chipmunk soul" style, sampling records, expanding the creative boundaries of his hip-hop compositions and eventually became a popular producer in hip-hop (Neal, 2014). West produced hit singles for notable rap, rhythm, and blues artists such as Jay-Z, Nas, Common, Alicia Keys, Beyoncé, and Janet Jackson, before his time debut album (Birchmeier, n.d.). While, his producing skills were a noticeable success, but rapping was what he wanted to do creatively. At that time, no record label was taking him seriously enough to promote him beyond as a producer. Record labels were unsure if his "middle-class, politically conscious, post-thug, bourgeois rapper" image would fit, in a market dominated by gangsta posturing rappers; this resulted in West not getting signed (Endelman, 2004).

West took it upon himself to create a demo album to showcase his work; the demo was picked up by Roc-A-Fella records while offered a record deal and studio time (Tyrangiel, 2005). After the release of his debut album, and its critical and commercial success, the rest of West's discography continued with a trajectory of achievements. West has a total of 380 nominations for awards and a total of 92 awards won, including the Grammy Awards, American Music Awards, BET Awards, MTV Video Music Awards, BRIT Awards, and others (IMDb Awards, n.d.).

Aside from being arguably one of the most talented figures in his generation of artists, West has found himself in several controversies. His demeanor has often come off as outspoken, cocky, and arrogant, particularly in the public's eye (Chambers, 2015). Whether it be a rant in public or online, interrupting pop star Taylor Swift's acceptance speech at the 2009 VMA Awards, arguing with paparazzi, going on live news coverage to say that George Bush "doesn't care about black people," or on Twitter supporting and stating his love for President Donald Trump, West counts controversy at every turn. West is constantly expressing himself and marketing himself in ways that appear contrarian (Krebs, 2014). However, West has continuously made himself relevant within the music and popular culture sphere and remains a fan favorite within the hip-hop community.

West is a rapper who utilizes "mass media as a communication vehicle, either through coverage of his public outbursts, public appearances or published documentation of his music sales, is necessary to creating and maintaining his image" (Cole, 2010). Jason Birhmeier, an editor from *AllMusic* wrote how West's "career progressed throughout the early 21$^{st}$ century, West shattered certain stereotypes about rappers, becoming a superstar on his own terms without adapting his appearance, his rhetoric, or his music to fit any one musical mold"(n.d). In May of 2015, *Time* magazine's contributor Elon Musk wrote about West in the list of "100 Most Influential People" stating:

> Kanye West would be the first person to tell you he belongs on this list. The dude doesn't believe in false modesty, and he shouldn't. Kanye's belief in himself and his incredible tenacity—he performed his first single with his jaw wired shut—got him to where he is today.

West has also been described and compared to former President Barack Obama, as a model of someone who showcases his influential status and appeal to middle-class youth while maintaining street credibility too (Kitterman, 2005).

Public opinion on West seems to be driven by his personality more than his creative output. Within hip-hop "West redefined boundaries, bringing millions of fans with him in the process"

(Dills, 2010, pg. 556). He has taken the genre and his creative process, to create a unique style and has impacted many fans in the process. "West shattered certain stereotypes about rappers, becoming a superstar on his own terms without adapting his appearance, his rhetoric, or his music to fit any one musical mold" (Birchmeier & Kellman). Studying West beyond what is viewed by the public and rather on his music, allows one to view the topics he incorporates within his music, the meaning they hold, or impact they have.

## 4.3 IDENTIFYING INTERSECTIONALITY

The framework of this project is intersectionality, or the intersection of social categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality and how they overlap and are interdependent systems of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). First used by Kimberelé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the failed representation of black women, intersectionality developed through Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) work on black feminism. The use of intersectionality draws attention to invisibilities that exist while consistently challenging multiple forms of oppression. Crenshaw argues that a key aspect of intersectionality is that multiple oppressions are not each suffered separately, but rather as a unified experience. Intersectional paradigms view race, gender, and class, among others, as mutual constructing systems of power. Collins (1990) discusses the importance of developing an analysis "of contemporary social phenomena that explore the connections among race, class, and gender oppression and use new reconceptualization's of family, community, and power in doing so" (p. 224). The purpose of utilizing intersectionality within rap music is based on the influence music has on many youths and the amount of reach hip-hop culture has in today's society, in particular black and Latino communities. As Collins (2006) discussed:

> "Rather, for many, mass media has become their classroom. The creation and persistence of this generational culture represents not only the resilience of Black and Latino youth. It also speaks to themes of alienation of a global youth population. In particular, rap music is a global phenomenon that transcends the provincialism of American academe and that has

influence far beyond the Black and Latino neighborhoods where it first appeared in the 1980s" (p. 191).

Intersectionality provides a unique lens to understand the character of oppression, where social structures interlock and intersect. Additionally it offers a perspective of viewing themes of race within rap music and issues regarding gender and class as well. The intersectionality of all three social structures acknowledges that power relations play a fundamental role in the construction of thought, experience, and knowledge, further providing an understanding of identity.

## 4.4 GUIDELINE FOR STUDY

This study will seek to present how identity can be construed through the framing of themes related to race, gender, and class within rap music. The themes will be analyzed and utilized to further understand identity construction through rap music. To support the overall study, this thesis will be composed of the following:

Chapter two consists of a detailed literature review examining rap and hip-hop music, popular music and communication, and identity and politics, to guide the study. Previous and current research that explores these concepts will be incorporated to create a framework for this research. This section will contribute towards the understanding that is needed for this study within popular music culture and communication. The research questions that will guide the study will also be presented.

Chapter three provides a detailed explanation of the methods and procedures that will be used to answer the research questions. The use of textual analysis and coding of songs will be further discussed and justified for their use as the method in this study. Lastly, the limitations of the methodology will also be presented and discussed.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study and discusses the analyzed lyrics examined in order to provide an answer to the research questions.

Chapter five includes a summary of the study and a conclusion that will address key concepts within each chapter. A discussion of the analysis will be followed, along with limitations and recommendations for future studies will be discussed.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following chapter, I provide a background of popular music and communication, an examination of rap and hip-hop, and identity politics. I will present previous research on popular music, rap and hip-hop, and identity politics, to justify the need for a study on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class themes in rap music and the influence on identity construction within the field of communication.

## 2.1 POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Mass media has played a huge role in facilitating communication within a community, through its unique form of symbolic expression. In *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, Shuker (2016) addresses the meaning within popular music culture as the following:

> "Cultural interpretations and understandings are embedded in musical texts and performances: physical recordings, music DVDs, concerts, radio airplay, digital downloads, film soundtracks, and so on. Such meanings are in one sense, the creations of those engaged in making the music in these diverse forms, but they are also the result of how the consumers of these forms interact with them" (p. 277).

Examining popular music culture provides an understanding of the impact popular music has had over the years by all who engage with music. Shuker also provides a framework for what is considered 'popular' in order to create a greater understanding of what popular music is in particular. For some, it simply relates towards appealing music and to others a more grounded 'of' people, while this study associates 'popular music' with a genre that is produced in commodity form and is largely available for the masses.

In studying popular music culture, Lull (1987) has argued that music is an influential communicator that plays a huge role in pertaining sociocultural behavior characteristics of the youth. Whether music is being used to listen for "pleasure, for identification, or as an accompaniment to other activities (dancing, cooking), distractedly (as when watching a film), [or] in many other ways," music provides thoughts, feelings, and expression that is universally

recognized (Moore, 2003, p. 1). Popular music is a repetitive form that can function persuasively with the use of familiar musical patterns, clichés, rhymes, alliteration, and punning, to name a few (Cheesebro, Foulger, Nagham & Yanneli, 1985). Lull (1987) states that music is more than just a cultural form, it also provides a unified voice of protest that can be shared with a wide audience. Songs have become art forms to communicate political viewpoints and share a voice through a different outlet. Popular music is a mode of communicating and creating socially shared meanings, providing an experience about someone's experience (Cheesebro, Foulger, Nagham & Yanneli, 1985). Music is a resource that has the ability to define and reaffirm one's views of their world (Lewis, 1983). Lull (1985) reinforces the idea of how music allows the listener to view different perspectives on topics within the music and the values and lifestyles of cultures. She discusses how music is a social function of communication that creates a cultural connection, in a way that no other form of medium can. Lull argues that music is used by "young people in persistent and creative attempts to find excitement and meaning in a world where power seems to rest in the hand of the unknowing" (p. 371).

Previous research highlights the importance of popular music culture and communication and the effects it has on a listener. Buhmann, Hellmueller, and Bosshart (2015) argue that in communication research, popular culture has become an important object of analysis due to the evolving success and role of media and communication technology in society. Popular music is easily available now more than ever, with the internet, streaming programs, cell phones, any technological device can play music. Engaging with popular music provides an insight of the music you like, which opens up the possibilities for you to think, act, and behave in a certain way. In other words, music is an outlet to discover one's identity. It is a publicly available tool that shapes one's self. Music can be used as a time capsule, teach language, used to celebrate, influence, connect, experience, push boundaries of expression, establish a culture, or simply an art form of distraction, nonetheless, it seems to be a key to identity. Thus, there is a high importance towards the messages that are constantly being communicated through popular music. Lewis (1983) argues that when studying music, the study of the meaning of music from those who create and listen

should be the focus. Lewis noted that music expresses visions and sentiments that give significance, and reflect the values and norms of a social system, through a symbolic medium.

As the youth market remains substantial in music, demographics such as race, class, and gender, have played a considerable role for the listener. To begin, 'gender' "applies to socially constructed and culturally transmitted norms," in which popular music includes masculine and feminine characteristics of men and women (Shuker, 2013, p. 220). Shuker argues that popular music generally privileges males, thus constructing a normative masculinity. There has been many growing studies that focus on the dominance of male-female binaries in popular music analysis. The inclusion of 'race' "has historically often been considered as a biological concept, whereby humans can be classified according to a number of physical criteria" (p. 225). In popular music studies, race is an important consideration as listeners seek certain genres to identify with. Especially in regards to race and music in the United States, Shuker notes that rap music has become a major genre preference for black audience's as it has become closely identified with 'black music' and black culture. Lastly, when class is considered in popular music, it is fundamentally related to popular music preference. Shuker further discusses the importance of class formation and identity as it relates to "educational attainment and life chances, employment categories, and to patterns of cultural consumption" (p. 181). Nathan Wiseman-Trowse (2008) considers class to be a concept that is constructed through music text in order to assure the listener of authenticity. Critique on class within popular music has often explored the ways in which the artist has been the voice of a certain class, reflecting on class aspirations, anxieties, and the desire for spectacle and excess (McDonald, 2009, as cited in Shuker, 2017). Examining gender, race, and class, within popular music demonstrates the role music has in cultural politics. As Shuker (2008) discusses the important role of popular music, he also acknowledges the cultural struggle of attempting to establish dominance, negotiating norms and expectations, and exploiting cultural contradictions.

Popular music has become an important point of study for providing a clearer understanding of music and its relation to society and self-identity. Tracing back to the beginning

of popular music scholarship in the 1950s with the works of Adorno, the increase of studies within popular music has provided a wide range of perspectives and approaches. To understand the meanings produced within popular music culture is to take a closer look at cultural interpretations and understandings that are embedded in musical texts and performances. For this particular study, the focus will be based on Shuker's (2008) suggested framework, entailing an approach to recognize the analysis of social, economic, and political context. While taking into consideration the text, the artist, the consumers, and their spatial location. However, Shuker does note that music that is a part of mass industrial production–in this case, rap–affects the particular texts and meanings that are included due to commercial music. Nonetheless, meanings of texts are never absolute, which Shuker argues lead to "a site of symbolic struggle in the cultural sphere" (p. 277).

## 2.2 EXAMINATION OF RAP AND HIP-HOP

The terms "hip-hop" and "rap" are often used interchangeably. Although they will be used interchangeably within this study, it is important to catalog the difference between the two terms. Hip-hop is viewed as a cultural framework consisting of four elements: deejaying, breakdancing, rapping, and graffiti  (Layne, 2014). Hip-hop is a lifestyle for many, while rap is something that people do. Rap is a form of delivery style that includes rhyme, rhythm, and spoken language, usually delivered over a beat. Shuker (2016) explains how "rap music has become the musical center of the broader cultural phenomenon of hip-hop: the broad term that encompassed the social, fashion, music, and dance subculture of America's urban, black and Latino youth of the 1980s and 1990s" (p. 121).

Rooted during the mid-1970s in black and Latino youth subcultures of New York City, hip-hop was used as a form of expression by those who were socially and culturally marginalized due to their race and class (Gosine & Tabi, 2016). The South Bronx was facing economic gaps between races, affecting working-class black and Latinos, and the federal government was cutting funds provided to schools and social service programs (Rose, 1994). Due to changes that severely impacted the community, the youth of the city sought ways to create new identities for themselves

through hip-hop culture. Hip-hop became a culture of style, movement, and sound, rapidly developing as a tool for communities and inspiration for the youth (Richardson, 2016). The rise of hip-hop music popularity has become a cultural phenomenon. The increased popularity of the genre unfolded a new era of hip-hop, rap music, expanded not only in the United States but also in Western Europe when the release of Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the airwaves in 1979 (Watkins, 2005). Popularity proved that hip-hop was no longer an underground subculture of the inner city, but a widespread phenomenon that was visible to wider publics. Popularity continued as artists such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five began to show rap's political potential detailing the conditions of ghetto life with "The Message" (1982). This song marked the beginning of the end of party-oriented DJs ruling hip-hop and opened the next era of more socially conscious MC-driven rap (Orfield, 2004). However, hip-hop began to change in the 1990s due to the mainstream music industry. Mainstream success and record companies' control of an artist developed the style of "gangsta rap." Lyrics heavily consisted of drugs, misogyny, and violence. By the 2000s rap and hip-hop cross genre boundaries and alternative hip-hop began to grow in popularity (Boyer, 2016).

Although rap music has gone through multiple trends and changes that have prompted widespread lyrical shifts, "keeping it real" has been key in hip-hop culture. Hess (2005) explains how "authenticity [is] necessary to establishing credibility as an artist within hip-hop, which values a discourse of lived experience, and has roots in oral traditions of testimony and bearing witness" (p. 298). Rap artists market themselves through narratives within their lyrics to authenticate their image. The rap artist is the storyteller in hip-hop, that gives vivid depictions of the daily struggles in life and offers a voice on behalf of their community while establishing themselves as "real." A rap artist's race, wealth, and social class are important in establishing their credibility. In "Beats, Rhymes, and Life: Hip-hop's unlikely movement," Waters (2014) discusses how hip-hop forms "authentic community within societies, making people feel as though they, and what they have experienced, matters" (p. 7). Thus, hip-hop created a sense of hope, giving the listener a confirmation that their situation is being identified and recognized (Smith & Jackson, 2005, 68).

