

The Audacity of Clout (Chasing): Digital Strategies of Black Youth in Chicago DIY Hip-Hop

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Though many scholars have theorized about the communication of Black youth in digital spaces, academic work has generally not sought artist perspectives of how their platformed creation might be connected to relational labor. Using observations and interviews with artists, artist managers, and entrepreneurs, we examine relational practices of hip-hop youth on social media. We describe their work on social media toward acquiring “clout”—a digital form of influence self-described by emerging musicians as allowing them to leverage digital tools in building social and professional status, amplify authenticity, cultivate connections with fans, and connect with friends and other cultural producers. In this study, we detail examples of three relational strategies that our respondents used to acquire clout: (a) corralling (b) capping, and (c) cosigning. To conclude, we argue that Chicago’s hip-hop scene provides an example of why formal institutions and researchers need to rethink how race, class, gender, and geography influence the digital interactions of young people and how their social practices add to the understanding of the counterpublics arising from globalizing social media.

Keywords: hip-hop, social media, media literacy, visibility labor, microcelebrity, platformed creation

Social media, streaming services, and e-commerce platforms have drastically changed the work practices of musical artists, who must now move between and within platforms to promote, professionalize, and sustain their careers (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Powers, 2015). Engaged audiences are new measures of success, as talent scouts and record label executives increasingly rely on social media metrics to identify the next stars. Social media provide launching pads for burgeoning artists to speak directly to fans, build personal relationships with fans, let them share in their creative processes, and aid in their promotion and other business matters (Baym, 2018). A rapidly professionalizing and monetizing wave of diverse, multicultural, previously amateur musicians from around the world has

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harnessed these platforms to incubate personal media brands, engage in content innovation, and cultivate massive, transnational, and cross-cultural fan communities (Baym, 2018).

Research on platformed creation has focused on self-curation (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015), audience engagement (Abidin, 2015; 2016a), authenticity (Hopkins & Thomas, 2011), and advertorial disclosure (Ots & Abidin, 2015), as well as common users such as brand ambassadors (Carah & Shaul, 2016) and facilitators of organic attention within social media platforms (Erkan, 2015).¹ Key to such entrepreneurialism for music artists is the work of making oneself visible and forming and sustaining relationships. "Visibility labor" is the work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self-presentations to be noticeable among prospective employers (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005), clients (Duffy, 2017, the press (Wissinger, 2015), or followers and fans (Abidin, 2015, 2016b; Duffy, 2016), among other audiences.

Visibility labor on platforms like Twitter, Snapchat, and Twitter allow independent musicians to build small "tribes of followers" who may track their every move and care just as much about their lifestyles as the songs they release (Haynes & Marshall, 2018, p. 1976). These taste communities intensify the connections between artists and their fans (Jenkins, 2006, 2014; Jenkins & Bertozzi, 2008). This is a relationship that can be rewarding for both artists and fans (Bennett, 2018), but also gives rise to tensions around relational boundaries and control (Baym, 2018). Relational labor (Baym, 2018) is the ongoing effort it takes to build and sustain the relationships with those people, across platforms online and off. Visibility and relational labor take effort but are rarely directly compensated. Instead, they are seen as investments toward building and maintaining the connections and audiences that will sustain careers (Baym, 2015).

Though previous work has explored many kinds of influencers, celebrities, and other artists, it has had less to say about the urban poor involved in hip-hop, a unique context in which creators are continually looking for strategies to reduce costs and increase productivity (Watkins, 2019). As this article will show, this context illuminates aspects of visibility and relational labor that are less visible in the scenes to which they have often been applied. Focusing on rap musicians in the Chicago scene, we are examining a case within the transnational digital landscape for emergent digital creativity among Black youth in the Global South.² In the interest of "Black vernacular technological creativity" (Fouche, 2006, p. 641), this article aims to depict how marginalized young people contribute to the global digital landscape in ways that reorient traditional music industry attention to genre-blurring amateurs. We ultimately argue that the marginalization these youths face allows them to make a living on their own terms and become celebrities outside of the already established industry norms.

¹ The term "influencer" is inspired by Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) concept of "personal influence" pre-social media.

² Global South in which it refers to the resistant imaginary of a transnational political subject that results from a shared experience of subjugation under contemporary global capitalism (Prashad, 2012).

