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# The "figuring world" of Blackness negotiated through rap music

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**The “figuring world” of Blackness negotiated through rap music**

by

**Jovan Hendrix Johnson**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

Major: Journalism & Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:  
Joel Geske, Major Professor  
Tracy Lucht  
Cameron Beatty

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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## DEDICATION

I respectfully dedicate this study to the “youth who march onward and upward towards the light.” I dedicate this to the young African-Americans men whether young, teens, or adults. I dedicate this study to Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and all of my Black brothers and sisters who have lost their life from police brutality. We must follow in the footsteps of Malcolm X and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when they both agreed that for African-Americans to be free we must not need to compare ourselves to others but we must see ourselves as people of God and do things for ourselves and ourselves only. As Rev. Dr. Martin L. King Jr. said;

*“I come here tonight and plead with you. Believe in yourself and believe that you’re somebody. As I said to a group last night, nobody else can do this for us! No document can do this for us. No Lincolnian Emancipation Proclamation can do this for us. No Kennesonian or Johnsonian Civil Rights Bill can do this for us. If the Negro is to be free, he must move down into the inner resources of his own soul and sign with a pen and ink of self-assertive manhood, his own Emancipation Proclamation. Don’t let anybody take your manhood.” – Rev. Dr. Bro. Martin L. King Jr.*

We should not try to fit in someone else shoes or follow someone else path to find happiness and acceptance. Yet, we should make our own shoes and create our own path to righteousness. Until we understand this, the Black man will never be free, and we will always face the issues we face with now. It is time t stand up, push back, and reclaim what is rightly ours. This study allowed me to find out who I am and understand what drove me to this point. This study along with other research help guide the understanding of Black America and therefore gives so many reasons as to why this should be further explored.

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at how young African-American males specifically in the state of Iowa construct their blackness in an environment where Blackness is lost in a White dominant space. I used Holland et al. theory “Figuring Worlds” as a foundation to how the study will go. In the theory, it explains that “social forces” or social expectations do not directly influence but dictate who we are and/or what we do govern people. I used rap music as a social force to examine rap music as a social force that governs who people are and what they do. Since rap music is prominent in the African-American community and since rap music narrates the lives of African-American men experiences, I chose to sample young African-American men who actively consume rap music to see how they construct their own identity negotiated through rap music.

The study showed that African-American men use Rap music as a tool towards negotiating their perceived identity. Rap music serves as a feeder for African-American youth in negotiating their blackness and socially learning how to practice their identity by popularity. Although, majority of the participants in the study agreed that Rap music does not directly assist in their understanding, they did agree that Rap music was used as significant impact on their identity by helping them understand the artifacts associated with Blackness by recognizing actors who exemplify and serve as a model of Blackness, certain outcomes are valued over others by observation or social learning, and significance is assigned to certain acts by practicing or exercising their understood identity.



## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: PRESENCE OF RAP

Music, much like language, has become an influential piece in the development of culture. Most importantly, people use music to construct their own perception of reality and their identity. Music was and still is an essential piece in our daily lives, influencing our thoughts, behaviors, and values. It is important to note that music, like television, caters to the individual. Because of the variety of genres, people are able to personalize their own musical style by selecting what they find interesting and what speaks to them while allowing people to become immersed within music's unconscious effects through the rhythm, lyrics, and musical messages. Once people become invested in music, it begins to "move through us as spoken discourse and embodied practice" (Hatt, 2007).

Music is a part of the cultural development because it is a channel that allows people to express emotions. Music is a source that keeps cultural values and traditions alive from generation to generation. Music is an art that embodies the complexity of culture while permitting people to have a personal connection in understanding and identifying with their unique heritages. Albums, lyrics, and beats also serve as a time capsule that allows people to examine how social issues and values and perspectives have changed over time. Some music has hidden messages within the narratives. Narratives are what the songs illustrate to their audience. Most songs that reflect on social issues tend to tell stories of the lived experiences of those who were faced with challenges of surviving in the world. Those songs usually narrate how to embrace, overcome, and/or stay afloat in an oppressive lifestyle. Music "reflects on the social and cultural organization, by translating life experiences into sound and providing opportunities for community members to represent the experiences of their marginalized status within society"

(Maultsby, 1996). Music is the voice for the unspoken; it is the expression of pain and suffering, and it is the release of energy through subliminal text (Hayes, 1996).

Music is the pulse of the African American culture. For centuries, it has been used as a form of communication for the Black community. Music is the spoken documentation of the Black heritage. Much of the music in the African American community today is a product of the slave culture (Hayes, 1996). Slave music, now known as “Negro spirituals,” was used to express the struggles and to cry out about the oppressive lifestyles they faced (Hayes, 1996). Negro spirituals are considered to be an expression of opportunity that was depicted through the voices of religion (Gospel) and mixed with Blues (Bluegrass). There are several different forms of Black culture music such as Rap, R&B, Gospel, Neo-Soul, and Jazz. The messages of prosperity, hope, equality, and better social conditions are the core. One would think that since there are so many different forms of Black music that the messages received are different and that the goal of the music is to bring the community together. The many different forms of music do not disband the community; yet, they bring together many different people who may like one form over the other.

This research uses “Figured Worlds Theory,” which explains that we are somewhat governed by “social forces.” According to Hatt (2007), these social forces are a “set of rules and/or guidelines that influence our behavior, speech, and how we practice” in social spaces. She goes on to explain that these social forces do not directly dictate these characteristics of speech, thought, and behavior; however, they do have some influence on them (Hatt, 2007). In a 1997 article, Gilroy claimed that rap music was the “Blackest” music to date because it is used as a scale to evaluate everything else (as cited in Clay, 2003). Rap music is a scale that every other race uses to evaluate what is and is not a part of their race.