The lyrics allow the listener who might be in a similar situation, to connect and have the sense that they are not alone. "Being connected means that you count… Hip-hop does that – it creates within itself a vibe where people can count and thus belong." (p. 73). Waters (2014) discusses the need for a place of belonging as a universal need that cannot be underestimated, especially towards people living at the margins of society. Similarly, Thompson (2008) discusses how young emcees are echoes of their habitat, in which they reflect on their social and economic culture. Lyrics give an artist space to express and reflect on issues, experiences, and to explore or fantasize. The types of struggles vary for every artist, but the American story of perseverance in achieving one's goals remains (Hess, 2005).

With the authenticity of hip-hop is the creation of the perceived "blackness." Hip-hop is conflated with the black experience, that creates a representation of racial identity and social class (Hess, 2007). Hess acknowledges that not all rap artists come from the same background of stories relating to the drug culture, fatherless homes, street gangs, and living on welfare and the projects, but the notion of social disadvantages gives rappers an inimitable quality and a voice to tell their own black experiences. According to Tricia Rose (1994), rap music is:

> "…central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the home of innovative uses of style and language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chitlin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling. In short, it is black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural intellectual and spiritual vessel" (p. 18).

Hip-hop is seen as a transformative art that represents social and political life, along with the representation of space, place, and context. Rappers create different contexts for their own vocals that articulate notions of subjective and collective identities, urban experience, racial consciousness and spatially structured patterns of power (Forman, 2002). Hip-hop culture provides visible complexities of racial construction, stereotypes, and misperceptions. Race matters as a

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defining principle of one's identity and their culture. Thus, the form to create and communicate cultural representation, social awareness, and political mobilization through rap, is central to authenticate the existence of racial identity.

However, hip-hop has experienced challenges in regards to rap music through the glorification of misogyny, violence, drug use, and materialism. In particular black women are often misrepresented as they are referred to as bitches, gold diggers, hoes, hoodrats, and stage props for rap artists. Waters (2014) argues that the misrepresentation of black women denies their authentic identity and hip-hop alone is not merely reflective for the images perpetuated but American culture as a whole. Krohn and Suazo (1995) discuss that "black women occupy the step under black males because they are the product of two handicaps: their gender and their race" (p. 150). Rose (2008) argues that there is an obsession with black men and women as gangstas, pimps, and hoes within hip-hop and American popular culture continues to reflect a deep investment in many of the misrepresentations of black bodies. The stories narrated in rap music "serve to protect young men from the reality of female rejection; tales of sexual domination falsely relieve their lack of self-worth and limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power" (1994, Rose, p. 15).

Although themes within rap music may have negative implications, it is necessary to understand the meaning behind the lyrics, that create a connection between the listener and the rapper. By understanding the music and what is being communicated, allows a level of understanding of themes that are being expressed and influencing the masses of youth. Hip-hop is an important cultural production that has become "a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world (2001, Mitchell, p. 2). Rappers interrogate sociopolitical structures within their music that create a role model image for many listeners. Even though there are problematic themes that arise within a rappers choice of lyricism, it is clear that hip-hop is a site of identity formation that underlies race, class, and gender in many ways.

## 2.3 IDENTITY POLITICS

Considering the importance of identity formation within popular music requires a deeper understanding of identity politics. Identity politics refers to categories such as race, gender, social, and other identity groupings, to provide a platform for discussions and concerns on how identities and power work together (Crenshaw, 1994). Labels of identity have become an obsession with the U.S. and social identities are fundamental within U.S. society for comprehending individual's actions and characteristics (De Fina, 2011). The continual battle of racial identity within the U.S. thought system–you are either black or white–influenced the focus of this research, by not only examining race, but including class, and gender while analyzing rap music. Through the framework of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) interlocking systems of oppression, analyzing the three systems of oppression will foster a shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions aside from racial identity. Although Collins research on black feminist thought speaks heavily on the discrimination and subsequent struggle for equality of black women, her standpoints can offer new visions of other groups. The concept of the matrix of domination consists of three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance. It's a paradigm that explains issues of oppression that deal with race, gender, and class, and how they interconnect. The multiple levels of domination consist of (1) the level of an individual's personal life; (2) the group or community level of the cultural background created by race, gender, and class; and (3) the level of social institutions and societies. An individual may be privileged in one aspect but oppressed through another aspect, ultimately forming a matrix of domination. Recognizing privilege and oppression impacts the impressions made on others and one's sense of identity. The use of matrix domination as a framework provides a greater understanding of how privilege and oppression play a role in society and the systems of inequality. When viewing all three levels, Collins (1990) states the importance of not only looking at the domination that is occurring but also the ways that people resist and fight back.

Although most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression--whether it be by race, social class, religion, physical ability,

sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender--they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination. In essence, each group identifies the oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all others as being of lesser importance. Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives (p. 229).

Everyone is shaped by a combination of social categories and different degrees of experiences of privilege and oppression. The idea of matrix domination underlines the connections and interdependencies of inequality. It allows for a greater grasp on the ways social categories are related and established. The intersection of social categories provides a theoretical approach that can be used to examine a group or community by analyzing and understanding where they sit within the matrix of domination.

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender, focuses on the way these systems of oppression vary and shape one's identity. Kimberelé Crenshaw (1989) suggests "that intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" (p. 12). Her research with intersectionality began to describe the impact of marginalized black women. Intersectionality provides a greater understanding of identity, based on the unique experiences of individuals. It enables a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Crenshaw notes through acknowledging "intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (p. 15).

Analyzing rap music provides a powerful lens to view a dominant discourse within black culture that has lived long in the margins of history. Kristine Wright (2004) argues that rap music results as a cultural expression, through its communicative practices on white America's racism. Most scholarship that examines hip-hop and social inequality have focused on themes related to gender and sexuality. Literature has explored the way lyrical content influences sexual attitudes

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and behavior, through the misogynistic and hegemonic masculinity representation (Guy, 2007). Exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in rap music contributes to the scholarship of intersectionality and how multiple social categories form a listeners identity.

This study contributes to previous literature and the importance of race, gender, class, and identity in the growing field of popular music and communication. The study attempts to showcase the intersectionality between race, gender, and class, and how rap music plays a role in identity formation. The following are the research questions that helped guide the study:

**RQ1:** In what ways does Kanye West frame race, gender, and class within his lyrics?

**RQ2:** How does Kanye West's framing of race, gender, and class, construct identity?

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter provided the foundation of the study, while emphasizing the connection between music and identity construction. To prioritize identity formation, the framework of intersectionality will be incorporated to ground the methodology of the study and provide a sharper lens to understand the interlocking and intersecting of social structures. Intersectionality will allow for a greater understanding of the roles race, gender, and class, play in the construction and understanding of identity. Due to the multiple identities that music offers and impacts within a variety of music, I will be focusing solely on rap music and specifically on Kanye West. Since West has a broad catalog, I will be focusing on social themes from five albums.

To answer the research questions for this study I will be using textual analysis. The purpose for selecting West was based on the following criteria: (1) he has impacted the standards for a rap artist and the themes used in rap music; (2) he has become successful musically by obtaining the most Grammy awards as a rapper (21); (3) all of his solo albums debuted at the number one spot; and (4) West has been listed twice among the list of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people. To take a closer look at the discourse West communicates within his music, I will be examining five different albums within his discography. In order to provide a balanced research, it is important to examine different albums within his career. The justification of selecting the following albums *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), *Yeezus* (2013), and *ye* (2018) were based on the following: (1) critical and commercial success; (2) were reviewed by critics for containing political and social issues; and (3) created controversy upon the release of the album and within the lyrics. Within this chapter, I will first discuss the theory that will provide a framework for the study and the method that will be used, followed by a background of each album and a description of the methodological framework used to analyze each album.

## 3.1 CRITICAL RACE THEORY (CRT)

Hip-hop began as a form of response by striving towards social change and sharing the inequalities within America, the movement of racial recognition is parallel to the movement of critical race theory (CRT). As race has continued to be a significant issue within American society, hip-hop and the use of CRT offers a framework as a race-conscious approach in understanding inequality and racism within America and giving a voice to those who are oppressed (Douglas, 2010). CRT serves as a form of resistance to the "unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines in America" (Taylor, 2009). CRT critiques the construction and maintenance of racially based social and economic oppression. It provides a view on race as a social construction that demonstrates a perspective on race and racism in America. Taylor defines the scholarship to be:

> …marked by a number of specific insights and observations, including society's acceptance of racism as ordinary, the phenomenon of white's allowing black progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the important of understanding the historic effects of European colonialism, and the preference of the experiences of oppressed peoples (narrative) over the "objective" opinions of whites (p. 4).

CRT emerged as a movement from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, due to the slow pace of racial reform in the United States and was further popularized as a discipline to understand issues of social realities. Previous scholars have explored how racialized classifications and racial structures are formulated and maintained throughout history. Racism intersects in multiple ways with themes such as gender, social class background, ability, and age (Haney-Lopez, 1994). CRT provides a critique of white racial privilege and a consciousness of oppression that exists in American society. CRT rejects the notion that one can fight racism without acknowledging social themes such as socio-economic status, sexism, gender and other forms of oppression (Douglas, 2012). CRT acknowledges that "personal experience and narrative storytelling are used extensively and creatively to challenge the existing social construction of race" (p. 55). Similarly, hip-hop too revolves around the use of storytelling and has been utilized

to discredit and disempower the white culture elite. The telling of stories also provides a space of ideas and beliefs within a historical and political context. Stories also have a connection with various elements and intersections of social life. Both CRT and hip-hop serve the dual purpose of providing a race-based theoretical framework for analyzing other lines of differences and social issues such as race, class, and gender, by acknowledging systems that fundamentally intersect and influence one's identity. This theory is appropriate for my research as CRT provides a focus on critique and construction, through the analysis of language within rap music that contains multiple dimensions of marginalization and oppression, as well as overlapping and interrelated social issues.

**3.2 ALBUMS**

Through exploring the language of West's lyrics, I will be utilizing five different albums that provide lenses to view social inequality themes such as race, class, and gender through his music and how they create a social impact. The four albums chosen do not derive from a certain period of West's musical career, but each showcase an artistic period of time in his life, varying the way he frames social issues. Over time his career has pioneered various musical styles and taken on different approaches that have had an influence on his lyrical content and hip-hop as a whole. Four albums that can be described as a heavier tool in communicating social themes, than the rest of his discography are *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), *Yeezus* (2013), and *ye* (2018). With the exception of *Yeezus* and *ye*, *The College Dropout*, *Late Registration*, and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, have all ranked in *Rolling Stone's* "500 Greatest Albums of All Time" (2012).

Within the study, I would like to explore the lyrical content West incorporates to communicate themes of race, gender, and class through examining five different albums: *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), and *Yeezus* (2013). *Dropout* is West's debut album that explored themes that are "critical of historical foundations, social structures, and economic systems," beyond the gangster-rap themes

that were taking place during that time (Boeck, 2014). Despite the predictions the album had of not making it to radio due to the topics his songs contained, West received widespread acclaim from critics, 10 Grammy nominations, was on *Billboard's* top 200, and has been his best-selling album in the United States thus far (Billboard, 2004; Scaggs, 2004; Statistic Brain, 2018).

While West received critical and commercial success with his groundbreaking album, his sophomore album *Late Registration* (2005), took on a different approach that brought growth to the rapper. The album contained lyricism on social themes with a much smoother delivery. West incorporated orchestration towards the production of the album, with co-producer Job Brion. Once again, curating creativity within hip-hop to mix with his articulation of wordplay within his songs (Jones, 2005). *Late Registration* also earned West a Grammy Award for Best Rap Album, debuted at a number one on the Billboard 200 chart, and has been certified triple platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (Billboard, 2005; D.K, 2006; RIAA, 2006).

*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010) is West's fifth solo studio album, and one of the most anticipated albums at the time of release due to his highly publicized incident at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards where he interrupted Taylor Swifts acceptance speech (Vozick-Levinson, 2010). Despite the controversial incident, the album serves as one of the most critically acclaimed albums in history, receiving top album rankings for Rolling Stone, Noisey, Billboard, Entertainment Weekly, and Acclaimed music, to name a few (Birchmeier, n.d.). It debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart, won a Grammy Award for Best Rap Album, and became a blueprint for other artists to articulate their own works in the coming decade (Billboard, 2010; Billboard, 2012)

*Yeezus* (2013), the sixth solo album of West, has provided a much different sound in hip-hop compared to his previous work, curating a definitive buzz around critics upon the release (Chambers, 2015). His songs within this album took a more minimalist production and a darker tone within his lyrics. Critics formed various interpretations of the album and debated on the content and tone he used within his work (Bassell, 2013). Although the album debuted at on the Billboard 200 chart and reached the number one spot, it was also the lowest sales debut of his

career. The album's house and electro sampling over half-finished verses were not well-received or thoroughly understood by others (Caulfield, 2013).

Lastly, *ye* (2018), is West's most recent solo album and by far the most controversial time of his whole rap career. Months leading up to the release of *ye*, West proudly endorsed President Donald Trump wearing a Make America Great Again (MAGA) hat, stated slavery was a choice and constantly voiced himself through Twitter. In the hip-hop community, West could no longer be excused for his actions, and being a West fan became difficult for some. The political rants were viewed as a way to stir controversy for the release of his album, typical West behavior, and even a reaction to his mental instability and health. Prior to the release of *ye*, West's previous album *The Life of Pablo* (2016) led to a tour that ultimately ended shorter than expected due to West's mental health. He was hospitalized, on drugs, and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Although his approach in returning to music was problematic for many hip-hop fans, his 23-minute long album that consisted of seven songs, that was released at a listening party in the middle of (nowhere) Jackson Hole, Wyoming, his eighth solo album provides darkness of his personal life. Multiple critics of the album described the controversy projects as a cry for help due to very personal lyrics referencing his life and his rocky career since being hospitalized (Garvery, 2018). Aside *ye* being labeled a "missed opportunity for redemption," the album landed West his eighth number one album on the *Billboard* 200 chart (Brown, 2018; Caulfield, 2018).

**3.3 PROCEDURES**

**3.4 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

To view messages that are being conveyed through West's music, a qualitative approach is necessary to examine the discourse that is being communicated. More specifically, a textual analysis best suits the purpose of the study. Shuker (2008) further discusses textual analysis as being "concerned with identifying and analyzing the formal qualities of texts, their underpinning structures, and constituent characteristic" (p. 81). To gain a greater understanding of social themes, textual messages within West's music will be interpreted. In particular, they will be interpreted

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through the perspective of a Latina. Shuker discusses that "subordinate groups may reinterpret such textual messages, making 'sense' of them in a different way" (p. 82).

Building upon the importance of rap music, the use of textual analysis will provide a greater understanding of how listeners of rap music make sense of who they are through the music they are listening to. Although there is a great amount of research in regard to rap music and its relation to one's identity, my intent is to contribute to previous studies that critique the relationship between rap music and black identities, through a Latina rap fan perspective. However, I would like to foreground the intersectionality between race, gender, and class, and how those factors appeal toward identity formation for various audiences. I will look at the themes of race, gender, and class, and how they intersect and overlap each other. I will pay attention to the way each theme is communicated and interrelated within his music. I will examine the ways West communicates racial and societal issues that formulate his own identity, ultimately impacting the formation of a listener's own identity. I will then discuss the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class and how they matter as they continue to structure society in many ways. Furthermore, I will include the importance of race, gender, and class as linked experiences and are how they remain foundations for systems of power and inequality. Ultimately, these intersecting categories shape and influence the construction of one's self. As rap has grown in scope and influence to form one's perception and identity, it is important to view the way certain artists incorporate lyrics that contain themes that reflect an individual's development.