Chicago's Hip-Hop Scene

This article examines social media strategy from the perspective of people in Chicago's successful do-it-yourself (DIY) hip-hop scene. Hip-hop, which has always been both entertainment genre and lifestyle, originates in America's low-income urban communities of color (Bynoe, 2004; Kitwana, 2003; Perry, 2004). As the third-largest city in the United States, Chicago is home to a vast array of arts and cultural institutions and many diverse cultures. It is also a city with well-documented racial, economic, and political tensions. Chicago's racial/ethnic and economic inequities have a long-standing history and have been characterized as "pervasive, persistent, and consequential" (Hendricks, Lewis, Arenas, & Lewis, 2017, p. 16). Poverty is concentrated on the South and West sides of the city, which are also the areas with the highest concentrations of Black or African American and Hispanic populations (Bloch, Cox, & Giratikanon, 2015).

For the past two decades, Chicago's hip-hop community has been remarkably successful by way of social media content and DIY digital music distribution tactics (Neff, 2017), becoming a burgeoning Web 2.0 hip-hop mecca (Harkness, 2013; Moore, 2016; Neff, 2018; Stuart, 2020). Harkness (2013) noted in his field work on Chicago hip-hop that traditionally there have been three tiers to the city's rap music scene. A top tier includes nationally established artists (e.g., Kanye West, Common, Jeremih, Lupe Fiasco) tied to major music corporations. A second tier includes local and regional artists who are independent from major music corporations and earn modest to middle-class living from music sales and concert appearances (e.g., Saba, NoName, and Queen Key). The third tier is composed of "underground" artists who self-distribute their music for free as mixtapes and aspire to launch careers in the corporate tier of the music industry (e.g., Bo Deal and Sasha Go Hard). However, all music scenes are not fixed and have ever-shifting allegiances, trends, tastes, and values (Hesmondhalgh, 2021). For example, Chicago native Chance the Rapper became the first artist to ever win a Grammy Award for a streaming-only (free and downloadable through Apple) album, and that project was not associated with a corporate record label. That project eventually earned the Recording Industry Association of America's (RIAA) designation of Platinum, the equivalent of 1,000,000 albums sold, and helped propel Chicago's DIY scene to global recognition.

Furthermore, Chicago is a unique site for a study examining the cross-section of hip-hop musical practice, audience connection, and social media usage with youth because of its rich and overlapping history of music, street gangs, and political organizing (both activist-led and electoral/state-led) within its Black communities. The city has been in the national spotlight for street violence since 2012, when it was deemed the nation's "murder capital" based on FBI data (Sherwell, 2013). This has created a scene where most of the hip-hop artists are split between producing either street-violence-centered ("gangsta rap") or socially conscious ("backpack rap") content (Harkness, 2013).

Chance the Rapper, Kanye West, Rhymefest, and Common are examples of corporate tier Chicago artists who proudly proclaim themselves to be activists/philanthropists and have even performed for various civic causes at the White House during the Obama presidency. Conversely, many of the more recent popular Chicago rap artists, like Lil' Durk, G Herbo, King Von, Polo G, and Chief Keef, are from some of the poorest, blighted, disinvested Black community areas of concentrated violence on Chicago's South Side, and they have used violent street-gang narratives about these neighborhoods to rise to prominent stature. This group of artists, along with many others, formed what is known as "drill music," a subgenre of gangsta rap known

for its grim, violent depictions of Chicago's South Side, especially the Englewood neighborhood (Stuart, 2019). The most popular Chicago drill rappers and their local fans represent a newer form of music subculture initiated by Black youth who have experienced a lifetime of hypersegregation, chronic poverty, poor education in overcrowded classrooms, and a regular loss of loved ones to both prison cells and gunshots (Evans, 2020). Thus, drill music functions as a way for poor Black youth to gain individual agency of their bodies and buck the authority of a racist and neoliberal capitalist society to commodify the harsh and dangerous realities of their everyday lives, which are clearly at odds with the positive promotional images often advertised from the City of Chicago Mayor's Office.