So, because rap music was claimed to be the “Blackest” culture, I will use rap music as the “social force” that influences the “Figuring of Blackness.” Holland’s “Figured Worlds” theory explains that “Blackness” has specific rules/guidelines that influence behaviors. “Figuring,” by Holland et al.’s (1998) definition, is when “particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to specific acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland et al., p. 52). Thus, for this study, I argue that “Blackness” becomes a “figuring” for Black youth by Holland et al.’s definition. “Figured Worlds” assumes that there are three concepts: Artifacts, Discourse, and Identity.

In the first half of this study, I review previous research on rap music and the influence of rap music on identity. Next, I use Holland’s theory to analyze how “Blackness” is “figured,” negotiated from the rap music illustration of Blackness. The main question for this study is to determine how “Blackness” is formed through rap music. More importantly, I examine how young Black males in Midwestern city use rap music to figure “Blackness,” and how those young men exercise their “Blackness.” I use an in-depth interview method with a sample size of four black males ages 18–21.

## CHAPTER 2 – WHAT IS RAP?

Rap music is a figuring of words that are rooted in autobiographies that narrate the struggle against the White dominant system (Rose, 1994). Rap music represents the lived experiences in the Black community (Kubrin, 2005), and the reaction toward the lack of positive reinforcement that could provide prosperity and change for the Black community (Smitherman, 1997). Rap music is a blend of nonfictional realities to the rebellion against White dominated structures (Smitherman, 1997). Rap music is a sub-genre of Hip-Hop, which consists of many different aspects of the Black culture. DJ Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Hollywood, and Busy Bee Starski were recognized as the fathers and were credited with coining the term “Hip-Hop” (Smitherman, 1997). Interestingly, the term “rap” was originally used in the African American speech community to refer to romantic sexualized interaction used by men to win over a woman for the purpose of sexual intercourse (Smitherman, 1997).

Rap music emerged from lower socioeconomic inner city neighborhoods in the South Bronx, New York, in the late 1970s; today, rap music has developed into “one of the world’s most influential cultural movements” (Hernandez et al., 2011). Although rap music was recognized as a predominantly Black genre, Latinos/as became a small but interesting group that became part of the Rap nation as well (Smitherman, 1997). The early 1980s marked a time when Black middle-class families moved out of the ghetto, and the overload of drugs such as crack and heroin moved in (Clay, 2003). Rap music’s vivid lyrical illustrations of Black urban life allowed consumers to authenticate the music. This authenticity helped position rap music as the voice of young Black America, which agrees with Gilroy’s claim that rap, is the “Blackest” culture (Clay, 2003).

Because Gilroy (1997) claimed that rap music was and still is the “Blackest” culture to date (as cited in Clay, 2003), and since Watkins (1998) claims that the rap culture illustrates “Black youth agency” that has become the feeding ground of the production of Black youth (pg. 65), then we must examine how Black identity is formed through mediated rap music and practiced in White-dominated spaces. The *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* identifies rap music as “the most controversial type of music” because of its depictions of violence, drugs, sexualized view of womanhood, and the misunderstood values of money and power (Kubrin, 2005).

Rap music serves as a background to provide a view of the world through the Rap artists’ vivid lyrical content. Wright, in his dissertation in 2010, quoted a saying from VH1 Hip-Hop honors that concluded “many people confuse Hip-Hop with Rap music.” The two are similar in context because they describe a part of Black culture, but they are different in content. Hip-Hop is the brand name, whereas rap music is the product of the Hip-Hop brand. Since its prime, Hip-Hop has become commercialized. This commercialization means that rap songs played on the radio became suitable for listeners inasmuch as much of the language used in Rap music has negative implications, and because most consumers of rap are youth, the Federal Communications Commission required radio stations to censor certain aspects of the songs with negative meanings.

“The Radio Act of 1927” gave the federal government power to control the content of music and commercials aired over broadband networks (FCC.gov). The law prohibits any use of indecent, profane, and obscene material. The majority of, if not all, Rap music has some negative or offensive content. So, for rap music to gain more airtime, radio networks censored the profane words by adding blank spaces, or voiceovers, to the songs. Some say that changing the actual rap lyrics changes the message even though the song may in fact still be the same by definition

(Wright, 2010), but changing the lyrics to more suitable words also changes the integrity and emotional aspect within the song's message. Most people respect rap music because it is a fixed narrative of the lived experiences of Black men rather than Black women (Kubrin, 2005), and to say the least, it exploits the "realness" of the Black experience in America (Wright, 2010).

Researchers agree that Hip-Hop is defined as the Black culture that is composed of graffiti art, break dancing, fashion, specific behaviors, and specific language (Wessel & Wallert, 2011; Smitherman, 1997). Rap music uses the instrumental beats to reminisce or expose the oppressive lifestyles that the Black communities share. The music shares stories of hope and prosperity that foster the trials and tribulations of Black youth.

### **Rap Music and the African American Culture**

Rap music is an art form that gives African Americans a voice to express the struggles that their community as a whole shared. Rap music, or in other words the art of rapping, was a source of relief because it allowed listeners to know that the obstacles they face are a universal problem in the African American community. Rap music quickly became a part of the genre that African Americans recognize today as Hip-Hop because so many people who were affiliated with or interested in rap were Black, and Black people created it. At its beginning stages, rap music was the primary way for Black youth to voice their concerns and seek ways to somehow create a "sense of order" (Smitherman, 1997). Although these expressions are problematic, rap gave content to the politics, race, and the history of the Black culture (Wessel & Wallert, 2011).