Using textual analysis within the study and to successfully answer the research questions, I first began by listening to each album. This was not a critical listen but rather a cursory listen, with a focus on how a song would make me feel. The second listen was a critical one, focused on identifying aspects of each song that would fit my methodological framework. After I heard all five albums, I began to use genius.com–one of the largest lyrics websites– to read songs line-by-line. To make sure the lyrics that were being provided by *Genius* were accurate, I played each album for a third listen while following along with each song to verify that the lyrics provided through *Genius* matched correctly. I then began to reread the lyrics for the fourth time and began

the coding process. I used a selective coding procedure to categorize songs within their themes. Characteristics of race that were searched for within the lyrics were the use of the "n-word," cultural events, and self-identification. After the search of racial characteristics, the second set of characteristics referencing gender were searched for. This included lyrics that describe the portrayal and representation of women and masculinity. Finally, messages regarding class characteristics will be sought within the lyrics. Messages in this area include the mentioning of employment, education, power, and wealth.

## 3.5 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

When viewing characteristics within rap lyrics, I will use critical race theory (CRT) as a framework of understanding multiple dimensions of marginalization and oppression, through the overlapping and interconnectedness of race, gender, and class themes within rap music. This interconnectedness of class, race, and gender calls for an intersectional analysis of how different categories or dimensions of power are intertwined. The following provides a background of each characteristic that will be searched for, in order to seek the ways each theme interrelates to shape one's identity.

### 3.5.1 RACE

*THE "N-WORD"*

The "n-word" has become a part of the hip-hop language and can be heard frequently in rap music. Deriving from the Latin word *niger* for the color black, n-gger, has become a racially charged word that sparks controversy due to the heavy history it holds as a racial slur directed to black individuals. It is important to note, that the usage of the "n-word," is most pronounced as n-gga rather than n-gger within hip-hop and rap lyrics. Alim (2004) explains the use of the "n-word" as n-gga instead of n-gger within rap music, "reflects the culturally specific meanings with a new meaning" (p. 399). Previous research on the "n-word" has recognized the use of it within hip-hop, as an encoded expression of resistance and consciousness of social and economic marginalization (Perry 2005; Smitherman 2001). Building on the expression of resistance through the use of the

"n-word," studies have found the term is often used to reclaim and recreate a collective black identity (Kelly, 1994; Rose, 1994; Boyd, 2002). Jacquelyn Rahman (2012) further explains that the term helps black males identify as resourceful and pragmatic survivors of racial injustice. Rahman explains that "during the period of slavery, n-gga became a term that Africans used to refer to themselves and companions in the struggle to survive" (p. 147).

Randall Kennedy (2002), describes "n-gger [to be] fascinating precisely because it has been put to a variety of uses and can radiate a wide array of meanings" (p. 34). He writes that "for bad and for good, nigger is… destined to remain with us for many years to come – a reminder of the ironies and dilemma, the tragedies and glories, of the American experience" (p. 176). Kennedy discusses that out of other racial slurs, the "n-word" is a more contentious word in American society than all the others, due to white and black racial conflict. Previous studies have critiqued the "n-word" as acceptable to use and interesting based on the multiple meanings, while others do not find the use admissible under any circumstance. Cornel West (2001) argues that the word is sensitive and should be discarded entirely, due to the dangerous and problematic usage. As previous studies have found the usage of the "n-word" as a term of affection, West also suggests words such as brother, sister, or comrade to be used instead. Eric Dyson's (2001) criticism of the "n-word" provides a different debate compared to West. He argues that the word "grew out of a loving affirming culture that used it in opposition to how the dominant white culture was using it." He continues by saying:

> The global export of American culture comes in the form and face of hip-hop culture… Professor West is right in the sense that now denuded of, removed from, the social context that can explain what the "n-word" means it can become dangerous, I agree with that. I still believe however, within the context of African American culture where certain people have disallowed the circulation of that term, it's quite necessary to see that we do not only have linguistic creativity, we have linguistic–I think–malleability. The form of the word can be played with and therefore the content can be challenged. The content that is negative and

problematic has to be reinterpreted through the lens of these young people who don't have the virtue of having sat in the feet of Professor West to understand the social context. Dyson does make it clear within his argument of the "n-word," in comparison to West's opinion the term not being used by anyone whatsoever, those who have permission to use the term are only those within the black community. The usage of the "n-word" becomes problematic when the white community begins to use the term.

Whether one finds the "n-word" admissible to say based on any context, previous studies have found the usage of the "n-word" within hip-hop as a black empowerment slang that is used as an act of historical remembrance, applied in ways of almost saying brother or sister, and is largely embraced as a way to create a black identity. Another used word within rap, the "n-word" is a form of language and expression that depends largely on the context to develop a certain meaning and sense of understanding. It is important to view such a complicated and multi-layered word that provides different feelings and a different identity for those who use it or hear it. When examining the n-word throughout the study, different variations such as "n-gga," "n-gger," and "n-gro,' will be sought in order to get a deeper understanding of how the use of the "n-word" serves as a term of identity construction.

## *CULTURAL EVENTS*

Understanding a culture provides an outlook on different beliefs, customs, values, history, and social behaviors. The hip-hop culture has continued to grow over the past years, sharing moments of protest, overcoming the struggle, pride, power, and black cultural references. The cultural movement has become a widespread popularity that incorporates important topics such as politics, slavery, civil rights movement, and what it is to be black in America. It is a platform to uplift communities, while creatively sharing social awareness. Many have used hip-hop to share their personal stories of dealing with racism, poverty, prejudice, and artistic freedom throughout songs.

As culture serves as a strong and influential part of people's lives, viewing cultural events voiced within rap music, calls for attention on racial issues while showing different perspectives

on views and values. It allows the development of connectedness and constructs who they are and where they come from. Previous research has acknowledged the influence music has on shaping cultural frames relating to the black community (Khan, 2008). Culture is what ties a group together, through values and beliefs for a variety of people all around the world. Khan further discusses how the use of cultural reference points has been used in a chase for social justice by the black community. Examining cultural events relates to the formation of one's identity due to the impact it can have on your attitude, emotions, or way of thinking. Culture and past experiences shape current thought and behavior processes. The usage of cultural references emphasize collective identities and shared values. When finding cultural events throughout lyrics, topics in relation to cultural movements, such as slavery, civil rights movement, and racial politics will be examined.

### SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Hip-hop is not only about music, but it is also comprised of fashion, art, and personalities, that have heavily served as an authentic representation of black culture. The majority of rap lyrics consist of references to experiences growing up in underrepresented neighborhoods, battling respect, and recognition in society. As it has become a highly vocal culture, rap music provides self-identity, politics, and a way of life for fans. Rap music utilizes self-identification based on a rappers choice of lyrical content, sharing their morals, social values, describing their skin color, and showcasing their intellectual abilities (Rose, 1994). American culture has trained people to identify one another's race based on these different characteristics. As rap listeners vary in demographics and race, studies have found that those who are fans want to be a part of a "cool culture" and are highly influenced by the self-identification of those around them or the music that they listen to (Speer, 2014). Although most of the racial self-identification that is shared through rap music has a greater relationship with black youth, rap music has the power to penetrate the daily lives of many through the sharing of relatable personal stories for a widespread audience (Rose, 1989).

Self-identification is significant to view within the study as fans of rap music enjoy the realness and authenticity of the genre. Not everyone thinks the same or has similar personal

characteristics or thoughts, the realness that is showcased within rap music allows a listener to connect to real-life issues or thoughts. Examining self-identification within rap places an importance within the theme of race, as behavior, values, and morals, vary depending on where you are from. Within the contextual framework of affirming authenticity, artists establish who they are by affirming their authenticity through their lyrics. When seeking to find self-identification, characteristics of attitude, morals, values, and behavior will be searched for.

### 3.5.2 GENDER

*MASCULINITY*

Since the beginning of hip-hop, studies have discussed the representation of black masculinity within rap music. Various scholars have defined black masculinity, as a black male that exhibits extreme toughness, invulnerability, violence, and domination (Collins, 2004; Neal, 2006; Oware, 2010). Collins (2004) describes the stereotyped "images of black men as "tamed beasts"–wild, violent, unintelligent and hypersexual beings used to justify domination and labor exploitation under chattel slavery in the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 56-57). She additionally discusses the growth of prison culture in the 1980s having influenced characteristics of masculinity within black communities, based on the incarceration of large numbers of black men, and in turn the cultural focus of the thug life and increasing misogyny and homophobia. Perry (2004) suggests that black masculinity is rooted in the class system, racialism, living conditions, and prison trauma. He further describes black masculinity existing in a world dominated by the strong white male patriarchy, which leads to more messages containing misogynistic lyrics in order to develop feelings of empowerment. Studies have argued that images of masculinity in rap music derive from actual norms and behavioral patterns representing social life in black communities. For example, Majors and Billson (1992) have discussed:

> Although black males defined their manhood similarly to white males–provider, breadwinner, and protector– they did not have the necessary resources to fulfill these roles. Consequently, they created the "cool pose," understood as "[u]nique patterns of speech,

walk, and demeanor… it is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails scripts, physical

posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a

single, critical message: pride, strength, and control (p. 2-4).

Building on Majors and Billson (1992), Collins (2005) explains how "so many African American

men lack access to forms of political and economic power that are available to elite White men,

the use of their bodies, physicality, and a form of masculine aggressiveness become more

important" (p. 190). Rose (2008) asserts that within rap music "sexism is visible, vulgar,

aggressive and popular" (p. 114), fueled by a complex of factors including sexism in black

communities that influences rappers' attitudes and lyrics as well as the patriarchal values

permeating the wider society. Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) have also concluded that the influence

of misogyny in rap music, encompasses larger social forces, norms about gender, the music

industry and local neighborhood conditions.

More than any other aspect of this musical genre, misogyny has been the focal point of hip-

hop research in relation to gender and masculinity. Collins (2005) states that one of the benchmarks

of a current "real man" includes the control of women. Although plenty of research done on rap

music has labeled rap's lyrics as misogynistic, scholar Tyree uncovered in her research that black

male rappers have a "safe space" where their mothers are praised, protected and appreciated, in

comparison to other women that are mentioned (2015). Many rappers construct a black male

subjectivity that incorporates the notion that masculinity means exhibiting extreme toughness,

invulnerability, and domination (Oware, 2010). Bajali (2009) argues that the media has a strong

ideological influence on how black male identity is constructed and states that artists engage in a

self-commodification process to create their own unique brands and social following.

Masculinity within rap music is undeniable. Previous research has noted the importance

and the continuation of masculine traits that are repeatedly shown throughout rap music. It is

important to take a closer look at masculinity, in order to create a stronger understanding and

perspective of a male role. Specific characteristics of masculinity that I will search for will be

toughness, boasting over women, hypersexuality, dominance, and egotistical behavior.

*FEMALE REPRESENTATION*

As rap music remains a male-dominated genre, the roles and representation of women are often grouped in stereotypical and degrading portrayals. Due to the controversial and highly sexualized content found in rap music, gender-based perceptions have become increasingly relevant to examine (Tyson & McLaughlin, 2012). For many years, the hip-hop industry has continued to grow sales with rap music and the use of demeaning women. It is no surprise that the genre is often viewed in negative ways, as women– particularly black females– are stereotyped as "overly sexualized, "baby mamas," and "gold diggers" (Hobson & Bartlow, 2008). The depiction of women in rap music is constructed through ideologies surrounding womanhood in American society. bell hooks (2006) critiques the "sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap [as] a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 135). hook argues on the representation of women within mainstream culture, which she states "would not lead us to place gangsta rap on the margins of what this nation is about but at the center. Rather than seeing it as a subversion or disruption of the norm, we would need to see it as the embodiment of the norm" (p.137).

Many scholars have concluded that rap music "has either ignored women or situated them as commodities, ornaments, or objects of male pleasure" (Tyree & Jones, 2015; Rose, 1991). In Imani Perry's "Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop," he argues that rap music frequently presents women as hypersexualized "gold diggers" who attempt to take advantage of men (2004). Building upon Perry's description of women as stereotyped "gold diggers" in rap music, Herd (2014) further discusses additional stereotyped images of black women. He explains how:

Images of black women have been shaped by the following principles: black women are unfeminine; their sexuality is abhorrent (either hypersexual, asexual; or anti-male and sexually punitive) their economic and social outlook is similarly deviant (they are predators or lazy and dependent on public assistance and men). The resulting "controlling images of

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black women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and "hot mamas" are used to justify black women's oppression and to normalize racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social inequality. Countering and challenging these controlling images has long been a central focus of black feminist thought (2014, p. 579).

Previous research notes the prevailing images within rap music in regard to women, as being seductive and physically attractive in order to catch the attention of a male. Stephens and Phillips (2003) have used a framework to argue on the stereotype and portrayals of black women as freaks, gold diggers, divas, dikes, and baby mamas in rap music. These images inform and add to the development of a black female. The use of certain depictions of women creates an "ideal" female identity, frame the understanding and impact the self-image of women in hip-hop and rap culture.

Although other studies have noted the sexualized and stereotyping of women within rap music, they have found the negative representations of women are based on men's fears and anxieties regarding women's ability to control heterosexual sex (Rose, 1994). hooks (1990) disagrees on the assumptions that racism is harder on men than females and that sexism empowers men despite the racism in their lives. Rather than defending rooted trauma in men as the reason negative female representations are used within rap music, hooks argues on the dominant values in America culture and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Examining gender and female representation within rap music exhibits different values and interpretations of the world around the rapper. It is important to view the representation of women and how that affects the treatment of women by men, along with the self-identification and stereotypes that continue to exist for women. Through searching for female representation, I will search for descriptions of a females physical appearance or behavior, references to gold diggers, divas, dikes, and promiscuous.

### 3.5.3 CLASS

*POWER AND WEALTH*

Communities vary on the resources they are able to offer to those living within. Everyone has different experiences that are created due to a system that you are born and raised through.

Systems vary in levels of power, privilege, and accessibility. Individuals who are less privileged have less access to quality education and job security. From the birth of hip-hop in the 1970s, it has always been about inspiring those to overcome obstacles. Obstacles that are often associated with the lower class, include financial trouble, coming from the "hood," describing the struggle, dealing drugs, and experiences within the judicial system. Hip-hop developed as a way to express oneself and experiences including one's socioeconomic status. As a form of authenticity, rap artists frequently mention their background along with the inclusion of mainstream hip-hop lyrics filled with materialism and wealth.

It's important to note the significance power and wealth has towards shaping one's identity. Representations of marginalized communities showcase what it is like to live in white America and daily challenges that are being faced by many. Collins (2006) further discussed that:

> Race intersects with class to such a degree in the United States that race often stands as proxy for class. Yet social class also produces fundamental group-based differences that are often masked by the inordinate attention paid to racism. Classes represent bounded categories of the American population who have different interests growing from their positions within capitalism (p. 181).