In hip-hop, representing one's place authentically while connecting to the wider culture has always been both essential and complicated (Forman, 2002). In a social media environment that worships "authenticity" (Baym, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014), hip-hop artists' geographic locations in communities of race and class raise particular complications. Artists are likely to be economically and digitally disadvantaged, limiting their access to media production resources. Indeed, discourses of such youth often focus on digital divides and portray them primarily through a deficit lens of disadvantage (Watkins, 2011; Watkins & Cho, 2018). Furthermore, the demands of authenticity create both opportunity and danger (Evans, 2021; Stuart, 2020; Watkins, 2019). With the "always on" nature of social media impression management (Duffy, 2017), hip-hop musicians are expected to be continuously present across multiple platforms, simultaneously affirming their street authenticity locally within the Black community and promoting their craft to an audience of global hip-hop fans who are inundated with content (Stuart, 2020). And they must often do it with only their phones. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with prominent members of this scene, we examine how artists mobilized social media to build their careers and, in so doing, served as what Stuart (2020) called "ghetto ambassadors." This select group of artists exploited the fraught market for urban poverty on the Internet. Yet even in the violent genre of drill, artists and those working with them often sought to use their entrepreneurialism to lift their communities out of poverty together.

Stuart (2020) has previously described Chicago hip-hop artists' digital efforts as "hope labor," noting that the work they put in may echo the "aspirational labor" of Brooke Erin Duffy's (2017) beauty bloggers in its ambitions of fame and financial reward, but for these Chicago youth, digital labor can also provide very real economic, social, and emotional benefits for their literal survival.³ Bridging traditional theories of urban sociology with emerging new media scholarship, we argue that these hip-hop artists, Black youth who are often understood as deprived, disadvantaged, or otherwise lacking, take advantage of the subcultural capital they do have with savvy social media engagement that allows them to amass cultural influence, or "clout," a quality measured through the social media logics of likes, views, reposts, and followers (Burgess & Baym 2020; Evans, 2022).⁴

³ Aspirational labor is the pursuit of creative activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital (Duffy, 2015, p. 3).

⁴ Evans (2022) argues that Black youth cultural production is characterized by its flow both online and offline and relentless pursuit of "digital clout." As an act of self-performance, clout-chasing involves self-fashioning of a loyal and engaged online audience.

While global fame and riches were goals, the youth we study also sought clout to gain local reputation. Clout allowed them to compete, collaborate, and connect within the larger hip-hop community of cultural producers. Still, it often did so at a price, as clout often meant exaggerating street credibility in ways that could become lethal. This, in turn, made participants ambivalent over their tactics for attention and fame. Last, we show how Chicago's hip-hop scene provides insight into how historically marginalized groups, particularly African Americans, use vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006) to articulate a sense of place and loyalty to their hometown on their own terms and in their own words.

Studying the Scene

Currently, being loved (or heavily engaged with) on social media is just as important to the career development of a hip-hop artist as any song they can create. Creating micro-moments that fans can organize around is the most robust currency of all (Caramanica, 2019). This study seeks to understand the strategies Chicago's hip-hop artists use to build their profiles. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: What visibility labor strategies are used among Chicago's hip-hop artists?

RQ2: What relational labor strategies do they use?

RQ3: How, if at all, are their strategies shaped by race, location, and technology?

In answering these questions, we used multiple qualitative methods to collect data. These data consisted of in-depth interviews and in-person fieldwork, including attendance at live performances and observation of recording studio sessions, podcasts, and local industry tastemaker events, as well as online fieldwork.⁵ Initially, we recruited interview participants through snowball sampling. Within months, we also began employing a virtual variation of this method: The first author used his Instagram and Twitter pages to offer brief information about this research and encouraged rappers to contact him to be interviewed for the project. Our initial established network of contacts on social media provided further interviewees who often recommended others, helping us construct a pool of interviewees.

The first author conducted 15 in-depth interviews with musicians and influencers from Chicago's DIY hip-hop scene. These artists interviewed could be considered to have careers in all three tiers that Harkness (2013) identified. All respondents considered their careers to be in the "underground tier" in terms of support personnel, but they have built massive audiences through social media, creating successful, sustainable, reasonably affluent careers akin to those of their peers affiliated with the large music corporations. We asked participants to sit for interviews in spaces where they participated in hip-hop culture and created music. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted some interviews via videoconference. We recorded and transcribed interviews before analyzing them. We compared identity performances across data types, comparing what we saw in person with what was on social media and what

⁵ This study is a part of a larger research design for which the first author collected ethnographic data for this project over a 16-month period.

was said in interviews. Subjects who chose to speak entirely anonymously are marked with an asterisk by their names.

Finally, our analysis was guided by the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014), in which bits of data were continuously contrasted with one another to develop categories and distill recurrent themes. We continually cross-checked and questioned patterns as they emerged and tested our tentative conclusions and writing research memos as we went along.