Sullivan (2003) believes researchers concluded that rap music helps young low-income African Americans develop "empowering beliefs by connecting them with their culture and developing positive identities." Researchers have claimed that early rappers' aim was to educate listeners (Henderson, 1996) and to spark social change in America (Powell, 1991). The messages

in earlier forms of rap music were lyrically projected to present the opinions of the Black community to America, and more so, the world. In 1988, the rap group Public Enemy from New York debuted a song called “Fight the Power,” which quickly gained media attention and became the anthem for Black politicized youth (Sullivan, 2003). While the song gained much respect, it was considered to be a political push for human rights, and more specifically for people of color. Now, rap music has shifted into an era where themes of money, power, and violent behaviors are the norm.

Rap music has taken a major change in the different forms of rapping such as Southern (Party) Rap, Conscious Rap, and Gangsta (Trap) Rap. Conscious rap and Gangsta Rap music specifically provide an expression that engages the African American ghetto culture, whereas Southern rap music is a generic expression for narrating the Black experience of marginalized success (Kubrin, 2005). I define “marginalized success” in Southern rap music as the expression of fame, money, and the glorification of illegal activity to gain social status within a marginalized community. So, rappers like 2 Chainz, whose songs about fame, money, and sex gain attention from media, become figures for the Hip-Hop genre. 2 Chainz has made a successful career narrating the story of how he became famous and the hard work it took to get there. This fame now allows him to change social status, but only in the social status category of other marginalized communities.

Rap music is not just an expression of the Black cultural experience in America; it is the practice that proposes a text resistant to the White American racist system and European cultural dominance in America (Smitherman, 1997). Rap music is an art form that accurately depicts the resilience of America’s best-kept secret, that is a rebellion from America’s economic and terrorist objective against Black people (Smitherman, 1997). It is important to note that some rap

music only exposes the truth about the social oppression of Black people and the Black community by White America. Researcher Murali Balaji (2012) studied music credibility and how local gatekeepers such as DJs, radio hosts, and media managers act as intermediaries between corporations that produce and distribute Rap artist music (2012). Balaji claimed that these dynamics influence the cultural production processes and the branding of the rap artist within the Black community. He said that rap music relies heavily on the Black community and that the community itself “authenticates” or endorses the artist so that the artist will represent the community.

During the late 1980s, rap music became more visible and rappers began to make their music more politically themed. Rappers discussed the obvious sight of racism, gang violence, poverty, police aggression toward the Black community, and more importantly, racism. This period in time is considered to some as the golden era of rap (Powell, 2000). In the late 1990s, political rap music lost its popularity, and corporate control and marketing destroyed rap music’s political agenda (Sullivan, 2003). Nonetheless, some critical rap forms still exist today, but those voices are often less commercially successful because anti-racist messages in rap music could potentially limit profit gain. Rappers Kendrick Lamar, and Jermaine Cole (J. Cole) are just about the only two commercially successful political rappers in 2014, and much of their music has limited airtime.

### **Rap Music’s Message Toward Identity**

Rap music is no stranger in scholarly research in identity and culture. In much of the cultural research in the Black community, music continues to be a driving factor in shaping how individuals practice their identity in social spaces. More recent studies have shown that Rap music allows consumers to take on violent actions and thoughts because the cultural codes claim



that survival in these marginalized communities requires people to portray themselves as figures of authority and violent reputations (Kubrin, 2005). Rap music creates the willingness to create a violent social identity, so that “making a name” is key for cultural survival (Kubrin, 2005). The Black youth have always fought for the right to counter the dominant discourse that demonizes and disciplines them (Watkins, 1998).

Lyrics in Rap music aggressively create borders that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Kubrin, 2005). These same lyrics teach consumers that violent behaviors are acceptable once certain individual boundaries are violated. Rap music allows listeners to actively assume that violent behavior or violent reputations are necessary as a method of social control. Berry (1994) suggests that rap music is a reflection of the lives of the youth who consume it, and that the music relates to empowerment and cultural and identity development. Researchers also suggest that rap music can be “a tool through which Black youth negotiate and authenticate their Black identity as it relates to the form of cultural capital” (Squires, 2006). There has been a constant struggle within the Black community, which is centered on “authenticity” (Clay, 2003). The struggle comes from the production of the Black culture to create a unified Black identity. Andreanna Clay, in a 2003 article, claimed that, in the Black youth perspective, one could only authenticate his/her Black identity by practicing the Hip-Hop culture. Black youth take cues from other Black youth on what it means to be Black, along with mainstream media and dominant groups (Clay, 2003). More importantly, Clay claims that Black youth must exercise their Blackness by performing in Hip-Hop culture. She goes on to say that Rap/Hip-Hop is in fact a marker for Black identity and culture.

In an interesting comment, Binder (1993) suggests that White heavy metal fans were viewed as potential victims of the music, whereas rap fans—mainly Black youth—were viewed

by media outlets as “a threat to society.” In addition, Epstein, Pratto, and Skipper (1990) analyzed the relationship between behavioral issues and the preference for rap or heavy metal music and found that 98% of Whites listen to heavy metal, and 98% of Blacks listen to rap, which indicates that race has a high correlation to music selection. What they also found was that the preference for both forms of music was not associated with behavioral problems.