Power and money have a great significance towards the social and economic status that you are placed within society. The division that society has on various hierarchies based on economic success, is more than just the accumulation of wealth that you have, but also reflects towards who you are. The power and wealth that you have, influence the items you have, the way you carry yourself, whom you associate yourself with, behavior, and attitude, to name a few. It is highly influential in the constructing of your identity, how you see yourself and how others see you. Exploring class through the characteristics of power and wealth will aim for a closer lens of the mentioning of money, materialism and consumerism, living conditions, treatment by the criminal justice system.

*EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION*

When it comes to educational or employment opportunities, access is often determined by an individual's social status. Within hip-hop, artists have been voicing struggles within the education system for decades. Bourdieu (1999) argues that social identity tends to be more and more defined by the education system. He explains how "the school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves toward it" (p. 423).

When it comes to voicing the topic of employment or previous jobs, in rap music you can often find the lyrics speaking about "hustling" in the streets. To "hustle" means to make money, by any means necessary– legal or illegal. The emphasis to "hustle" is heavy within hip-hop culture, and for many rap artists, it's the only way out from the streets. As rappers use their lyrics to speak on their personal experiences, the use of dealing drugs is famously seen by many. For many, it is easily accessible to make more money dealing, than a minimum wage job. For many, the harsh conditions of living in the "ghetto," do not provide the needed access to certain sources such as legal jobs and education.  Living conditions have been described in various hip-hop songs, even in early rap like Grandmaster Flash's "The Message." Artists like Jay-Z, Biggie, and Nas have used their music to do the same and provide a glimpse of living conditions in the projects. Often "hustling" in the streets reflects a type of educational success. For someone living in the projects, the typical American dream to achieve a degree and earn a successful job is not the life for many minorities– it's reaching 18 and getting out of the projects. Hip-hop and rap music is seen as a negative genre, for topics such as dealing drugs, stealing, gang affiliations, but for many artists, those are their reality. Many times the lyrics are explicit, and others who have access to higher education and employment opportunities do not understand or blame hip-hop culture for the lyrical content, but it is a living reality.

The educational and employment opportunities that you may have, plays a significant part in who you are and whom you will become. It's important to look at class with the characteristics of education and employment, since each class various on the access they have of the two based

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on where they are in the social hierarchy. For example, the life of someone who is born in a lower class with parents who never completed high school has a completely different advantage than someone who was born in a middle-class family and parents who have a college degree. Although education and employment do not define the success of a person, most of the time the access to those two are based on class, which then plays a part on who someone is. To further analyze these characteristics I will seek any mentioning of education and references towards working conditions and occupations.

The stereotypes of black individuals in society have been framed to be poor, violent, and criminals. Although this image of black individual dates to the days of slavery, it is still heavily conceived to this day (Kene, 2010). Socioeconomic status is recognized within different factors based on income, education, occupation, and wealth. Aside from race, and gender, social class adds an important third dimension of everyone's identity and the different resources and opportunities that they may have. Therefore viewing the different characteristics of class, is important to address and view the role class plays within intersectionality of race and gender.

# CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

Chapter four presents the results of the study, explaining the way's West uses the themes of race, gender, and class within his music. Within each theme are characteristics that were found throughout his lyrics. First, I outline several instances of West referencing characteristics of race, gender, and class within his music. Then I discuss the importance of discussing the characteristics within the his music. Overall, I argue on the importance of West incorporating race, gender, and class themes within his music and the role it plays in identity formation. The first part of the analysis involves race and the characteristics searched within the theme, (1) the "n-word, (2) cultural events, and (3) self-identification. The second part of the analysis covers the theme of gender with characteristics of (1) masculinity and (2) female representation. The third and final section of the analysis involves the theme of class and the characteristics of (1) power and wealth and (2) education and employment. After analyzing each section with the findings of race, class, and gender themes and the important implications of West's uses and their connection with identity, I provide an overall discussion on the importance and intersectionality of all three social themes within his music.

## 4.1. FINDINGS

### 4.1.1 THE "N-WORD"

Through analyzing West's five albums and the use of the "n-word," I found variations of the word used by West on a total of thirty-four songs. The context in which West used the "n-word" varied; it was often used to form black identity, address black oppression, expression of resistance, form of affection or as a filler word within the song.

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE "N-WORD"

First, West expresses social and economic issues within the black community and incorporates the "n-word" as a form of resistance. The first example is in "We Don't Care" (2004), the theme of the song focuses on dealing drugs and hustling in the hood, while referring to the men within the song as "n-ggas." He enters the song by saying, "Oh yeah... I've got the perfect song

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for the kids to sing…" (intro), and provides a song to 'celebrate' dealing drugs out of hopelessness. He claims he raps for his "n-ggas outside all winter, 'cause this summer they ain't finna to say next summer I'm finna" (verse 1). West is referencing the drug culture that surrounds many black men in low-income communities. He is dedicating his song to those who keep hustling in the cold and in the summer; they do not waste time thinking about future plans, since dealing in the streets is a tough environment where your future is not always guaranteed.

It is similarly found in "Crack Music" (2005) when West repeatedly uses the "n-word" within his chorus, "that's that crack music n-gga, that real black music n-gga." Throughout the song, West is speaking on political topics regarding the Black Panthers, Ronald Reagan, lynching, George Bush, and the 1980s crack epidemic. The use of the "n-word" gives the song greater meaning towards themes of the drug culture and racial inequality within the black community. West uses the "n-word" to affirm the theme of crack (an addictive drug associated with black individuals) and black music (referring to hip-hop due to its African origins) as the medicine for the black community. "Crack Music" compares crack addiction to America's addiction to hip-hop. The use of the "n-word" elaborated the meaning of the song as West explained in *Time* saying, "Take the word n-gga. I don't like the word, and I made an attempt to change it on this new song 'Crack Music.' I tried saying, "This is crack music, homey,' but it just didn't have same impact" (Ahmen, 2012).

The expression of the "n-word" was also used to reflect towards black male experiences and negative stereotypes that originally constructed the racial slur. Black male stereotypes were found in West's "Jesus Walks" (2004). West describes racial stereotypes of black men, as he raps:

You know what the Midwest is? Young & Restless

Where restless (niggas) might snatch your necklace

And next these (niggas) might jack your Lexus

Somebody tell these (niggas) who Kanye West is (verse 1)

West begins the verse by acknowledging the location of the Midwest, a place of poverty and criminality. He then provides negative scenarios of black men being criminals. Prior to the black

community providing a new meaning of the "n-word" through reclaiming and recreating a collective black identity, the "n-word" was used as a racial slur directed to black individuals. The historic meaning of the "n-word" was used by racist and violent white supremacists, to hold power over blacks. It was used to devalue and dehumanize the black community (Sheinin & Thompson, 2014). Similarly, "Violent Crimes" (2013) provides a negative black male representation through the use of the "n-word," when West raps:

Niggas is savage, niggas is monsters

Niggas is pimps, niggas is players

'Til niggas have daughters, now they precautious (verse 1)

The song is referring to his daughter that has changed his perspective on the way men act towards women. He claims men will continue to act like savages, monsters, pimps, and players, toward women, until they have daughters that will impact their behavior for the better. West incorporates the racial slur, when emphasizing his message that daughters change men from associating themselves with negative stereotypes that have been created for black men.

The "n-word" was also found as a form of affection, in songs like "Family Business" (2004), when West raps, "all my niggas from the Chi, that's my family dog, and my niggas ain't my guys, they my family dog" (verse 3). In opposition to the dominant white culture using the term to dehumanize black individuals, West uses it as a form of affection. It is used as another word for saying brother or comrade. Another example is shown in "Gorgeous" (2010), when West mentions he "won't be satisfied till all [his] n-ggas get" (verse 1). Within this verse, he is bringing up his dream that not only includes success but also the success of those around him.

Lastly, the "n-word" was found within West's lyrics as a filler word. Quite commonly, the hip-hop language incorporates certain terms to create an effect in that particular moment of the song or to maintain a rhythmic. For example, in "I Thought About Killing You" (2018), West raps:

Ye, Ye, Ye season, nigga, we obey

We was all born to die, nigga DOA

Niggas say they hero, mhm, I don't see no cape (verse 1)

The use of the "n-word" does not impact the context of this verse in terms of a certain meaning but is rather used as a filler within the song. The use of the term impacts the tone of the song and sound, but lyrically the use of the "n-word" within this song does not provide a deeper meaning.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE "N-WORD"**

The context of the "n-word" is important in today's society, as many debate on the role the hip-hop community has with ingraining the youth culture through the repetitive usage of the word. A word that holds a historic meaning, is prevalent now more than ever as many within this generation hear the word repeatedly through hip-hop music. The word holds power based on the intention one is using it with. The "n-word" is dependent upon context and the setting, which alters the meaning of the word. For some, "it's impossible to separate the word from various manifestations of white supremacy" (Sheinin & Thompson, 2014); for other's the use of the word today has almost no personal connection to history or race and believe loaded context should be removed in modern language. The phenomenon of the word originally meant as a slur and being used in a way to assert black experiences in facing racism, has become a way to create black identity.

**YEEZY TAUGHT ME: THE "N-WORD"**

Within West's music, the "n-word" is used as a black empowerment slang that provides a collective black identity. As a form of racial resistance and consciousness, the "n-word" is used within his music to emphasize the messages he is communicating. While the "n-word" is a complex and controversial racial slur, it is important to view the context in which West is using the word within his music. Although the "n-word" does not fill the majority of his verses, it is a racial slur that is used often within the hip-hop community. Since the term was used for black individuals to refer to themselves and others in the struggle to survive, West incorporates the use of the "n-word" repeatedly in certain songs that contain themes of black struggle in society. Through his lyrics the

use of the word was found when referencing social and economic issues that include the drug culture that surrounds many black men in low-income communities and negative stereotypes that shape many black men as criminals and monsters. Although the context of the "n-word" is also found as a form of affection to similarly say "brother" or as a filler-type word, West includes the "n-word" in racially charged lyricism to emphasize the meaning of what he is communicating and to highlight the realities and representations of black men within America.

## 4.1.2 CULTURAL EVENTS

Examining cultural events within West's music, black history references of the civil rights movement, slavery, the 1980s crack epidemic, and Sierra Leone diamond trade were found present in a total of fourteen different songs. Cultural references provide social awareness of black culture and the importance of remembering history within the black community. As a son of a former Black Panther and a successful English professor, West creatively raps about previous cultural events while reclaiming and rewriting cultural struggles that recognize his family's past struggles and acknowledge where he comes from.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL EVENTS**

An example of cultural references found within West's music is first seen when he references the Civil Rights movement in "Never Let Me Down" (2004). He enters his verse rapping:

I get down for my grandfather who took my momma

Made her sit that seat where white folks ain't want us to eat

At the tender age of 6 she was arrested for the sit ins

With that in my blood I was born to be different

Now niggas can't make it to ballots to choose leadership

But we can make it to Jacob and to the dealership

That's why I hear new music

And I just don't be feeling it

Racism still alive they just be concealing it (verse 2)

West presents his grandfather's role in the Civil Rights movement and the continued activism that was followed by West's mother. West draws a historical lineage of black identity, by including his grandfather and mother's role in the sit ins. Additionally, he discusses voter discrimination within the black community that has limited their voice on being heard, due to the difficulties created for minority groups to participate in the political system. He also brings up his believes that many black individuals are persuaded to spend their money on Jacob (jewelry) and new cars, instead of being educated and having the opportunity to voice themselves in the electoral system. He believes racism is just being concealed within America, due to disadvantages the black community continues to face.

References towards the Civil Right movement were found again in "Crack Music" (2005), as West speaks about the Black Panthers and Ronald Reagan's Mulford Act of 1967 that was used to suppress the Black Panther movements and the crack cocaine epidemic. He raps:

"How we stop the black panthers?

Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer

You hear that?

What Gill Scott was hearin'

When our heroes and heroines got hooked on heroin.

Crack raised the murder rate in DC and Maryland

We invested in that it's like we got Merril-Lynched

And we been hangin from the same tree ever since

Sometimes I feel the music is the only medicine

So we cook it, cut it, measure it, bag it, sell it

The fiends cop it

Nowadays they can't tell if that's that good shit

We ain't sure man

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Put the CD on your tongue yeah, that's pure man" (verse 1)

West begins the verse by referencing the way the government attacked the Black Panthers, by disseminating crack cocaine in inner-city black communities to tear apart the hopes of the Black Panther movement. As he speaks on the crack epidemic in America, West references Gill Scott, a soul musician and poet who commonly incorporated topics of racism within her music. He further acknowledges the use of crack cocaine and the increased crime that affected major cities. He closes his cultural references, through the reference of lynching, something commonly associated with slavery and Jim Crow. Through associating historical references, West offers a view on his perspective on black history and the inequality and injustice within American society. By addressing cultural events, he also dives into a comparison of the consumption of crack cocaine as a coping mechanism for unequal systems and its relation to hip-hop. He uses "crack music" to build upon the history of racism and inequality, by connecting it to the present use of hip-hop that is also controlled by privileged whites.

Examples of cultural events were also found in "Diamonds From Sierra Leone (Remix)" (2005), as West raps about the violence involved in the global diamond trade. He opens the song with the following verse:

"Good Morning, this ain't Vietnam still

People lose hands, legs, arms for real

Little was known of Sierra Leone

And how it connect to the diamonds we own

When I speak of Diamonds in this song

I ain't talkin bout the ones that be glowin

I'm talkin bout Rocafella, my home, my chain

These ain't conflict diamonds, is they Jacob? don't lie to me mayne

See, a part of me sayin' keep shinin',

How? when I know of the blood diamonds

Though it's thousands of miles away

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Sierra Leone connect to what we go through today

Over here, it's a drug trade, we die from drugs

Over there, they die from what we buy from drugs

The diamonds, the chains, the bracelets, the charmses

I thought my Jesus Piece was so harmless

'Til I seen a picture of a shorty armless

And here's the conflict

It's in a black person's soul to rock that gold

Spend ya whole life tryna get that ice

On a polo rugby it look so nice

How could somethin' so wrong make me feel so right, right?" (verse 1)

The verse begins with a reference of Vietnam, a location where a lot of violence occurs, as a transition to the main topic of the song. West incorporates the Sierra Leone trade of blood diamonds to emphasize the violence between drugs, money, and diamonds. West connects the systems of inequality that has been experienced within the black community to the current consumer culture in America. Many within the low-income black community die buying, dealing, and using drugs, all to use their money to buy diamonds for themselves. West provides awareness of history and the connection to contemporary issues, as he includes himself within the song's message to emphasize the similarity of pursuing diamonds as they are a goal for people to obtain and how they signify symbols of success.