Findings: The Three C's of Clout Chasing

We see "clout chasing" as a technosocial competition in the marketplace of attention. Clout chasing is self-expression that involves creatively asserting one's presence in digital spaces that are not designed with them in mind. As a phenomenon, clout-chasing is built around youth sharing their everyday lives online in hopes of creating a reputation within social media platforms. Related to both Wu's (2005, 2017) concept of "Exposure Culture" and Brock's (2020) concept of "The Ratchet" in the *Libidinal Economy*, clout chasing resists the dominant spaces of music production, understanding those spaces as riddled with gender inequality and harassment, racism and racial essentializing, musician exploitation, and corporate gains. We use clout as a framework to understand how Black subjects labor in the innovation economy to expose their talents. Reflective of African Americans' historical engagement in informal, underground, and off-brand income generating activities—clout chasing offers Black youth pathways to social, creative, and financial capital on social media (Evans, 2022).

Capping

Previous research has shown that young people increasingly feel pressure to project favorable versions of themselves to their social media audiences (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). This ideal self is something that these youth are continually renegotiating and often reinvent themselves on the platforms they participate in. Within what Kitwana (2002) dubs the "hip-hop generation," mass media showcase a narrow range of hypermasculine cultural images of Blackness (e.g., thugs, players of women), characterized by toughness, flamboyance, and sexual prowess (p. 4).⁶ In the hip-hop music industry, rappers are regularly self-aggrandizing in both music videos and in their lyrics (Fitts-Ward, 2008, p. 211). They accomplish this in two ways: (1) publicly displaying extreme wealth, which symbolizes status and authority, and, (2) an overwhelming display of women's bodies, a requisite component of self-promotion (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013). In hip-hop studies, scholars have described this standard of authenticity as relating to demographic aspects, including cultural Blackness, "being hard" heterosexual masculinity, hypersexual femininity, and coming from "the streets" (Low, Tan, & Celemencki, 2013). Complemented by music and lyrics, hip-hop's visual images in creator culture provide a dynamic representation that is ubiquitous and cultivating of a global youth culture that views the glorification of money and violence as necessary to gain

⁶ The span of those adults whose formative years were firmly rooted in the culture of hip-hop ranges from individuals born as far back as 1965 and as recently as 1996 (Kitwana, 2002). Tied together by ethnic norms and social values, the children of those born to members within this community (those born after 1997) are hip-hop natives.

respect in everyday life (James, 2015). However, there is a lack of understanding on what artists think about how these forms of racialization constrain their work with digital tools and technologies.

For respondents in this study, their strategy for visibility was to post the most sensational parts of their lives in the urban ghetto, often mixed with the self-branding as a "self-made entrepreneur" or "street hustler." In their world, being as flashy as possible was an indicator of high status and being safe wasn't deemed as cool as being infamous. This served as a "standard for authenticity" for interviewees. This was exemplified by the practice of self-staging that they called "capping." Importantly, capping usually amplified the seeds of authentic self-representation to make themselves seem as important and influential in this hard scene as they could. One way to cap was to post pictures tagging places and @-replies to people even when they were not there/with them at that exact moment to reveal gang affiliations and/or residence in a neighborhood.

Respondents also often exaggerated their violent nature and material wealth on social media, posing for pictures holding large sums of cash or expensive champagne, sporting diamond necklaces, wearing monogram logo luxury brand clothing, and brandishing guns while often boasting about their crew, neighborhood, and gang affiliations in the captions of their posts. When asked why his artists participated in capping, artist manager Peeda Pan, explained:

We spend time in Miami at places like Liv, and though part of the mystique being there and walking to the front of the line while others can't get in, but other part of it is that brag about being there on Twitter, post a geotagged photo of all the women and bottles on Instagram, and go live on Snapchat from the section smoking a blunt. People have to see the tree fall, or it never happened. We have an intern whose job is to make sure people see the tree fall.

Here, Peeda detailed the possession of power (business ownership), prowess (beautiful women), and paper (money) as the traits that earned bragging rights for his artists. In explaining the social media tactics of Chief Keef, Peeda was describing what Rein and colleagues (2006) would call "sensation staging" (p. 70), or multilayered communication with an audience through one piece of curated audiovisual content. Additionally, he hints here that the mystique of his artist's private life was made more intensified by online content that the artist created. In explaining this rationale of capping, King Louie's manager, Big Homie Doe, stated that most drill artists originally saw themselves as "gaming" the public at large for clout on social media:

There's a strategy to how we use social media. Real drill was about doing stuff to others for money without getting caught. We never really let people know exactly where we were at while we are there. We might take photos with big-ass guns and a wad of money in an alley, but we wouldn't share our location.