In 2005, Charles Kubrin looked at rap music lyrics and the link to violence and found that out of the 632 songs he analyzed, 79% of them mentioned some aspect of violent behavior with graphic depictions. Kubrin suggests that the language in rap lyrics serve to establish a “tough guy” identity. Berry (1990) suggested that rap music was a representation of criminal and violent behavior that adds to the social problem in the Black community, whereas Ballard et al. (1999), stated that people believe that other people are inspired by rap music lyrics, and because rap music lyrics represent violent behavior, she also suggests that those lyrics influence negative behavior. From the beginning, rap music has been viewed from a racist perspective (Sullivan, 2003). Consumers of rap and those who are considered rappers are often viewed as dysfunctional Black adolescents (Sullivan, 2003). At the same time, Black youth indicate that these messages are ways that counter the dominant structures, which allows them to (re)-affirm their experiences, cultural group, and identity (Sullivan, 2003). Based on my literature review, I conclude that Clay (2003) claims that rap has become a marker for Black identity, and Hikes (2004) claims that rap music and rap imagery creates a “misrepresentation of the Black culture to non-Black children, an unrealistic image of Black womanhood, the glorification of the ‘thug life,’ and the continuous violent behavior for Black boys.” So, while rap music plays a major role in the construction of a violent and reputable identity in Black youth, it is safe to agree with

Hikes (2004) that today's rap music and rap imagery are instrumental pieces that create the "lack of respect" for the Black culture in America.

As I continue to read more and more about identity and social structures, this study only examines how "mass media" as a social force impacts identity. Other research has claimed that specific social institutions such as schools, churches, community centers (YMCA, Boys and Girls Club), etc., also influence one's identity. I do believe that identity is negotiated here but I claim that only after individuals understand their identity can these social institutions help them to accept or reject that piece of their identity. Social institutions help individuals demonstrate their newly constructed identity rather than help them define what their identity is. In other words, these social institutions comes into play when the individual wants to exercise his/her newfound identity to see how socially accepted it will become or if the individual needs to go back and reconstruct his/her identity to be deemed as acceptable to the social group. In the study, I examine how "rap" music helps individuals define their understanding of "Blackness" and how to perform it in social spaces.

### **The Complexity of Rap Messages' Influence on Geographical Location**

It could take almost an entire study to understand the complexity of rap and its influences based on geographical locations. For example, in this particular study, I have to understand how rap music in Iowa influences the minds of young Black males. While the discussion of rap messages on the consumer is very important, I found that there is a lack of information on how rap music with one central message is interpreted differently depending on geographical location. So eventually those who consume rap music in bigger cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, etc., will have a different understanding of "Blackness" within those boundaries. To make it more complex, within those city boundaries, there are even more specific

boundaries within the city where the message could be interpreted differently. Where the individual lives in the state is another consideration. Those who live in suburban neighborhoods will receive different messages than those who live in metropolitan areas; those who attend public schools will receive different messages than those who attend private schools; so will those who have two-parent homes and those in single parent homes, those who were raised without their biological parents, and those who were raised by their grandparents. These boundaries create an interpretation that cannot be fully understood because of the many possible circumstances. It is very interesting not only to see how these messages are disseminated but also to understand how they agree with the fact that music can be a form that destroys culture while praising “individuality.” Messages are influenced by boundaries within boundaries, and the ways in which rap messages on “Blackness” are understood also impact on the way “Blackness” is performed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, I use Holland et al.’s theory of “Figured World,” which explains that we are governed by specific “expectations” or social forces that somewhat dictate who we are and what we do (Hatt, 2007). I chose this theoretical framework because it allows us to examine how our cultural background and identity shape the way we perceive others and ourselves. It also allows me to examine how everyday activities inform and re-create identity. I claim that “Blackness” and the Black experience are constructed, or in Holland et al.’s term “figured,” in a world where “particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). “Blackness” and the Black experience are defined as the ways in which the individual understands who he/she is by recognizing others who they think represents “Blackness,” and the behaviors he/she practices.

I examined how figuring “Blackness” negotiated through rap music allows specific behaviors and identities to take shape. Figuring worlds, used mainly in education research, will give a foundation to how Black males figure “Blackness,” where “*actors are recognized, certain outcomes are valued over others, and significance is assigned to certain acts*” (Holland et al., p. 52). As stated above, Holland et al.’s, theory consists of three elements: artifacts, discourse, and identity. In this study, two of those 3 elements are found to be true and one, which I will discuss later, is not found here.

I examine what artifacts Black males associate with “Blackness.” Holland et al. defined artifacts as “*the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful*” (p. 61). The discourse element was the element that was I found to be a concern. I changed the discourse element into what participants described as “Observation”. I examine how “Blackness” is defined and perceived. The observation element allows the individual to understand what the artifacts mean and how they work. For the last element, I examine how Black males “practice” their understanding of “Blackness” in a White-dominated institution. Holland (1998) claimed that once we have become invested in the figured worlds, it begins to move through as spoken discourse and embodied practice” (p. 251). While I explore the figured worlds of Blackness, I consider that “Blackness” becomes the reflection of self and that those who practice “Blackness” must understand it. To examine this phenomenon, I address my research questions as:

**RQ1:** How do young Black males “Figure Blackness” negotiated from rap music?

**RQ2:** How do young Black males exercise their “Blackness”?

### CHAPTER 3 - METHODS

When we began to look at rap music as a representation of the Black experience, I first asked the question: How do Black youth figure “Blackness” through Rap music? Much recent research looks at identity and Rap music, such as Charis Kubrin, analyzed violence in rap music and the depictions of the violent behaviors associated with identity. Other research views rap as a negative instrument that influences negative behaviors/and identity. I plan to contribute to the effort to look at the initial question of how rap music allows young Black males to construct their identity for the sole purpose of understanding who they are as Black individuals in a White-dominated society.