A similar reference to connecting history with current social issues within America is seen in "New Slaves" (2013). West raps:

My momma was raised in an era when,

Clean water was only served to the fairer skin

Doing clothes you would have thought I had help

But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself (verse 1)

He illustrates consumerism as present-day slavery, by comparing his family's past experiences of slavery to the contemporary systems in America. West expresses his experiences entering the fashion industry, as his voice and creativity were limited. As a rapper, the amount of creativity and voice is often limited and controlled by corporations. Relating towards his personal experience in the fashion world can be similar to the black community feeling that their level of voice and expression is still limited and divided in American society. In an interview with BBC radio host Zane Lowe, West addresses the frustration with fashion clothing to produce his own products to the barriers that Michael Jackson faced in putting his music videos on air. West says, "So when I say, "Clean water was only served to the fairer skin," what I'm saying is we're making product with chitlins! T-shirts; that's the most we can make. T-shirts. We can have our best perspective on T-shirts. But if it's anything else, your Truman Show-boat is hitting the wall" (2013).

## IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL EVENTS

Examining cultural references within rap music, provides different perspectives and understanding of black culture. Hip-hop curated as a social movement that impacted American culture, but it's beginnings were heavily influenced primarily by black cultural experiences. Hip-hop presents historic stereotypes and experiences that have impacted black identity. As hip-hop culture changed direction due to mainstream music, the stereotypes of rappers were heavily associated with lyricism of hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia (Oware, 2010). Negative portrayals of rap overshadowed lyrics of socially charged messages. Through examining cultural events within rap music, it provides social awareness of black culture and creates a collective black identity through a grouping of historical criticism.

## YEEZY TAUGHT ME: CULTURAL EVENTS

Cultural references through West's music presents social awareness of who he is as a black male and his family history that foregrounds his identity. He incorporates past racial struggles for social justice within the black community and intertwines them with current struggles in society. The inclusion of social awareness of past cultural history and struggles, creates a form of connectedness to the inequality and injustice with not only the black community but also other

marginalized groups in American society. By acknowledging and addressing cultural events and history within his music, West provides a connectedness and awareness of black culture. The cultural references found in his music allows one to further understand who they are, their past, or overall cultural awareness. In particular, he intertwines cultural history with current social issues in America to present black cultural experiences.

### 4.1.3 SELF-IDENTIFICATION

West's self-identification is quite present throughout his music and appears at least once in all fifty-seven songs examined. As his music changes through each artistic period that he goes through, West continues to provide characteristics of a black male. He embraces his blackness, whether it may be through his frequent characteristics of his physical appearance or offering a voice directly and clearly through a perspective of black male. He is open about his race and proudly incorporates it within his music.

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The image of West is first heavily shown in "Breathe In Breathe Out" (2004), as he describes his appearance. He raps the following:

"First n-gga with a Benz and a backpack

Ice chain, Cardi lens, and a knapsack

Always said if I rapped I'd say somethin' significant

But now I'm rappin' 'bout money, hoes, and rims again

And it's still about the Benjamins" (verse 1)

West provides characteristics of his physical appearance by first referring to himself as a "n-gga" to showcase his black identity, and further describing his belongings of a Benz, backpack, ice chain, Cardi lens, and a knapsack. West raps about his appearance within the rap industry while including stereotypes of rappers. Most rappers are stereotyped to look and act a certain way, including lyrics that focus primarily on topics like "money, hoes, and rims." West identifies

himself as a black male, but with a different appearance as a rapper than what society is expected to see from a black rapper.

Throughout his music, West proudly represents his hometown of Chicago. Although he grew up in the South Side of Chicago, a community that is described as violent and dangerous, he takes pride of where he comes from. A monumental song in his career, "Through the Wire" (2004), West raps:

> What if somebody from the Chi that was ill got a deal on the hottest rap label around
>
> But he wasn't talking bout coke and birds it was more like spoken word
>
> Except he's really putting it down
>
> And he explained the story about how blacks came from glory
>
> And what we need to do in the game (verse 2)

West provides an authentic persona as he introduces himself as a Chicago native, shares his near-fatal car accident in Los Angeles, and emphasizes his determination and the role he wants to play in hip-hop. Although he takes on a braggadocios tone, West constructs his identity as a black male in Chicago who is seeking to overcome life challenges, which at the time consisted of his physical limitations due to his wired shut jaw from the car accident. The use of describing his music as spoken word compares his music more to poetry than to "gangsta rap." West sought to break away from the "gangsta" rap image that was related towards black men and rappers at the time he entered the genre; ultimately West was successful and would eventually convert the rapper image within the hip-hop community.

Through analyzing the ways West identifies himself, I also found references to Malcolm West. In "Gorgeous" (2010), he raps:

> Is hip-hop just a euphemism for a new religion?
>
> The soul music of the slaves that the youth is missing
>
> But this is more than just my road to redemption
>
> Malcolm West had the whole nation standing at attention
>
> As long as I'm in Polo smiling, they think they got me

But they would try to crack me if they ever see a black me

I thought I chose a field where they couldn't sack me

If a nigga ain't shooting a jump shot running a track meet

But this pimp is, at the top of Mount Olympus

Ready for the World's game, this is my Olympics

We make 'em say ho 'cause the game is so pimpish (verse 2)

Here, West is referring to the 2009 VMA incident where he interrupted Taylor Swift's acceptance speech to announce that Beyoncé had the best music video of all time, which resulted in media backlash. West was labeled as rude and disrespectful in media headlines for disrupting an innocent young white female. Although many perceived the interruption of Swift as a malicious act, it was also seen as a response to the devalued and dismissed celebration of blackness. West was not focused on talking down to Swift, but to recognize Beyoncé and her success as a black woman in an industry still controlled by white men (Leonard, 2014).  West also self-identifies as Malcolm West, referring himself as an influential being who advocates for the injustice of blacks, in this case advocating for Beyoncé. He then continues by including perceptions of black men in society, where they are stereotyped to occupy jobs in football, basketball, and track. West thought he chose a profession that would shield his own opinions and image. However, the media's backlash to his actions at the VMA's carried a wide range of opinions that have constructed his public image. His white audience would rather see him wearing a polo shirt and looking like a nice rapper, than see him proudly showcase his blackness and opinions on racial inequality.

Aside from his appearance, he also demonstrates the way he feels America perceives him as a black male through the figurative description of "King Kong"–a scary and dangerous beast. West raps in his song "Black Skinhead" (2013):

Enter the kingdom but watch who you bring home

They see a black man with a white woman at the top floor

They gone come to kill King Kong

Middle America packed in, came to see me in my black skin

Number one question they asking. Fuck every question you asking

If I don't get ran out by Catholics, here come some conservative Baptists

Claiming I'm overreacting like them black kids in Chiraq bitch (verse 1)

West identifies himself as King Kong, based on society's perception of a black man with a white woman. During this time of the album, West was at the beginning of his relationship with his now-wife Kim Kardashian West. King Kong is described as a beast, scary, and dangerous compared to the white woman whom he is protecting (Dines, 1998). The metaphorical use of King Kong can also imply a similarity of perception of West and King Kong, as an ape living in a world of white America. As the media continuously seeks to bash his choices, opinions, and overall voice as a black man. West also offers an image of how black artists feel, by referencing the middle passage where slaves from Africa were packed in on ships during the voyage to America (Hooks, 1992). He performs in various packed arenas, stadiums, or events, that people gather around to see. Whether West is performing, he always has eyes on him, alike any black individual that always has someone looking at them to see what their next move might be.

**IMPORTANCE OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

Self-identification is beyond only one's skin tone, but also the experiences that one has. It has become an important area within one's identity. In a society that runs on labels and everyone is divided by their race, rap music provides an outlet for a rapper to speak on who they are and where they come from. As hip-hop began through personal narratives of daily struggles that many lived through, it became a space for authenticity and a way to affirm the characteristics that construct their racial identity as a black male. Rose (1989) argues even though black self-identification is often seen through rap music and has a greater relationship with black youth, the power of rap music has the ability to impact a widespread audience through the relatable personal narratives that are shared.

**YEEZY TAUGHT ME: SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

West embraces who he is and where he comes from. Throughout his music, West showcases his black identity and does not seek any empathy for being a black male. He provides

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the realities of being black and the contemporary explorations of racism and exploitation that black men face. Black men are seen to be at the bottom of society's social structure in America (Curry, 2014), in which West does not conform with. For instance, the "thug" and "gangsta" image that is heavily associated with other black male rappers and also a huge part of their authenticity that gives them commercial success in music, is not an image that West falls under. He fought himself into the rap scene with a middle-class college boy image, whose authenticity would build from his personal narratives of blackness from his vantage point. As someone who refers to himself as "Malcolm X," he identifies himself as a black male who speaks on the realities of being black in a world against Jerome's and in favor of Brandon's. In the end, West self-identifies himself as black through his own terms and not what society has built a black male should look or act like. It can similarly push boundaries for audiences who are black, but are stigmatized by society to look or act a certain way as well.

### 4.1.4 MASCULINITY

The hip-hop community is dominated primarily by a hypermasculine culture. West is no different from other rappers who use their music to develop and showcase their own masculine identity. When analyzing West's music, the theme of masculinity was found in thirty-four songs. Through his music he seeks to shift traditional black masculinity and incorporates his own experiences, that do not commonly align with the ideal structures or perceptions of a black male.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF MASCULINITY**

West is seen as a rapper who challenges society's perception of masculinity. Since the beginning of his rap career, West's masculinity was questioned by the hip-hop community based on his appearance. West did not hold a "thug persona" or experience the lyrical content that drives most of rap music. The first time West challenged the traditional interpretations of black masculinity was through "All Falls Down" (2004), in the third verse West raps "man I promise, I'm so self-conscious," sharing his insecurities and pressures of a black male in society. The song

speaks on the difficulties of moving through the school system and society's perception of black masculinity. He continues the verse with the following:

> That's why you always see me with at least one of my watches
>
> Rollies and Pasha's done drove me crazy
>
> I can't even pronounce nothing, pass that Versace!
>
> Then I spent 400 bucks on this
>
> Just to be like nigga you aint be on this!
>
> And I can't even go to the grocery store
>
> Without some ones that clean, a shirt with a team (verse 3)

Although the lines can come off as ignorant, describing that he has to go everywhere with at least a luxury watch, spending $400 dollars on items that he cannot even pronounce, and finding the need to go to the grocery store specifically with a pair of Jordan 1's or Nike's Air Force 1, criticizes society's perception of black masculinity. West shares the thoughts and expectations American society has for black men to act a certain way, especially if you're a rapper.

West also challenges the traditional interpretations of black masculinity and the perception of "hardness," through a melodic song devoted to his mother, Donda West. In "Hey Mama" (2005), West dedicates an entire song to his mother who has supported him throughout his upbringing and has influenced his musical career. West demonstrates a "safe space" when he refers to his mother, by showcasing gratitude towards the hard work that she did in order to "keep on the lights" (verse 1) and promises:

> I said mommy imma love you till you don't hurt no more
>
> And when I'm older, you aint gotta work no more
>
> And Imma get you that mansion that we couldn't afford (verse 1)

The admiration towards his mother is definitely being shown throughout the song as he describes past experiences that they both went through in order for them to get to where they were at in that given time. He acknowledges how he "feels like it's things [he's] gotta get, things [he's] gotta do" in order to prove to his mother how much she means to him (verse 2). West displays his emotional

vulnerability to his mother, whom he sees as "unbreakable, unmistakable, highly capable, lady that's makin loot, a livin' legend too" (verse 1).

The showcasing of a different representation of masculinity in rap, can be seen through "Blame Game" (2010). The song involves a narrative between himself and a female, calling her a "bitch" and her responding with similar abrasive language. Although the use of brash language towards a female does not showcase a different perception of tough guy posturing, while he makes it clear that no one will be able to replace what he gave to her; West admits she once gave him a purpose. Through the lyrics of "you ain't finna see a mogul get emotion" or "you should be grateful a nigga like me ever noticed you" (verse 3), West is showcasing a male's ego that has been hurt by his previous lover and indeed making him emotional.

Similarly, West addresses his emotions when it comes to relationships with songs like "Runaway" (2010). West begins the first verse with:

> She find pictures in my e-mail
>
> I sent this bitch a picture of my dick.
>
> I don't know what it is with females
>
> But I'm not too good at that shit.
>
> See, I could have me a good girl
>
> And still be addicted to them hoodrats
>
> And I just blame everything on you
>
> At least you know that's what I'm good at (verse 1)

West introduces a sense of sorrow within his masculine identity when it comes to relationships. He is sharing a glimpse of previous failed relationships that he has had, where he ultimately believes that he's not good when it comes to love. He believes that he is not "much of a romantic [and] could never take the intimacy," illustrating his insecurity when it comes to relationships due to his past failures (verse 3). The repeated chorus "let's have a toast for the douchebags, let's have a toast for the assholes, let's have a toast for the scumbags," showcases the arrogant personality

that he knows he has and encourages the female to runaway since he cannot change the way he is to prevent another fiasco.

West's latest album includes personal tragedy and traits that he has, to share suicidal thoughts and his bipolar disorder. His masculine emotions are showcased differently, as they do not only refer towards a woman but also reflect his personal hardships with mental health. In "Wouldn't Leave" (2018), West raps:

Oh, don't bring that up, that's gon' get me sentimental

You know I'm sensitive, I got a gentle mental

Every time something happen, they want me sent to mental

We had an incident but I cover incidentals

You want me working on my messaging

When I'm thinkin' like George Jetson but sounding like George Jefferson

Then they questioning my methods then

If you tweakin' out on my texts again then I don't get reception here

I got the mind state to take us past the stratosphere

I use the same attitude that done got us here

I live for now, I don't know what happen after here

I live for now, I don't know what happen after here

Plus, what was meant to be was meant to be

Even if, publicly, I lack the empathy

I ain't finna talk about it, 'nother four centuries

One and one is two but me and you, that's infinity (verse 2)

West opens up on his hospitalization, medication, the fear he has of himself, and the misunderstandings that are very common anytime he opens his mouth. He refers to himself being ahead of his time when he speaks, similar to cartoon character George Jetson from the cartoon *The Jetsons*, yet sounding like George Jefferson, a loud mouth character in a sitcom *The Jeffersons*. The song sounds like it is personally dedicated to his wife Kim Kardashian West, as West provides

a sense of regret on his past incidents that have negatively affected not only his image but Kim's as well. He acknowledges his TMZ interview where he stated that "slavery was a choice," which heavily impacted the perspective of West for many in the hip-hop community. West received a great amount of backlash by the media, friends, and fans, and has heavily impacted his current public perception.