In another example of capping, Marco Rackz* posted a picture to Facebook of himself at a video shoot with several exotic dancers whom he paid to be in his music video. However, the caption of the picture gave the impression that the women were at his house hanging out in bikinis. In defending this strategy, Marco confided:

Big-ass guns, lots of pretty chicks, money, and tons of dope smoke. That's what you find on my page. That's how you show your clout. This is just part of what people assume your life is like as a rapper. I found the cutest strippers on Instagram and told them I'd pay them 700 bucks each to be in my music video. Drinks, weed, and food included.

For respondents like Marco, a financial investment in capping was worth doing because it solidified his digital reputation, maintained his street credibility, and amplified the narratives that he wanted to drive home in his music. To that very point, rapper Young Benz described capping as not just a chance to be an exaggerated version of themselves but also an opportunity to, as he described, "spit in the world's face."

Most days, I be just chilling in the studio or with my daughter, but that shit is boring. No one wants to see that. Like, if that means posing with money or going on live or the snap (Snapchat) when I'm smoking dope with females . . . I give them what they want to see.

Though it garnered them hypervisibility online, the long-term cost of performing the role of the hypermasculine, violent, materialistic, street infamous, and/or sexually promiscuous rappers through capping is that the details of artists' content are surveilled by rivals in ways that can set them up for negative offline encounters. DJ Onyx* elaborated on this topic during our interview:

FBG Duck just got killed in downtown Chicago. That was partially because he was bragging and sharing his location to his enemies. (Lil) Reese got shot in his neck. King Louie was shot in the head. (Chief) Keef was almost killed outside the W hotel in New York. King Von got killed in Atlanta the same way. Posting money and jewelry with their location tagged and putting disrespectful captions in their posts. Bragging about having sex with another person's baby mama. Authenticity is one thing; self-sabotage is another. People get robbed and killed over posting too much.

For many interviewees, the logic of capping was simple: Sensationalism and conspicuous consumption boosted their followers, so they did it at all costs. At the same time, this meant strategically curating their social media stunts to appear authentic to their audiences.

Although capping was usually described by many male respondents as associated with showing a violent or misogynistic nature, female respondents primarily described capping as exaggerating affiliation with high-status men, display of luxury material items, and projecting sexual availability on social media. Though often more sought after than their male counterparts, their visibility also appeared wrought with inner conflict about their celebrity. Singer/songwriter/model Bricks* was the biggest example of this. Originally a burlesque dancer, she subsequently transitioned to selling nude pictures and videos to subsidize her studio time and sustain her income. Despite amassing more than 40,000 followers on Instagram, she felt very ambivalent about the quality of the attention she was receiving as well as its impact on her credibility as an artist:

I was thinking I needed to hide my nude stuff to do music and just be like, now you need to take me seriously. But I realized that anyone that follows me is expecting some ass

photos, and if they're not seeing them, they're gonna be like, what the fuck is this, and just unfollow . . . I don't know, there's probably other girls like me out there who have like, a beautiful voice, and they're like, but I'm just a stripper. You know?

For Bricks, reappropriating the stereotypes of Blackness in mainstream music industry to her advantage was a clever solution for self-commodification on OnlyFans. However, this was also conflicting with her identity and content as a musician. Expression of sexuality through "the booty" can be limiting and tends to reduce Black women to being perceived as what Miller-Young (2014) calls "video hoes." This is something that scholars claim can be attributed to the "backwards gaze" of the audience (Durham, 2012; p. 38). This gaze frames the booty as an erogenous zone of racial difference complementing the breast as a signifier of gender difference for Black women (Durham & Baez, 2007). The backward gaze is considered a pornographic one, and Bricks' insight signaled this very notion that the racialized ideological tensions of clout chasing also carried some gender-specific considerations that deserve attention.

Ultimately, capping involved how our participants commodified their ethnic and racial identities into desirable economic goods. Overall, we found that capping of our participants tended to be exercises that held potential to give them individual freedoms while often creating ambivalence about how their work impacted the collective view of African Americans in mainstream society. They talked incessantly about being highly surveilled, judged, and stereotyped.