A qualitative method will guide this study because it allows me to gain a deeper understanding of individuals immersed within the “rap” discourse by the sharing of personal experience from participant to researcher. The goal of qualitative research is to “develop concepts which enhance the understanding of social phenomena in the natural settings, giving due emphasis to the meaning, experiences, and views of all participants” (Pope & Mays, 1995, p. 43). In sum, the essence of qualitative work is to dive deep and get closer to the targeted audience. While the theory I will use explains that figured worlds represents the “rules, guidelines, or social forces that influence, but do not completely dictate the ways we speak, behave and practice in social spaces” (Hatt, 2007), I look for individuals who are actively immersed in rap music. Actively immersed is defined as the amount of physical, psychosocial energy devoted to the experience (Wessel & Wallert, 2011).

The approach of the study is based on a snowball sample in a Des Moines, Iowa, low-income community. I chose Iowa because of the low visibility of Black culture. Because of that reality, the youth must find other alternatives to understand what Black is. It is important to note

that in areas like Des Moines, the lack of Black culture makes it very hard to understand what culture means. This study will help show how culture is defined in a non-cultural state, more so looking at how Black culture is defined in this less populated state. In 2014, the State Data Center of Iowa reported that African Americans constitute 3.2% of the state of Iowa population. In 2012, Polk County, Iowa, had 28,000 African Americans, making it the largest population of African Americans in any Iowa county. Also, 45% of African American families in Iowa live below the poverty level with an average income of \$29,929, compared to the state's \$79,143 average income. Based on the United States Census Bureau data, Iowa has a 92.5% White populations, whereas the Black population barely topped 3% in 2013 (US Census Bureau, 2013). I chose the Oakridge Neighborhood and Drake community to study because it is known for presence of the Black culture.

### **Selection of Setting**

According to the Oakridge Neighborhood website, the community demographic shows about 16% Somalis, 16% Sudanese, 7% Liberian, 2% Ethiopian, .11% Sierra Leonean, 1% Kenyan, 4% Iraqi, and for the purpose of this study, 37% African American (Oakridge Neighborhood). Urban communities are great target audiences because the “rap” narrative explains that this is their target audience as well, and recent research has agreed that majority of those who consume rap music live in inner city/urban communities (Watkins, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2011; Kubrin, 2003; Hatt, 2007). Another reason to examine this population is that most of the individuals who live in these communities have either seen firsthand or has some reference to the rap narratives.

### **Selection of Participants**

My target population age group will be 18–21 years of age. I chose this age group because this is a time when individuals learn who they are in the world and how they should present themselves to the world. I specifically want to focus more on males than females because the depictions of “Blackness” in rap music represent that of men directly and, because Black men dominate the rap industry, it is safe to say that males’ livelihood has more influence from Rap music.

Participant (J20150430#1055N) was a 20-year-old male who identifies as African-American. Participant wore his hair in the African dreadlock fashion and wore African symbolic jewelry (ankh). This participant represented the African culture and was very conscious of his lifestyle and presentation.

Participant (A20150428\*602P) was an 18-year-old male who used blackness as an expression of empowerment. This participant modeled after Malcolm X, Dr. Martin L. King Jr., and has a critical insight about life. Participant was very pro-black and had parents who taught him from the right image and the wrong image. This participant practiced poetry and labeled himself an artist doing several performances at local venues. He also made sure he asserted his Blackness through the language he used and the deeply rooted metaphors to provide examples. Participant did not discredit the uses of rap, just the affect rap has on one’s mentality. He expressed that rap music signifies the Black and/or African-American heritage and experiences but that today’s rap music has affected the way Black men think of themselves and how Black men see the world.

Participant (T20150426@0950S) was an 18-year-old and had just completed his GED in a correctional institution. Following his incarceration, this participant started working for



Oakridge as a mentor. He is a splitting image of the narrative in rap music that exemplifies the Black male identity by having gold teeth on the top and bottom row, tattoos on his arms and chest. This participant talked in a way that he explained things deeply so that I had enough information to understand him. It was like he wanted to authenticate and assert his Blackness in the conversation by sharing stories similar to those told in rap music. Participant knew that the messages of rap music has changed his experiences but by no means thinks that it is harmful to his perception of the real world. Participant thought that the use of rap music personally helped him through his life experiences and allowed him to feel included in the social experiences he has went through.

Participant (C20150430%012H) was a 21-year-old male who did not graduate from high school and grew up in Oakridge. This participant had the trending hairstyle of bald sides with a high top box Afro. This participant also had gold teeth but only at the bottom with diamonds trenched in the “fang” teeth. This participant stressed that his understanding of self mainly derived from rap music and the images of Black masculinity in rap music. He was now conscious of the images and wanted to change his life around by telling his story encouraging young men to learn from his mistakes.

### **Snowball Sampling**

A snowball sample of Black males will be used to identify the research population for this study. Lindolf & Taylor specified that snowball sampling is appropriate to study “hidden” populations (2011). In this study, young Black men who identity with rap music can be rare because only 3% of the African-American population of the entire state of Iowa self-identify as African-American. A snowball sample works by initially interviewing a member of the population and then asking them to refer others to me or asking them to refer me to others who

may fulfill the research criteria. All of the members of the population must agree to participate in the study as informants. The process of referral is ongoing until the desired results are saturated and respondents show signs of redundancy. Traditional methods cannot produce reliable samples, and they are not effective or efficient at gathering hidden populations.