Other attributes of West's masculinity through his music is his ego. West's ego is a key element in his masculine identity and is heavily present throughout his music. Since the beginning of his career, his ego has been showcased within his music. For example in "Last Call" (2004) West raps:

> Some say he arrogant. Can y'all blame him?
>
> It was straight embarrassing how y'all played him
>
> Last year shoppin' my demo, I was tryin' to shine
>
> Every motherfucker told me that I couldn't rhyme
>
> Now I could let these dream killers kill my self-esteem
>
> Or use my arrogance as the steam to power my dreams
>
> I use it as my gas, so they say that I'm gassed
>
> But without it I'd be last, so I ought to laugh
>
> So I don't listen to the suits behind the desk no more
>
> You n-ggaz wear suits 'cause you can't dress no more
>
> You can't say shit to Kanye West no more
>
> I rocked 20,000 people, I was just on tour, nigga
>
> I'm Kan, the Louis Vuitton Don (verse 2)

West addresses his journey in becoming a rapper, while bluntly reminding others about all the people who did not believe him in the first place. While acknowledging that he is arrogant, his arrogance is what shaped his ability to reach his dreams, despite those who chose not to believe in him. Aside from the egotistical characteristics that are showcased within this verse and the entire lyrical content of "Last Call," he provides an ambitious character in the making. Through the story-

telling of receiving his "last call" that got him a record deal, West pushed the boundaries and expectations of a black male in rap and ultimately reached his dream of becoming a rapper through his egotistical characteristics.

Additional depictions of West's masculinity is showcased in "Diamonds From Sierra Leone" (2005). A song that holds cultural references, also makes a case for his egocentrism. In the following verse, West raps:

Does he write his own rhymes, well?

Sort of, I think 'em

That mean I forgot better shit than you ever thought of

Damn, is he really that caught up?

I ask if you talkin' bout classics, do my name get brought up?

I remember I couldn't afford a Ford Escort or even a four-track recorder

So it's only right that I let the top drop on a drop-top Porsche

Spoil yourself that's important (verse 1)

Within this verse West is flaunting his luxury Porsche car, calling his music classics, and claiming he has forgotten better lyrics than other rappers have ever thought of. He also asks if his songs are being brought up as classics. Additionally, it can be interpreted based on the production of his songs that contain classic soul songs as samples. He continues to build his ego as he continues the verse by rapping:

I was sick about awards

Couldn't nobody cure me

Only playa that got robbed but kept all his jewelry

Alicia Keys tried to talk some sense to them

30 minutes later seems there's no convincing them

What more can you ask for?

The international assholes nah

Who complains about what he is owed?

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And throw a tantrum like he is 3 years old

You gotta love it though somebody still speaks from his soul

And wouldn't change by the change, or the game, or the fame (verse 1)

West is acknowledging the incidents when he was robbed in award shows, that resulted in him throwing tantrums and seen as an "international asshole." He believes that he is seen as a child that complains about everything publicly. For the music scene, award shows are places where artists receive recognition for all the work that they've put in their music. Since an early stage in his career, West believed the times he didn't win certain awards were based on his race more than anything else. His success was there and he knew it, which led to him voicing himself on the lack of recognition and the walking out of award shows when his name would not be called up. Although West is aware of his egotistical characteristics, he believes that his voice still comes from his soul and fame will not change that.

Similarly, in "Power" (2010) West addresses himself as better than everyone living in the 21st century and his superhero theme music is the "screams from the haters [that's] got a nice ring to it" (intro). West acknowledges himself as the most influential artist of the century and doesn't really care about what the media has to say about it. In this case, "Power," was released after his controversial interruption with Taylor Swift. His arrogant behavior created tremendous uproar in popular culture, ultimately leading to West's creation of "haters." He clearly does not shy away from voicing his opinion, as he states that he "[embodies] every characteristic of the egotistic, he knows, he's so fuckin' gifted" (verse 2). He further expresses his ego in the last verse of "Power," where he raps:

Lost in translation with a whole fuckin' nation

They say I was the abomination of Obama's nation

Well that's a pretty bad way to start a conversation

At the end of the day goddamnit I'm killin' this shit

I know damn well ya'll feelin' this shit

I don't need your pussy, bitch I'm on my own dick

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I ain't got a power trip who you going home with?

How 'Ye doin'? I'm surviving

I was drinkin' earlier now I'm driving

Where the bad bitches huh? Where ya hidin'?

I got the power to make your life so excitin'... (verse 3)

West addresses his public outburst in the media that have become controversial while sharing a stereotyped image of "the abomination of Obama's nation." This last verse presents aggressive characteristics as being misunderstood for voicing his thoughts, in which he believes that many are not able to convey the messages he communicates to the public. Critics and media can say all they want about West's arrogance, but his ego is so high that he doesn't really need anyone's acceptance.

West's perception of himself and his ego are reiterated in "Monster" (2010). West references his rapping as merciless in the following verse:

The best living or dead hands down huh?

Less talk more head right now huh?

And my eyes more red than the devil is

And I'm bout to take it to another level bitch

None of who you go and get, ain't nobody cold as this

Do the rap and attract triple double no assist (verse 1)

West refers a basketball statistical category to the way he is able to write, rap, and produce his own tracks. Compared to other hip-hop artists who either work solely on production or rapping, West doesn't need assistance and can take a track from start to finish on his own. Although he technically did not do this, he possibly could if he wanted to. The continuation of his self-centeredness is displayed as West refers to himself as a "hood phenomenon, the Lebron of rhyme" and finds it "hard to be humble when [he is] stunting on a Jumbotron" (Devil in a New Dress, verse 1). West is conveying that he is similar to Lebron James–a popular and arguably the best NBA player of today's generation–by being a phenomenon in rap music similar to how Lebron is on the court.

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Additionally, West demonstrates his masculine identity through hypersexual lyrics. When describing his sexual fantasies the use of repeated sexual commands towards women is frequently expressed. West builds a persona within his music that women cater to men and their needs. For example, in "Get Em High" (2004), he raps, "She's gonna think that I'm lying, just spit a couple of lines. Then maybe I'll be able to give her dick all the time and get her high" (verse 2). He assumes that his rapping abilities will lead the women to do anything, in this case having sexual activity. West showcases himself as a male who treats females as sexual objects that will fulfill his sexual needs. It is similarly found in "Slow Jamz" (2004) when he raps the following:

I told her to drive over in your new whip

Bring some friends you cool with

I'm gonna bring the cool whip

Then I want you to strip

See you is my new chick

So we get our grind on

She be grabbing, calling me Biggie like Shine home

Man, I swear she fine homes (verse 1)

West expresses authoritative behavior toward his "new chick," by instructing her on what they will be doing. Within the same verse, he tells his girl to "take [her] pants off," in order to prove his friends wrong–who previously stated– that "she ain't no freak" (verse, 1). Being called a "freak," is used to describe an attractive trait for men since it is assumed that they are the ones who will perform all their sexual fantasies.

His boastfulness through hypersexual lyrics is also present in "Monster" (2010), when West conveys sexual dominance towards women through the following verse:

'Cause you will never get on top of this

So mommy best advice is just to get on top of this

Have you ever had sex with a pharaoh

I put the pussy in a sarcophagus

Now she claiming that I bruise her esophagus

Head of the class and she just won a swallowship (verse 1)

Although the premise of "Monster" is to take the words and perception of the public viewing him as a "motherf---ing monster," West includes an interaction with a women to really be seen as a monster. He claims the best advice towards the female is to engage in sexual intercourse, again illustrating women as sexual objects that are being used to fulfill his sexual needs. The use of sexual references within this verse is used to boost his own ego by bragging about the size of his genitals. Including hypersexual lyrics allows him to reiterate his ego that is built off of women as well.

West also discusses male dominance over women to construe his masculinity, in "Hold My Liquor" (2013). The song reveals sexual lusts and desires that ultimately face criticism for his faults. West provides a story of seeing a woman that he had broken up with five years ago and claiming that "one more hit and [he] can own [her], one more fuck and [he] can own [her]" (verse 1). West makes it clear in the song that he doesn't really care if he can't hold his liquor and compares his desire for sleeping with the female as if he was addicted to a drug and needs an additional "hit" to finally get over her. He does not describe any emotions towards the female, but rather sex references that he wants to participate in and move on with his life. Even after he shares that the female still loves him even when he isn't sober, for West he does not share similar feelings towards her and when the sex is over he is moving on to the next one.

Similar to "I'm In It" (2013), West is illustrating a male who orders his girl to "tell [her] boss [she needs] an extra hour off" and "needs [her] home when [he gets] off" so she can fulfill his needs (verse 1). He describes how he needs "that wet mouth," which can be conveyed as wanting to perform oral sex to the female. Throughout the song West is glorifying a life of sexual addiction. In the last verse, West raps his need of having the female home when he is off work, suggesting he needs her to fill his sexual needs. He then provides a description of the sexual appetite by rapping:

"You know I need that wet mouth

I know you need that reptile

She cut from a different textile

She love different kinds of sex now

Black girl sippin' white wine" (verse 3)

West describes an egotistical description of his male part and describes their sexual encounters. Including the color of wine can be seen as a sexual reference to semen, tying in with the sexual context of the song.

**IMPORTANCE OF MASCULINITY**

The formation of masculine attributes has long been constructed even before the birth of rap music. American popular culture plays a huge role in the representation of male power and privilege, through the intertwining of sexist, moral, social, and political characteristics. Within the hip-hop community, masculinity plays a role in enhancing one's status and authenticity as a rapper. Belle (2014) notes the importance of manhood in order to receive 'street credibility,' "by being hyperviolent, homophobic and heteronormative, while degrading women" (p. 296). Masculinity helps solidify a rappers authenticity and produce ideological influences on black male identity. The continuation of masculinity being found within hip-hop provides an ongoing discussion on how rappers structure their masculine identity and how it impacts men. As studies have argued on the images of masculinity in rap music deriving from social norms and behavioral patterns representing real life, mainstream hip-hop additionally upholds patriarchal and racist ideologies to enhance masculinity performance. The demonstration and authority of masculinity in hip-hop culture, provides a better understanding of the impact on masculinity and identity.

**YEEZY TAUGHT ME: MASCULINITY**

Although it is clear that West's music does not consist or celebrate much of the "thug life" as other rappers glamorize, he expresses an egotistical, misogynistic, and at times a sentimental male persona. West expresses an identity of what it means to be a black man in America. West expresses characteristics of what society has long found acceptable of a man and in particular, a

black man. The masculine attributes found within his music, showcase a different perspective of masculinity compared to other rap artists. Due to his upbringing, West did not have "thug life" experiences. References to the drug culture and poor living conditions are showcased through his music, but not as personal narratives. Many within hip-hop build their masculinity from having "street cred," whether that may be hustling in the streets, associated with the gang life, or being violent. For West, his masculine identity is built through the use of women. The use of hypersexuality and misogyny references fill a great amount of his music. West uses women to fulfill his sexual fantasies and uplift his masculinity and ego. Simultaneously, he pushes boundaries and structures that have long been built for black men in society, by showcasing his rawest emotions and demonstrating vulnerability through personal experiences and hardships. Additionally, his masculinity takes shape as he shares his frustration over black male exploitation and personal experiences.

## 4.1.5 FEMALE REPRESENTATION

When analyzing the ways West portrays female's throughout his music, I found women presented as sexual objects, promiscuous, or gold diggers in thirty-two songs examined. A females representation varied depending on who West was speaking about and the storyline of the song.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Viewing masculinity within West's music would be incomplete without a closer look at female representation. West discusses women as overly sexual throughout his music in songs like "Get Em High" (2004). The song presents women as promiscuous when having a conversation with West in the following verse:

Now who the hell is this?

E-mailing me at 11:26, telling me that she 36-26, plus double D

You know how girls on black planet be when they get bubbly

At NYU but she hail from Kansas, right now she just lampin, chilling on campus

Sent me a picture with her feeling on Candice

Who said her favorite rapper was the late great Francis

W-H-I-T, it's getting late mami, your screen saver say tweet

So you got to call me, and bring a friend for my friend (verse 2)

He is describing an email conversation where the female is flaunting herself to him, by describing her size of breasts while also acting sexual with her friend in hopes of seducing West. The female is portrayed as voluptuous and flirtatious throughout the email that West is describing.

Aside from females being portrayed as overly sexual, West describes females as materialistic and gold diggers. In "The New Workout Plan" (2004) West creates a parody of an aerobics routine that will lead women to change their image in order to pull themselves "a rapper, a NBA player, man, at least a dude wit' a car" (intro). He presents women as having to change their physical appearance in order to be rewarded with a successful man that they deserve. It is similarly found in his best-selling single "Gold Digger" (2005) displaying a materialistic woman that rocks "Louis Vuitton under her underarm" and "if you fuckin' with this girl, then you better be paid" (verse 1). The image of a women having success or wanting more for herself, she is considered to be a "gold digger" in West's eyes. He continues the song by painting women as liars in the following verse:

18 years, 18 years

She got one of your kids, got you for 18 years

I know somebody paying child support for one of his kids

His baby mamma car and crib is bigger than his

You will see him on TV any given Sunday

Win the Superbowl and drive off in a Hyundai

She was supposed to buy your shorty TYCO with your money

She went to the doctor got lipo with your money

She walking around looking like Michael with your money

Should've got that insured got GEICO for your money, money, money

If you ain't no punk holla we want prenup

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WE WANT PRENUP! Yeah

It's something that you need to have

'Cause when she leave yo ass she gon' leave with half

18 years, 18 years

And on her 18th birthday he found out it wasn't his (verse 2)

West describes a female who is using a man to be responsible for a child she had with someone else, while she spends the child support money on materialistic things like plastic surgery. Again, West is describing a women's physical appearance and conforming into society's beauty standard. If a female does not have an ideal body that showcases perfection, she should seek plastic surgery in order to reach flawlessness. Throughout the song, West is displaying a women whose goal is to get pregnant by a successful man who will provide her with everything she may need and eventually leave when she is able to take what she sought out in the first place.

Women are later presented in "Hell of a Life" (2010), as West presents a story about a relationship with a porn star, through a celebratory attitude. He repeatedly sings:

No more drugs for me,

Pussy and religion is all I need

Grab my hand and, baby, we'll live a hell of a life (hook)

West conveys that all he needs is a woman in order to live a hell of a life. Within the song, West describes a sexual fantasy of having a one-night stand with a porn star. He uses a porn star to describe a female that is able to fulfill the wildest dreams of a man and cure the pain from his previous relationship. Including a porn star as the "rebound" to his heartbreak, showcases the thrills that he is seeking in order to mask the misery that he is feeling underneath his break-up. Emphasizing the need to only need pussy or religion in order to live "a hell of a life," showcases women being used in marriage as a vanity act to only "[get] divorced by the end of the night" (outro). Nonetheless, women are presented as a sexual object that gets used for the sexual needs of a man and discarded like the way porn is used. Although West claims this sex-crazed story leads

to happiness and a hell of a life, it showcases more value towards covering the emotions of a male that can only be fulfilled through a woman.

Similarly, in "Blood on the Leaves" (2013) West delivered a song that describes relationships that fell apart due to fame. While he raps about the effects fame has had on relationships, he describes women as surrounding him and always wanting something for him, not love but money. In his last verse of the song, West raps:

> To all my second string bitches, trying to get a baby
>
> Trying to get a baby, now you talkin' crazy
>
> I don't give a damn if you used to talk to Jay-Z
>
> He ain't with you, he with Beyonce, you need to stop actin' lazy
>
> She Instagram herself like "Bad bitch alert"
>
> He Instagram his watch like "Mad rich alert"
>
> He only wanna see that ass in reverse
>
> Two thousand dollar bag with no cash in your purse (verse 4)

In this verse, West once again portrays women as gold diggers and wanting to use successful men to post on their social media in order to gain attention. He further describes the female as putting up a facade to impress him by having an expensive bag, even though she doesn't really have any money. The song provides a story of past relationships where the woman West is speaking about "could've been somebody" with him, but fell into the trap of money and materialism that comes with fame. He describes a relationship that failed due to the fame he has received and ruined the trust he has on females there on after. Searching for genuine love and a female who is not seeking him for fame or wealth is a struggle that many in experience in the limelight. For some, the dream of reaching wealth and success and overcoming difficulties but are left with loneliness due to genuine relationships being tarnished by materialism attracting shallow individuals.

**IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Sexist and demeaning references towards women have long been embraced and glorified within popular culture. In particular, rap music generally contains lyrics that illustrate women

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catering to men, described as sexual objects, used to boost a male's ego, and dividing women into groups of who is worthy of respect and who is not. It is often rare to find rap lyrics where women are being shown respect, ensuring gender equality, and empowering women. Although it is seen regularly within rap and hip-hop, the degrading portrayals of women has long been present amongst American society. As the values of society have had an influence on the ideologies surrounding female representation in America, it is important to view the multiple ways females are being discussed through West's perspective and voice.

**YEEZY TAUGHT ME: FEMALE REPRESENTION**

In West's music, the portrayal of a female varies depending on the relationship that he has with her. When it comes to speaking about women whom he does not share a close relationship with, West utilizes negative stereotypes of women that have become dominant values in America culture and white supremacist patriarchy. Throughout his music, females are being seen as sexual objects that cater to his needs and should feel lucky to be with him. He presents women as nonetheless but a piece of accessory for a man. His repeated use of women as gold diggers and promiscuous contribute towards society's outlook and treatment of women. The continuation of men disrespecting women develops an attribute that is seen as an acceptable behavior of a males identity. Not only does the treatment and representation of women that is used throughout West's music, influence a male's identity on how to treat women, but also influences the stereotypes of who women are. As a society where women are underrepresented in multiple aspects, West's lyrics only contribute even more problematic treatment and perceptions of women.

**4.1.6 EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT**

As a college dropout, West's experiences has provided him lessons and a voice for personal narratives on the education system. Although he is no expert on education or employment, West speaks on the subjects and their relation to class in American society. When analyzing the theme of class in regards to education and employment, West demonstrates topics of education inequality, college, working conditions, and occupations in thirteen songs.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT**

Themes of education are heavily seen within West's first album, beginning with "We Don't Care" (2004). West illustrates stereotypes of poor communities and the children that are born into systems that influence their education. The education system and the supplemental programs vary based on the financial situation the school is in. West raps:

You know the kids gon' act a fool

When you stop the programs for after school

And they DCFS some of them dyslexic

They favorite 50 Cent song's 12 Questions

We scream, rock, blows, weed park

See now we smart

We ain't retards the way teachers thought

Hold up hold fast we make more cash

Now tell my mamma I belong in that slow class

Sad enough we on welfare

You tryna put me on the school bus with the space for the wheelchair (verse 3)

West draws attention to the Department of Children and Family Services and how most children who are reported from DCFS are being labeled with a learning disorder. The labeling of a learning disorder at a high rate is not due to children actually having a disorder, but rather targeted towards the system that utilizes programs for their own benefit and financial needs. The more children labeled with learning disorders provides the system with additional funds– funds that are never really utilized to help children. It is continued within the verse as West mentions the disproportioned high referral rate for students in poor communities being labeled as "special ed," which is often assumed that schools label students from having a disability in order to receive more funding as well.

His theme of education is continuously present when vocalizing his opinion on college education in "All Falls Down" (2004). West opens the song by rapping:

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Man I promise, she's so self-conscious

She has no idea what she's doing in college

That major that she majored in don't make no money

But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny

Now, tell me that ain't insecurrre

The concept of school seems so securrre

Sophmore three yearrrs aint picked a careerrr (verse 1)

West raps about a female student who has no idea what she is doing in college and feels insecure about choosing a different career path that has no relation to what she was studying in the first place. He also mentions the fear that she has if her parents were to find out she wanted to pursue something different than initially planned. This is a very common and relatable situation for many college students. In American society, college is defined as the pathway to success and straying from the path will lead to disappointment from loved ones. Similarly, in "School Spirit" (2004) West raps:

Told 'em I finished school, and I started my own business

They say, 'Oh you graduated?'

No, I decided I was finished

Chasin' y'all dreams and what you've got planned

Now I spit it so hot you got tanned

Back to school and I hate it there, I hate it there

Everything I want I gotta wait a year, I wait a year

This nigga graduated at the top of my class... I went to Cheesecake, he was a motherfucking waiter there (verse 1)

Within this message, West is conveying that college does not guarantee a successful career, by rapping about a class valedictorian who is working in the restaurant industry as a server. He describes college education as a route that many assume leads to prosperity. While West dropped out of college to pursue his musical career, being a rapper is not a career that many can just decide

to do and a guaranteed success will follow. For West, he chased his dream rather than continuing school and following the path that is ultimately expected for many youth in American society.

A significant aspect of class, is occupation. The topic of employment is heavily seen in "We Don't Care" (2004), as West raps on working practices in the following verse:

The second verse is for my dogs working 9-to-5

That still hustle 'cause a n-gga can't shine off $6.55

And everybody selling make-up, Jacob's

And bootleg tapes just to get they cake up

We put shit on layaway then come back

We claim other people kids on our income tax (verse 2)

West addresses those who are in the drug culture are dealing in order to survive. Rather than sharing the topic of drug dealing through a personal narrative or using the topic to build towards his masculinity, West offers a different view on drug dealing. In many cases drug dealing is associated with themes of crime, violence, or toughness,  while West is showcasing a different point of view on the reasons people turn to drug dealing. He speaks on the need for people to work an office-type occupation and still sell drugs part-time out of desperation. A job that pays a low-wage does not give anyone the ability to "shine." West is blaming the pay wage as a reason people resort to stealing or dealing just to get buy. He later opens up about his personal working experience at a retail job. In "Spaceship" (2004), West critiques the experiences of a working black man in a minimum wage side job, that deals with racial commentary and unfair treatment while on the job. West opens up the beginning of the song with the following verse:

Man, man, man

If my manager insults me again I will be assaulting him

After I fuck the manager up then I'm gonna shorten the register up

Let's go back, back to the Gap

Look at my check, wasn't no scratch

So if I stole, wasn't my fault

Yeah I stole, never got caught

They take me to the back and pat me

Askin' me about some khakis

But let some black people walk in

I bet they show off their token blackie

Oh now they love Kanye, let's put him all in the front of the store (verse 1)

He shares a personal experience of fantasying about punching his manager due to unfair treatment that he received. He then defends the reason as to why he would steal in the past due to the small paycheck he would receive at *The Gap*; he did not earn what he needed to buy what he wanted. West offers a view on his personal experience working in a retail job, while stating he was used as a greeter for the store to help with the image of *The Gap*. Seeing a black male working in the store, provides an outlook of the store having diversity and ultimately might persuade customers to enter the store and make a purchase. Ultimately, West shares a story of wishing to buy a "spaceship and fly past the sky" to reach a dream of success while referencing the hard work that one has to live through in order to reach that better life (chorus).

## IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Through examining references towards education and employment, it provides a further discussion on class. In particular marginalized groups are stereotyped as not making it to higher education or having a job other than hustling on the streets. Education and employment opportunities have played a definitive role in social identity. It is important to look at class with these characteristics, based on the close relationship they play on establishing where one may lay within the social hierarchy. As education is a heavily pushed pathway for American society and is associated with employment, leads to a further conversation on the ways ideas or opinions on them are being voiced.

## YEEZY TAUGHT ME: EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The use of West's personal experiences shares an outlook that was not common for rap at the time of the release of his first albums. As a college dropout, West does not bash on topics of

education but rather voices on the inequality and struggles that are relatable within the education system. He speaks on the inequality of the education system for low-income communities and the struggles that many face who are brought up within those systems. When it comes to higher education, West vocalizes his opinion of college. Coming from a middle-class perspective, who had the ability to attend college, West speaks on the insecurity of college. College is framed as America's "key to success" and the pathway to fulfilling one's lifelong dreams. The mentality that is engraved in majority of America, is you graduate high school, then you attend college, and then build a successful career. Although he does not seek to influence others to become college dropouts, he does open the discussion of education. College is often described as your pathway to make money and live well, while West opens the conversation that (1) college is not for everyone, (2) college does not lead to success, (3) college is not a smooth journey, but rather one filled with insecurities, and lastly (4) college does not define who you are. Not everyone makes it through college and even those who do, it does not set in stone their future or who they ought to be. Having a degree or not does not define who you will be and if you will attain success. As he speaks about education, he also includes references on employment. Hustling in the streets is a common source of employment for many marginalized communities, having to do whatever they can in order to get by. Like anyone else in society, working to climb up on the social hierarchy is a goal. Where you are born is not your choice but where you choose to go is. West includes his personal experience working at *The GAP* and critiques the unfair treatment that he received for being a black male. The use of his work experience and dropping out of college, but the ambition to buy a spaceship and fly past the sky to reach his own success provides an outlook of a confident and ambitious individual who does not settle nor conform. West seeks to free himself from social norms and continues to push boundaries from what is expected by society and most importantly does not seek to be controlled by any standards built for black men.

**4.1.7 POWER AND WEALTH**

Through examining characteristics of power and wealth, references on money, materialistic belongings, brand names, living conditions, and experiences with the judicial system and law enforcement were found within thirty-one songs.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND WEALTH**

When discussing themes of power or wealth, West acknowledges living conditions for those who live within urban communities and are stuck by the system that is built in America. In "We Don't Care" (2004), West opens the song with a repeated chorus recognizing individuals who are forced to deal drugs. He raps the following:

And all my people that's drug dealing just to get by

Stack your money 'til it gets sky high

We wasn't supposed to make it past 25

Joke's on you we still alive

Throw your hands up in the sky

And say "We don't care what people say" (chorus)

West conveys how in some communities the only available source of income is dealing drugs. He pays tribute towards communities where people are forced to participate in the drug culture, while encouraging them to reflect towards making it past the stereotyped age of twenty-five due to violence, drugs, or the streets. Celebrating making it past twenty-five and stacking their money, allows a reflection towards the harsh lived reality and rejecting society's negative thoughts and association with drug dealing. Within the same song, West raps about the drug culture in the first verse saying:

We never had nothing handed

Took nothing for granted

Took nothing from no man, man I'm my own man

But as a shorty I looked up to the dopeman

Only adult man I knew that wasn't broke man (verse 1)

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West is implying that many within urban communities do not have a successful role model that they look up to, other than the "dopeman" and the amount of money they make. Although the song's repeated chorus can sound like an advocation of dealing drugs and stacking "ya money till it gets sky high," West is emphasizing the drug culture being forced upon certain youth based on where they are from rather than a personal choice (chorus).

West's message is reiterated in "Heard 'Em Say" (2005) when he raps:

The devil is alive I feel him breathin',

Claimin' money is the key so keep on dreamin',

And put them lottery tickets just to tease us (verse 2)

He also acknowledges the lottery ticket as a way for the government to tease the lower class of hoping one day they could win and reach wealth. Unfortunately the chances to win the lottery are very slim, and they're losing their money while the government gains it. Many individuals assume that money is the key to happiness, which is why the of purchasing lottery tickets in hopes for a wealthy future continues. Although West speaks on issues with consumerism in America, he also refers to himself as a product of it. In "Touch the Sky" (2005) West raps about spending a lot of money on a new pair of loafers, which resulted in splitting a bucket of *KFC* with his girl. He expresses how before becoming a rapper he'd "do anything to say [he] got it," meaning he'd buy materialistic items to live up to a standard of how a successful rapper looked like (verse 2).

Aside from materialistic references within his music, he also makes it clear throughout his music that no matter your wealth, if you are a black man in America you will always be seen as a black man above anything else. In "All Falls Down" (2004) West begins his third verse rapping:

"I say fuck the police, thats how I treat em

We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom

We'll buy a lot of clothes when we don't really need em

Things we buy to cover up what's inside

Cause they make us hate ourself and love they wealth

That's why shortys hollering "where the ballas' at?"

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Drug dealer buy Jordans, crackhead buy crack

And a white man get paid off of all of that

But I ain't even gon act holier than thou

Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with 25 thou

Before I had a house and I'd do it again

Cause I wanna be on 106 and Park pushing a Benz

I wanna act ballerific like it's all terrific

I got a couple past due bills, I won't get specific

I got a problem with spending before I get it

We all self-conscious I'm just the first to admit it" (verse 3)

West conveys how the black community faces racial discrimination despite where they fall within the social hierarchy. Through a personal narrative, West tackles the judicial and materialism system within America, by addresing the inequality and racial oppression that lives in America with lines like "even if you in a Benz, you still a n-gga in a coupe" (verse 2). The insecurities that West is confessing within this song are part of the racial and social disparities that he seeks to hide with materialistic objects. As materialism is a signifier of status it allows others who fall under a form of discrimination reach the level of those who are in a higher place within the social hierarchy. Although West contradicts himself by stating he purchased an expensive piece of jewelry before.

Power in society is shown as West offers political references, speaking on the justice system and draws attention to law enforcements aggressive interrogation methods towards the black community in "Jesus Walks" (2004) rapping:

"Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now check the method

They be asking us questions, harass and arrest us

Saying, "We eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast."

Huh? Y'all eat pieces of shit? What's the basis?" (verse 1)

West offers a view on the living realities for the black community in America. He demonstrates a conversation between a police and an individual who is interrogated and harassed in Chicago, an

experience that many black youth who live in harsh areas within Chicago fall under as they "walk through the valley of the Chi where death is" (verse 1).

Racial profiling is similarly found in "Heard 'Em Say" (2005) when West mentions how Black men "can't cop cars without seeing cop cars," because he believes that they are frequently pulled over by law enforcement who what to see them "all behind bars" (verse 1). Additionally, West reflects towards realities of individuals who are a part of struggling communities. He voices his thoughts of the government administering AIDS in hopes of getting rid of blacks and homosexuals, where it is also repeatedly shown in other songs. like "Roses" (2005) and "Gorgeous" (2010). In "Roses" (2005) West raps:

> If Magic Johnson got a cure for A.I.D.S.
>
> And all the broke muthaf-ckers pass away
>
> You tellin me if my grandma was in the N.B.A.
>
> Right now she'd be ok?
>
> But since she was just a secretary
>
> Working for the church
>
> For thirty-five years
>
> Things s'posed to stop right here (verse 1)

West describes a personal story about his grandmother being in the hospital while critiquing healthcare and the difference of treatment depending on one's wealth. Magic Johnson is a retired NBA player who was HIV positive, but with his wealth he had the ability to afford advanced treatment. Yet, unfortunately for West's grandmother who was devoted to working for a church and not in the same class status as Johnson, her life was cut short. West addresses the disadvantage to certain health-related resources for working-class individuals and his frustration towards a fragile moment, to touch base on the opportunities that are available based on one's income.