Cosigning

Time and time again, respondents expressed that wider visibility had to be earned only through official gatekeepers, such as established artists, agents, managers, or security personnel, and then only if the purpose of the contact was deemed legitimate by their audiences. This was labeled as "cosigning." Like Duguay's (2020) concept of "aspiring relational labor" (p. 32), cosigning involved attempts by our subjects to forge relationships with established influencers or celebrities in hopes of acquiring greater attention and entering the corporate tier of the music industry. To get a cosign by an official gatekeeper is to be granted that legitimacy and, importantly, to notify platform algorithms that you are interesting and worthy of appearing in others' feeds. For example, fashion designer and store owner Joe Freshgoods spoke about how having up-and-coming artists wear his clothing on their Instagram pages was a reciprocal relationship that led to increased social capital:

I sold out every time I did a new release with people like Chief Keef and Fredo (Santana) or Chance (the Rapper) and the Save Money guys, but what people don't see is all the years he hung out at our store, and we supported him by giving him clothes to wear, a platform to sell his music, and a space to hold events for free. When you're in high school, you're just looking for resources. I managed the store and convinced my boss to invest in him, and when he got to where he was supposed to be, he invested in me.

These relationships ultimately led to Freshgoods's brand being featured by Chance as his official merchandise vendor during Chance's "Magnificent Coloring Day" concert held at Chicago's Guaranteed Rate Field. Ultimately, for Freshgoods and Chance, it was mutual cosigning that began the viability of

his clothing brand, but it was their public acknowledgement of each other's work on social media (locally by Freshgoods and globally by Chance) that ultimately propelled both of their creative careers into sustainable income and celebrity.

Another form of cosigning reported by respondents occurred when subjects looked for ways to be acknowledged and reinforced publicly by strangers (established artists, disc jockeys, and other high-status people) with large social media followings. This included posting a picture with a famous singer and tagging the singer in the caption or screenshotting text message exchanges with a famous producer, or even paying a video model to dance to a new song and then posting it on social media as if it organically happened. Artist Jonny Jonsin* spoke about how he did this while at New York Fashion Week and consistently connected with famous peers on social media: "These are people I used to see all the time on my phone, on social media, and now I'm in the same room and they're tagging me in their posts. It feels so crazy and unreal." After these encounters, Jonny would often brag to his followers about having personal interactions with mainstream celebrities on his Instagram page. Very similarly, @-replies were used on both his Twitter and Instagram pages to get the attention of established celebrities and high-status people during high-status events with the hopes that it would elicit acknowledgement. After a concert appearance at San Francisco Pride, Jonny saw his follower count rising by the thousands daily, an engagement spike to 24,000 likes, and more than 100,000 views on his posts despite prior averages of 5,000–7,000 likes per photo post and 15,000 views per video post. When referencing this spike in engagement, Jonny explained:

When I posted that I was hanging out at a party with Solange, my fans reposted the shit out of it, and now she is a fan of my music. She also started to follow me, and that cosigned me to her network of fans.

Jonny's quote exemplifies the duality of cosigning. While it is highly targeted at mainstream stars, it often functions to make fans feel like they are intimate enough to be included in those relationships. By publicly courting the attention of the traditionally famous musicians, Jonny accrued visibility and celebrity by proxy.

Another example of this type of cosigning among our respondents was G Herbo. A mid-20s-age rapper from the South Shore area of Chicago, Herbo was initially cosigned in 2010 by local Chicago rapper Mikkey Halsted and signed to his management company (Machine Entertainment Group) after Halsted found his music on YouTube. In 2012, Herbo captured national attention with a music video for a song called "Kill Shit," which amassed 41 million YouTube views (as of June 11, 2019). Many attributed that viral video to the fact that rapper Drake tweeted some of his lyrics and publicly invited him to collaborate with him over Instagram. When speaking about how that cosign played into Herbo's success, Halsted explained:

It's about us passing influence back and forth through social media. Because I worked with Wayne, Drake was in our network. We just needed the music to be good and the videos (to be good) to get the views for it to matter.

Receiving acknowledgement from established celebrities often caused "turning points" for the careers of artists like Herbo. These sorts of Internet approvals as reputable cosigns led to corporate record deals, sponsorships, or high-profile collaborations. In this space, social media made up a "cosigning"

playground with reflexive and immediate benefits. In Herbo's case, a well-known individual (Drake, 2020) took claim on promoting an up-and-comer on social media simply by exchanging his mainstream clout for Herbo's street clout.