Within snowball sampling, my data will come from individuals who identify as a consumer of or being actively immersed in rap music. To understand how an individual is actively immersed, Astin (1984) explains that immersion is the “physical and psychological energy that the individual devotes to the experience.” Black males who are highly immersed in “rap” can be identified by the physicality in dress/fashion, speech, and behaviors that represents the “rap” narratives. The young man would also devote time and energy to studying “rap,” seeking out new “rap” artists, and participating in the “rap” experience by attending concerts. Not all those who are actively immersed will follow this format, but will have one of the formats. Those who are not actively immersed in the “rap” music will spend little effort in listening to rap music, seeking out new artists, participating in the discussion of new and upcoming rappers, and spending money attending concerts.

To be a part of the study, participants will be assessed on their understanding of rap music by the presentation of fashion, language, and familiarity of the genre. To build a sample from the Black male population in Iowa, I will use the connections that I have with Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) and Oakridge Neighborhood. DMACC has a federally funded initiative that allows underprivileged adults to obtain their high school diploma. This program was formerly known as the GED program but is now known as the HiSet Program. I am a volunteer for the Oakridge Community, where my title is community liaison. My primary role is to watch after the kids while their parents are either in school or at work. I met a group of

young men who also volunteer in the same role at the Oakridge Community. The majority of the volunteers live in Oakridge Community. Oakridge is a community where those who live below the poverty can live as long as necessary so they can become self-sufficient. Oakridge also serves as a refugee site for immigrants from other countries.

Those who met the criteria were asked to participate with no benefit to themselves or others around them. If they chose to not participate, I asked if they knew any other individuals who would be willing to participate with the same lifestyle and understanding about rap music.

### **Background of the Primary Researcher**

Rap music and the subliminal messages are deeply rooted in me. Growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, I saw firsthand how rap music transformed the Black culture. It was 2004 and I was at Booker T. Washington High School, which was the first African American high school in Atlanta, Georgia. A new artist with the given name of Clifford Harris and stage name of T.I. had produced his second album, “Trap Muzik” (2003). It was the first time I had seen a cultural shift from students wanting to party hard to everyone wanting to be “hard.” I remember walking into the building everyday and seeing the young kids looking to party and to live the hard life. It was a time when I begin to wonder about myself and who I wanted to be. Falling into the culture at Washington High, I began to listen to rap more often and really take heed of the messages in it. After that, I noticed that my views, my admirations, and my outlook on life start to change. I found myself engaged and active in rap music.

I remember walking down the hall and reasserting my dominance through body language. I noticed myself holding firm to my tough guy attitude, ever vigilant. Washington High was a feeding ground for wolves and those who remain sheep were left to create alternate groups. I remember listening and being able to quote rap lyrics that alluded to my tough guy persona. I

lived through rap music and was eager to stand behind what I believed in. I was ready to defend my toughness while deep down inside yearning for a way out. Washington High School was very much a land of imprisonment. It was an institution where there were rules beyond those of the institution. I lived my life through reciting something my uncle told me: “if you aren’t the one doing it (fighting, stealing, robbing, etc.), it is going to get done to you.” It’s another way of saying if you are not the perpetrator, then you will end up being the victim and no one wants to be the victim because it lives through you forever.

Rap changed the way I viewed the world and the way I thought my life was going to end. I viewed the world as a violent, ignorant, and racist place where people of my own kind were out to kill and sabotage my future. Rap music still lives in me, not by performing rap but by being a consumer and allowing rap music to represent the mood that soothes the mind to rest and where the construction of the mind, body and soul convene. This influence of rap music on my identity is the reason I wanted to find out if it had the same influence on others.

### **Operations**

I chose in-depth interviews in this study because they enable researchers to “gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). As Kleinman (1994) noted, interviewing is “a good way to learn about physically unbounded social realities ... and identities and meanings that cut across, lie outside, or transcend settings” (p. 43) (as cited in Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Interviews are particularly well suited to “understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011).

There are three forms to validate the representations of “Blackness” in interviewing people: stories, accounts, and explanations. Storytelling is the one symbolic practice that is always used

in interviews because of the specific ways in which it is narrated (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Accounts and explanations are similar because they give people the opportunity to justify or create excuses. Interviews often are used to get information from participants, and to validate the information told by using specific examples. For this study, interviewing will allow participants to give detailed, descriptive responses of how the construction of “Blackness” comes from “rap.” Interviewing offers an environment in which there is no pressure to tell the truth and no fear of alienating others.

The interviews will be taped using a recording device, a method commonly used in interviews because it preserves and captures the interview discourse with little to no effort. It also allows the researcher to fully engage in the conversation. In my analysis, I will be able to play back the recorded interview while digitally transcribing the interview. I assume that each interview will take about 75 minutes; depending on how many interviews I conduct, it will take at the least two to three hours to transcribe each interview. Transcription will begin one week after the interview. The interview questionnaire can be found in the Appendix B. on page 46.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The present study uses semi-structured interviews that have two parts. The first part aims to examine participants’ understanding of “Blackness” mediated from rap music imagery. Questions will focus on the interpretation of what it means to be Black in White America. The responses will explain how participants understand “Blackness” in their own way by personal experience.

The second part explores how rap music influences their understanding of “Blackness,” and how rap music shapes their understanding of “Blackness.” These questions will explain how individuals attribute meanings of “Blackness” from rap music, and use those meanings to

confirm their identity. I define “Blackness” as the way in which individuals relate their personal experience and understanding in correlation with their race and/or skin color.

In this study, I will use deductive categorizing method to analyze data. This means that I will defer meaning and wait until the information arises. I will use the interpretation of the interview responses to analyze and categorize the key points of each interview. I also will ask subjects to allow me to record our interaction and the description of the subject presentation by dress and style.