The continuation of racial and social injustice in America is found in "Gorgeous" (2010) as West raps:

Inter century anthems based off inner city tantrums

Based off the way we was branded

Face it, Jerome get more time than Brandon

And at the airport they check all through my bag and tell me that it's random (verse 1)

Within this verse, West is referring anthems to rap songs that are created based off of violence and drugs that fill cities and cause tantrums and outbursts. The songs speak on harsh lived realities that become anthems for many who live within those communities. West also targets prison sentencing based on racial inequality within America. The inner city Jerome's of the world as the ones who get more time behind bars in comparison to those who fit the image of suburban Brandon's, receive lighter sentences. Continuing with racial inequality in society, West shares racial profiling in the airport that is claimed to be a procedure but believes that the color of one's skin plays a huge role on who gets stopped for additional searching.

Political references are additionally found in West's "New Slaves" (2013), as he raps in his second verse:

Meanwhile the DEA

Teamed up with the CCA

They tryna lock n-ggas up

They tryna make new slaves

See that's that privately owned prison

Get your piece today (verse 2)

The DEA is short for the Drug Enforcement Agency, a United States federal law enforcement agency that oversees drug usage and smuggling in the United States. Although the purpose is supposed to be for the good of the country, there have been many reports of racism and unconstitutional acts within the agency ("Race and the Drug War," n.d.). The CCA, short for Corrections Corporation of America, is known for black men who are under correctional control. West is expressing the racism within the prison-industrial complex, and how the injustice and treatment that the black community receives, are like slavery. They are now the new slaves. West

enables an alternate view of racism, its cousin, classism. He demonstrates that even wealthy black individuals are stereotyped in multiple ways. Money does not change one's skin tone, but rather creates new stereotypes based on their social class. In this case, "New Slaves," constructs classism when he raps:

> You see it's broke n-gga racism
>
> That's that "Don't touch anything in the store
>
> And it's rich n-gga racism
>
> That's that "Come in, please buy more
>
> What you want a Bentley, fur coat and diamond chain?
>
> All you blacks want all the same things
>
> Used to only be niggas now everybody play me
>
> Spending everything on Alexander Wang
>
> New Slaves (verse 1)

West showcases how society is when they see a black male walking around a store and automatically assuming they are there to steal. But when they see a wealthier black male, the treatment is much different. They want to get as much money as possible from them. Their tone and attitude change towards someone with a higher status, since they believe only those from the lower class are the ones who commit theft. The incorporation of "please", showcases the change of manners that one has as well, based on their class. West reconceptualizes the position of black men in America as the new slaves who face oppression, violence, racism, and capitalism; and their class does not change their image or stereotypes that have been comprised in American society.

**IMPORTANCE OF POWER AND WEALTH**

Viewing power and wealth within the theme of class provides an important aspect in shaping one's identity. As hip-hop developed as a form to express the daily challenges in America and inequality, viewing the ways a rapper who was born in a middle-class family provides a different perspective and stories on class. The division within current society is based on economic success and the resources that one is able to obtain through wealth and power. In regards to class,

it has become a significate part of who you are as a person and your place in society. The division between social hierarchies does not only reflect towards your income but also towards who you are and ought to be. Power and wealth influence your experiences and most importantly your identity.

**YEEZY TAUGHT ME: POWER AND WEALTH**

When it comes  power and wealth, West heavily speaks on America's materialism and consumerism. While acknowledging the issues with consumerism in society, West places himself as a product of it as well. He addresses the battle of consumerism that many face and the mentality that possession indicates one's wealth. Throughout his music, he speaks on the control and power that white individuals have within America and seek to have over black individuals like himself. The inclusion of politically and socially conscious lyrics provides a voice for those who live in low-income communities and experience political injustice. West includes and connects himself through his music, through ways he has been afflicted and stereotyped based on class, similar to any other black male in American society. Through West's music, he is clear that wealth does not change the image portrayed of a black male in America. Above anything else that he may be, West believes he will first be seen by the color of his skin. The continuation of racial discrimination follows no matter where you place in the social class hierarchy. West focuses particularly on black male experiences of oppression that many face in society. In times of speaking against the injustice of police brutality, racial profiling, and the justice system, West draws attention to the experiences faced by black men. The stereotypes of black men in society are framed to be poor, violent, and criminals through some of West lyrics, not through his perspectives but the perspectives that white America has constructed.

**4.2 DISCUSSION**

West identifies himself as a black male who is challenging racial and social structures that have long been created and maintained within American society. Black men have been stereotyped to be lazy, violent, aggressive, and misogynistic. West attempts to shift black male identity by

creating a voice that speaks to being black in a white America; fighting through his lyrics against stereotypes, social, and racial issues he has faced or that are common within the black community. West seeks to turn negative stereotypes within the black community into positive images and provide a different outlook on certain issues. The incorporation of social awareness of black cultural history, creates a form of connectedness to the inequality and injustice within American society and white privilege. Although West does not identify himself as a "thug" in his music, West identifies himself as an artist who does not conform with racial and social stereotypes. He provides an outlook through the lens of a middle-class college boy perspective, without ignoring the challenges of others.

Even though West challenges black male stereotypes, his masculinity is uniquely expressed. He communicates a sense of frustration over black men and their invisibility and exploitation which leads to an egocentric and arrogant behavior within his lyricism. West provides a different outlook on masculinity within his music, as he includes songs of emotional vulnerability with topics like his daughter, mother, grandmother, family dynamics, and relationships. Despite the fact that West includes a few positive songs related to certain women in his life and does not include lyrics related to abuse of women, he does present women as overly sexualized to boost his masculinity. As previously mentioned, West does not come from a similar background as other rap artists, who experienced living in the hood, or with gangs, drug culture, or violence. Those themes not only help build a rappers authenticity, but also demonstrate their masculinity. Since West does not come from that background, he uses women to build his masculine identity. Women are used as sexual objects to fulfill his sexual fantasies and commands. Not only does West contribute towards society's perception of masculine identity and representation of women, but also contradicts his messages of being frustrated over the misrepresentation of black men.

Overall, in viewing characteristics of race, gender, and class themes, each characteristic was intersected or interrelated with one another. For example, when West speaks on topics of race, he primarily focuses on experiences of black males and then the experiences vary based on the class background. Each narrative or conscious lyric that West includes, intersects with each theme.

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West pushes boundaries within his music by proudly identifying himself as an uncontrollable black male who is seeking to push through social structures. The middle-class perspective provides a connection to topics and experiences that others can relate to and identify with. Rap is often filled with gang references, drugs, and violence, whereas West provides topics on family dynamics, insecurity with school, emotional vulnerability, racial inequality, and difficulties with consumerism, to name a few. Although not everything West communicates is positive, political, or different from the misogyny in rap music, West provides a voice for others to identify and connect with through his personal story-telling and socially conscious lyrics that create conversations of oppression in America and unleash authentic and memorable experiences. West's identity showcases a black male who lives in a white America and is seeking to feel liberated. He does not accept society's traditional values and pursues to construct black excellence through his music. Although his ego and misrepresentation or inclusion of women often overshadows the important topics he also speaks on, West's powerful language through his music provides upliftment and social awareness. As a frustrated black male, who comes off as arrogant, West is racially and socially conscious within his music, providing an imagery and outlook of the world that attacks oppressed groups–particularly black men. West demonstrates a raw black male, who continues to push forward when it comes to obstacles faced within in America.

Through the five albums explored, West showcases a war within his own identity as a black male, going back and forth on what he defines and constructs as blackness throughout his music. His authenticity of blackness, is everchanging depending on the artistic period of his career. He showcases the way he copes with the inequality and racism of the world, through his music. As a popular figure who provides a voice for many oppressed individuals–black men in particular–West showcases a disconnect on his public actions and the lyricism he uses within his music. As the music gets older, it also begins to contradict itself. One song he is speaking on racial issues and years later he is claiming "slavery was a choice." His shift in identity varies on the position he is at in that particular moment of his life. Yet what remains consistent through exploring West's albums and the themes of race, gender, and class, is his identity as an uncontrolled black male in

white America. The use of personal experiences, raw opinions, and witty lines, West identifies himself as a black male who is challenging racial and social structures on his own terms– an overwhelming image for white America. Race, class, and gender continue to structure society and remain foundations for systems of power and inequality, and West challenging a black male identity within society can influence the thoughts and construction of listeners seeking to form their own identity and place in society.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

## 5.1 SUMMARY

In the first chapter of the study, I presented a framework for communication and its relation to popular music culture. I explained the primary goal for the study and gave a brief background of the rap artist whose music was used to further examine the use of social structures in constructing one's identity. I also provided a background on the intersectionality of race, gender, class and it's relation to identity and this study. For the second chapter, I presented significant scholarly research, by providing a historical background of each area and studies that have been completed relating to each concept. I began by introducing and examining hip-hop and rap music's background, along with previous research regarding the music genre, followed by a review of popular music culture and communication and the relationship with music to self-identity. I then explained identity politics and introduced the use of matrix domination as a framework to provide a greater understanding of the connections and interdependencies of social categories. The intersectionality of social categories provides a theoretical approach to further analyzing the race, gender, and class, and the influence of identity construction through rap music. In the third chapter, I explained my methodology for the study and presented the justification for examining Kanye West and the five albums that will be analyzed. I also included CRT and the involvement when further analyzing the study. I presented the five albums that would be explored and gave a background of each. Followed by the use of textual analysis as the method of the study and the framework of race, gender, and class characteristics that were utilized to analyze West's music. The fourth chapter incorporated the findings of analyzing the themes of race, gender, and class within the five albums. This resulted in an analysis of the social themes and identity construction, followed by a discussion of the findings. The components presented within the study lead to a discussion of the conclusions that have been presented from the study.

**5.2 CONCLUSION**

The field of popular music culture and communication studies has had a wide exploration of focused topics of research. In particular, rap music provides an area of study that exposes a variety of messages and the influence they have on listeners, positive or negative. The exploration of social themes within rap music created a framework for this study. By examining rap music, it was evident to see the themes communicated of race, gender and class, and how rap music plays a role in constructing one's identity. Examining the intersectionality of social themes within the five albums, provided a framework of how race, gender, and class intersect and are interrelated, continuing to impact the structure of society and self-identification. The focus on West's music was useful in further analyzing the way he self-identifies through his music, as the popular culture world has been able to view West's identity in ways the hip-hop community would never imagine. In the past months, West has self-identified himself as a black man who proudly wears a "Make America Great Again" hat and discloses his support and love for President Donald Trump. As a voice and figure that was once described as "the Barack Obama of hip-hop, a golden boy whose mixture of soulful beats and social consciousness appeals to middle-class young people but has street credibility too" (Kitterman, 2005), West's constructed identity through his music has shifted throughout each discography. It was evident to see that no album is identical, and each album varied depending on his artistic period of the time. It is also important to note that not every song provided deep meaning or included socially conscious lyricism. However, through examining race, gender, and class themes through West's lyrics demonstrated the interconnectedness of his developed identity of being a black male in white America. By utilizing CRT, a greater understanding of social and political themes were found, as well as how they challenge notions of diversity and social hierarchy while impacting self-identity. The concept further explains how white supremacy and its oppression of the black community have established race in the center. As a theoretical perspective that centers race in its analysis, allowed for a greater conversation of West's identity and the additional structures that impact his identity, class and gender. CRT has provided a useful criticism of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, as additional social

constructs impact the oppression experienced by black individuals in America. Intersectionality involves interconnectedness of multiple experienced forms of oppression, aside from race. Viewing gender and class, provides additional aspects on intersecting roles that construct one's identity, while providing an understanding on how race is not the only form of oppression. Narratives of West provides a voice on stories he shares through his music that challenge white supremacy. West challenges society through his experiences and actions, while exposing that race is a main factor of the inequality in American society. His story-telling through his music also provides a voice and can influence the identity of those who listen to his music.

It is critical to acknowledge the fluidity and social construction of social identities through rap music. It is important to note the undeniable role that music plays in shaping, influencing, and informing a listener. Music opens up a whole new world that further exposes important and necessary values in society while communicating messages that connect with an audience. Given the importance of music as a social influence on the development of attitudes, behavior, values, and identity, it is important to further understand the content of music. The cultural influence and dialogue communicated through rap music and West's lyrics provide an outlook of stimulating messages that challenge racial and social stereotypes through the voice of a self-identified black male living in a white dominant society. Although West's music challenged stereotypes of the black community and coping with inequality and racism within society, I acknowledge the inclusion of misrepresentation of women within his music. The stereotyped gender roles emerged when lyrics contained sexual imagery, presenting women as sexual objects and men as the ones seeking sexual conquest. However, the representation of women as overly sexual and as gold diggers is important to note, and I argue the inclusion of those lyrics are a reflection of American society. The incorporation of misogyny includes a larger social force on gender relations and the ways gender intersects with race and class. The themes of race, class, and gender not only matter due to the ways they continue to structure society and values, but the intersectionality of the three social themes give a more meaningful effect of how they impact and influence a person's life. They have linked experiences in which are all of the same importance and interrelated in many aspects

of today's society, in particular, identity formation. Through analyzing the work of an artist within the top genre in America, West is also a big name in popular culture that has had a wide range of influences towards his fans. Even with the controversial support West was giving Donald Trump through Twitter, his followers remained the same at around 27 million during the summer of 2018 and have continued to increase within the months after to 28.6 million followers. His popularity and fan base are evident, which is imperative for communication scholars to continue to analyze an artist such as West to view the relationship and influence his music has with individuals. Within this study, I was able to examine multiple themes within rap music and how they intersect to influence and structure identity formation, yet there were still some limitations.

## 5.3 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The first limitation of the study was my own bias as an unapologetic fan of West's music. Though I have each album in my *Apple* music library, the inclusion of certain albums was not based on my own preference. However, future studies would benefit from conducting an analysis of West's lyrics by a researcher who is not a fan. Another limitation from this study was the inclusion of albums based solely on critics reception. Although critics reception is important in viewing the music that had a higher impact and greater music sales, further studies would benefit in choosing albums based on artists artistic period to view different messages within each period and how they inform West's identity. As music technology has developed, sales in music have changed as streaming music has become a popular form in obtaining an album. For example, West's *The Life of Pablo* (2016) was an album that was not released for physical sales and only available through streaming platforms.

Another limitation of the study is the variety of interpretations of lyricism that can be found within music. Including the perspective of an audience would facilitate a greater understanding of what audiences interpret from the music and would also illustrate a greater interaction between the social themes communicated and popular meanings that are formulated. Through the inclusion of such methodology, a greater discussion could also be formulated as to the ways other women listen

to and identify themselves with such a male-dominated genre like rap music. Although this study does not address the issue of women identifying with rap music and rather opens up the social construction of identity to all listeners of rap music, it does come from a Latina perspective in which can be perceived differently by other viewpoints. Lastly, a future recommendation of the music analyzed would be the inclusion of sampling, features, and skits, as they could benefit future studies. Focusing solely on the lyrical content of the main artist within the albums limits the additional integral parts of what makes an album.

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# VITA

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