Literature on gangsta rap has continually described a tension between what artists perform authentically and what they do to fulfill the expectations of their audiences (Perry, 2004; Quinn, 2004). The resharing of digitally mediated cosigns seems not to be a temporary phenomenon but an expectation of the emerging rap artist on social media platforms. This practice was described as the extension of norms in music marketing that now must blend online and offline elements. Our respondents regularly exploited chance encounters and private acknowledgements via digital return channels for revenue, competitive edge, and strategic expansion.

Corralling

While the Internet has opened opportunities for Black voices and storytelling, it has also created an overcrowded attention economy for which it is nearly impossible to break through by oneself. While the process of career development, from being one among the mass of amateurs to becoming a star always relied upon individually navigating past the gatekeepers, developing connections, and improving one's networking skills (Condry, 2006, p. 88), our respondents described their music careers as collective work. Many used the term "corralling," which referred to the necessity of "the posse" in being a rapper, the number of hours required the collective, the amount of sheer effort involved in being in the studio as a unit. In contrast with capping and cosigning, which treat fans as spectators, when they use corralling, musicians engage fans as equals, often mobilizing the most engaged to serve in more official roles within their professional support systems.

For example, Lady Unicorn described how the process of corralling started when she habitually cross-promoted herself across and within social media with hopes to professionalize and leave the confines of her day job as a clerk at a liquor store:

Instagram allowed me to herd audiences (without labels). Through geotagging, through microtagging in my stories, and through tracking my signature hashtags, we just started hacking the algorithm. With this (holds up phone), I learned how to manipulate and defeat the Internet. I figured out how to troll the Internet and create a point of conversation with my fans. At that moment, I knew I didn't have to show my body for attention or chase a record label.

Both Mako Fitts-Ward (2008) and Imani Perry (2004) address how hip-hop's community of practice sexually objectifies, provides little agency and economic mobility for most female cultural workers. However, in this quote, Lady Unicorn spoke candidly about how using Instagram gave her a sense of freedom from gatekeeping practices typically forced upon women in the music industry. When she spoke about "hacking" the algorithm, she was implying that the algorithm had to be manipulated to properly give her work visibility without sexually exploiting herself. In elaborating on how she found her core audience in this process, she explained further:

Social currency is having an understanding of your herd and their engagement. Over time, I've developed an algorithm in my head of what works and what doesn't, but that's come from almost a decade of really watching what works (on the platform) and what doesn't.

For Lady Unicorn, Instagram provided a launching pad to speak directly to fans of her music, build personal relationships with fans, and let them share in their creative process. One of the primary ways she did this was through a weekly marijuana-themed "meetup" with fans in Instagram Live. It was through these meetups that she got the idea to harness and monetize this following by starting her own music festival, where her followers, friends, and family alike could gather in the physical world. The collective produced a one-day music festival in the south suburbs of Chicago. She ultimately sold 1,500 tickets for \$75 each.

Besides her live music festival, Lady Unicorn formed a social media marketing company. The company was a collective of her Instagram followers whom she not only selected to help her promote her events but also paid to promote local Chicago businesses that contracted her for branded social media posts. These individuals often used the Dubsplash app and other short-form social video apps like Funimate, Likee, and Triller to seed content with original songs or product placements featured within it. They then posted (or cross-posted) the videos to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook, where they often reached wider audiences through social sharing.

Many other interviewees frequently referred to fans and followers as support systems who helped them promote their music to wider audiences. For instance, Young Benz* expressed that he felt his fans were more like his family or community:

These people are damn near like my family. I want them to feel like they literally are just waking up and smoking with their homie. That's my brand. It's not about me. It's just for a community of people to talk to each other, like-minded people.

Though "fans" are relegated to interacting primarily with one another online, they could become people whom artists consider as their friends. As Benz explains here, he used Instagram and Facebook to develop real social connections, and those connections helped him with social-emotional support. Through this level of intimacy, these friends/followers validated his creative work, promoted it to their networks, and helped give him a "continuance commitment" (Lee, 2009), to move forward with music as a career path.