Approval from the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board was granted on April 21, 2015. The IRB approval form can be found in Appendix A. on page 45.

### **Ethical Limitations**

No ethical limits either assumed or demonstrated during this study. The format of the interview, data collection, and storage guarantee the interviewee anonymity. The data will be stored on a secured external hard drive that will have a security code that only the researcher knows. A code known only to the researcher will keep the identity of each participant safe and secure. Only the participants’ initials and the date and time of the interview will be used to protect their privacy and comply with university procedures.

### **Generalizations**

I understand that because of the sample size, that I am unable to generalize the findings. However, I have chosen to conduct this study in the best possible way to learn how “rap” is used to understand “Blackness” and the Black experience. Using any other method could not explain such a topic without accounting for details and real-life experiences. Throughout this process of researching previous method designs, I have found that I this method for producing data is the most effective.

## CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

The findings of this study cannot generalize that all young Black men form their identity around rap music and/or rap imagery directly. Yet, we are able to generalize that the notion of “Blackness” is understood through rap music messages and/or rap imagery, thereby allowing music to be an influence toward identity. First, we must understand why rap music is important to the Black culture and the individuals who actively consume it, but before doing that I want to make it clear how these finding were viewed and formulated.

Using Holland et al.’s theory “Figured Worlds,” I looked at music as a social force that influences behavior and identity. The idea came from a discussion with a couple of friends about Black people in America and what does change look like in the near future. One close friends said something that stuck out to me about how Black people’s identities are shaped: “*Whatever we feed our brain, is what we speak, and what we speak, ends up being how we act.*” It is the idea that what you listen to, what you read, what you watch, all influence our speech and behavior. When you read, listen to music, watch TV/films, you are actively or passively feeding your brain. Hidden messages/concepts come from all forms of media and those hidden/subliminal messages/concepts become stored in the back of our minds for processing.

This is a process that leads to the creation of a schema. Once we have created a schema for that particular message, we begin to internalize the message and associate it with other related or similar schemas so that we are able to comprehend the concept as it relates to other associations. If, and once, that schema becomes associated with other schemas, the individual begins to redefine the concept with the new knowledge to the best of his/her ability or in a way that make sense to that individual and how it was interpreted. After constantly processing and redefining the meaning and association to the concept, the concept is then processed and

becomes something that the person is then able to speak about and teach others. This is because they find it to be true or have some relevance to them, which then influences their behaviors that are associated with that concept because it has now been validated. My intent was to look at rap music as that social force in the Black community and in the identity of young Black males. I examined how rap music influences young Black males' identity while also influencing the way young Black males define their "Blackness."

I examined the idea that young Black males feed their minds with the things that they associate with preconceived knowledge. Like all human behavior, once we find something that intrigues us, we begin to do more reading on that subject to feed our minds with the new concepts that we want to understand more about. Whether done passively or actively, the consequence of feeding one's mind is an influence on one's subconscious. I use the term feeding as a tool to gain information. It is used like a spoon or fork to feed the body with the nutrients and other means of survival.

In this study, rap music was explained to hold a significant purpose in the lives of those who listened to it. Some of the participants believed that rap music is associated with Blackness and those who listen to rap gains some form of gratification and/or understanding from it. As stated earlier, rap music has many different forms, all of which have their own purpose for the listener.

Participants who stated that they listen to more "conscious rap" defined it as being not highly favored by majority listeners: *"I don't think conscious rap is bad per say, it's just not what the people want to listen to. People want that trap music where messages of killing, drug dealing, and MPR (money, power, respect) rules and trumps everything."* – (J20150430#1055N)



This conscious form of rap is more like deep poetry. It uses different metaphors and ideas to put together a bigger picture or concept. In the example listed here, Kendrick Lamar, who is well known for his style of rap as spoken words (poetry), speaks about the social system in American and how it affects the black male, while learning how to overcoming or take advantage of that system;

*“The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it.  
Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city.  
While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive.  
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns him, but praises the butterfly.  
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar.  
But having a harsh outlook on life the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak and figures out a way to pimp it to his own benefits.  
Already surrounded by this mad city the caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon, which institutionalizes him.  
He can no longer see past his own thoughts. He's trapped.  
When trapped inside these walls certain ideas start to take roots, such as going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city.  
The result? Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant  
Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations that the caterpillar never considered, ending the eternal struggle.  
Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same.” –  
Kendrick Lamar- To Pimp a Butterfly: Mortal Man Track 2015*

In his “To Pimp a Butterfly” album, Lamar paints a picture, or shall I say he talks about a concept, of how he as a Black man in America sees the world using a caterpillar and a butterfly metaphor. The caterpillar represents the young man who knows nothing other than what he sees. The butterfly represents the older man who sees through what happens and uses the knowledge he has to bridge the racial disparities in America. The butterfly is seen as an inspiration because of its passion to shed knowledge on other caterpillars. He says at the end that the caterpillar goes through these systems, which oppresses it. After understanding the system, it learns how to take advantage of it, and imparts its knowledge on others, which turns it into a butterfly to the community. Lamar clearly is taking rap music, and especially conscious rap music, to another

level. This form of rap is not widely recognized or aired because of the presence and glorification of hardcore “gangsta” rap.