Even still, not all corralling created personal relationships. Some of our informants admitted to hiring their social media followers to support the promotion of their work, a significant indicator of class status. Rapper/comedian Sly Dolla spoke about hiring a group of college classmates to send direct messages to their followers about his content:

I realized that guerrilla marketing just went from overpopulating the street to overpopulating Instagram. Every person [I hired] on my team had to have at least 10,000 followers to join my team. Collectively, any post by someone in our crew always hit at least 100,000 people in Chicago, and we use that as our base.

Overall, the various artists we interviewed spoke about coralling as developing a real sense of community within their promotional networks. Respondents spoke about Chicago's DIY hip-hop movement as a perfect example of the power of collective intelligence and the wisdom of crowds. Through democratized media production, this music-driven community interacted online as a group with shared interests, continually aggregating data among one another, serving their own hyperlocal interests, and bolstering their city's creative capital.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Our study speaks to the larger ways that Black digital practices on social media, particularly those born in the hip-hop music industry, have been at the vanguard of what we now know to be influencer work. Using Chicago's hip-hop scene as a case study, we identified three strategies of visibility and relational labor germane to DIY hip-hop artists: capping, cosigning, and coralling. Though these tactics are comparable to other artist communities explored in previous research on microcelebrity, what's specific to this case is the particular ideologies of race, class, gender, and geography expressed within the strategies used. Though previous scholarship argued that microcelebrities are more available to their fans to be perceived as anti-mainstream, in this case, respondents hope financial rewards and traditional careers in entertainment would come in exchange for this level of engagement. In this way, their descriptions of their digital practices also show how, through acting out their Blackness in spaces that weren't intended for them to do so, they received hypervisibility to audiences that often never knew their type of Blackness existed.

Those whose online opinions are most respected and can influence the behaviors of others gain digital clout. Hip-hop artists who amass this clout mobilize (and exploit) explicitly the very social conditions they faced to forge their product. The ironies run deep: These artists turn the very social costs of urban poverty, violence, and social isolation into assets, and they place this enterprising "conversion narrative" at the heart of their imagery. Illustrating Robin Kelley's (2017) suggestion that capitalism is both the greatest foe and greatest friend to young Black men facing deindustrialization, the personas of our respondents critique the options of dead-end service-sector jobs and respectable middle-class upward mobility by staking out creative careers through social media platforms. Additionally, respondents followed the trend of prior work on gangsta rap (e.g., Quinn, 2004) that claims that artists turn the so-called deficiencies of their locales as assets to their storytelling, personal branding, and claims to authenticity. Conversely, affordances of social media and the power to control the promotion, distribution, and monitoring of their images without the need of the male rapper allow women to exploit the rap game for social mobility. Ultimately, their platformed creations served as means to entrepreneurship, economic mobility, and sustained microcelebrity.

However, we want to emphasize that we are not seeking to reinforce "new racism," in which Black Americans' inherent strength and will to overcome structural racism have been reframed in ways that glorify personal resilience and resourcefulness (Collins, 2004). The emphasis on diversity and difference in this case is particularly important given trends toward stereotyping and pathologizing the cultural practices of Black youth in low-income communities of color. Scholarly work has continually noted that often youth, particularly those of color, have their social media practices dismissed as unproductive and/or a waste of time. However, the usages exhibited in this study by DIY hip-hop musicians in Chicago are expanding and innovating on the types of digital participation and relational labor that musicians use to further their careers.

In beginning to understand the labor practices of these youth, we suggest that highlighting different types of digital participation and relational labor is as important as understanding how digital technologies have shaped their generation.

As an essential source of Black cultural production, hip-hop artists often disseminate, incorporate, and commodify cultural forms from the margins of Black society. By providing Black youths understandings of talent and authenticity, we believe gaining the artists' perspectives on the nature of their work holds huge implications on the study of cultural production. For this and other reasons, theories of cultural production need to make the intertwined oppressions associated with race and ethnicity far more central than they have been until now—and these oppressions need somehow to be theorized in relation to power dynamics related to class, gender, and other factors (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013, p. 185). Furthermore, as Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013) argue, production is also significant. This study suggests that creators' experiences while creating do matter, and so does the quality of their working lives. As new forms of racialization made possible by the Internet and social networking technologies formulate the digital street, Black artists and creators are forced to figure out how best to project an image of African American identity. Future work will be necessary to explore how they manage creating content that would be acceptable both to themselves and to global audiences, in addition to the ethnic and racial politics of American relations to the rest of the world. This work shows the kinds of complexities in which power and inequality work themselves out to carve hip-hop's place within creator culture.

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