Now that we have discussed the overview of the study and how I used rap music as a social force toward understanding one’s identity. I will explain here how the theory “Figured Worlds” partly agrees with the study. In the “Figured Worlds” theory, it is explained that specific “expectations” or “social forces” govern us as individuals that somewhat dictate who we are and what we do (Hatt, 2007). In this study, I examine how the figuring “Blackness” is negotiated through rap music, which dictates specific behaviors and identities to take root. Figuring worlds, used mainly in education research, will give a foundational view to how Black males figure “blackness” where by definition “*actors are recognized, certain outcomes are valued over others, and significance is assigned to certain acts*” (Holland et al., p. 52). As stated above, Holland’s et al., theory consists of three main elements: artifacts, discourse, and identity with the discourse element in this study being changed or viewed more so as observation. I looked at what artifacts that by Holland’s et al., definition to artifacts as “*the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful* (pg. 61)” young black men associate with “Blackness.”

In the discourse element, I examined how “Blackness” is defined and perceived. The discourse element allows the individual to understand what the artifacts mean. By the views of this study, I ruled out that discourse takes place in defining “Blackness” and replaced it with observation. Participants described their understanding of “Blackness” through their view of others who perform “blackness” in a way that the individual understands which we will discuss later in the section about observation. For the last element, I examine how Black males practice their understanding of “blackness”. Holland et al. (1998) stated, “*Once we have become invested*

*in the figured worlds, it begins to move through as spoken discourse and embodied practice”* (Pg. 251). While I explore the figured worlds of “blackness,” I consider that “blackness” becomes the reflection of self and that those who practice “blackness” will embody it.

### **Artifacts**

As noted above, Holland et al. (1998) defined artifacts as the “*means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful*” (p. 61). These “artifacts” act as semiotic mediators, which are there to influence psychological processes and behaviors over time. While discussing rap music and the association of rap music to blackness or Black identity, the majority of participants agreed that the music itself has a huge role in their understanding of their own blackness. All of them agreed that rap music is considered Black music and those individuals must have some knowledge about rap music to understand their blackness. Although it was stated that rap music does not solely influence their understanding of blackness, it does take some shape in how they view blackness. Participants agreed that rap music is the dominant representation of the AA image. With that being said, the rap image itself becomes an artifact because individuals now associate rap music imagery with being AA (African American).

The artifacts that the participants stated were all materialistic as described in Holland et al.’s article, but they represent what Blackness looks like and how to identify with the AA culture. The participants claimed that clothing and styles of dress is important to learn and defend ones’ blackness. While participants noted that it is not necessary for black people to dress as they see other AA people in the media, they must have some understanding of why their appearance stems from Blackness. So, for example, one participant described his Blackness as putting on a snapback (baseball cap) backward, a gold chain, popular name brand shoes

preferably Nike, popular name brand clothing, with everything being color-coordinated. These are just a few things that participants stated when asked about what artifacts are needed to defend or authenticate Blackness:

*“I have to make sure that I wear my ‘ankh’\* wherever I go – although it does not define me, it allows me to remember who I am and where I come from” – (A20150428\*602P)*

*“I show my Blackness by wearing snapbacks, letting my hair grow out, and being coordinated with style.” – (T20150426@0950S)*

*“I cherish my Blackness by keeping my dreadlocks because it symbolizes where we come from and what it took for us to get here today.” – (J20150430#1055N)*

These artifacts serve as mediators, and it makes their Blackness seem real. The artifacts can be seen and recognized rather than hidden within the mentality that participants know they are AA. Blackness then becomes socially and culturally produced, which it means that it can be changed over time, and those individuals must then gain those artifacts to preserve his/her own Blackness. Each artifact that was mentioned was cohesive among all participants, but I want to dive deeper in the meaning of having jewelry represent Blackness. The first artifacts mentioned by all participants were the gold chain, gold ring, and gold watch. I asked what the chain represents and what means in our understanding of Blackness. I got several different answers but the one that stuck out the most was when one participant stated that *“the chain speaks more to the people outside of the one who’s wearing it, rather than the one who’s actually wearing it.”* - (A20150428\*602P)

### **The Gold Chain**

I wondered to myself, what does the gold chain represent? One participant discussed that in ancient Greece, the kings wore gold chains, and the more gold a person had on, the higher the

rank that person has. In a sense, the chain represents the levels of wealth. I asked myself if the gold chain validates who is and who is not. This question became relevant as I continued to analyze why the AA male identity was associated so much with the gold chain. *“Jewelry has always been a part of the (AA) culture. It is the representation of status.”* - (A20150428\*602P)

So, when looking back at the historical context of gold and gold chains, we can see the era that African kings and Egyptian kings wore gold chains. Some of the most powerful African kings such as Mansa Musa and Shaka Zulu wore and valued gold at the highest point during their reign. Images of these two powerful rulers in Africa during their time clearly show that gold was the most valued artifact that one could have. According to one website, Mansa Musa is considered the richest man in world history, with a net worth of what today would be \$400 billion. (www.independent.co.uk) Mansa Musa was the ruler of West Africa’s Malian Empire in the early 1330s. He made his fortune exploiting his country’s salt and gold production. In every picture depicting Mansa Musa, he wore gold jewelry on his head, wrist, neck, fingers, and there was gold on even the things he used, like his chair and robe.

Participants explained that the gold chain also symbolizes the “coming out” for young men to symbolize their transcendence from boyhood to manhood.

*“I don’t have to have the big chain but I do have to have a nice chain and I want a nice watch and I am wearing nice clothes to where I am stunting (flashy) on others.”* - (T20150426@0950S)

This occasion is similar to the Jewish culture, which holds a bar mitzvah for boys who become accepted into manhood. The Black culture and the system used to authenticate Blackness is set up to weed out those who are physically Black but do not actually understand what it means to be AA. Blackness is associated with those artifacts such as the chain that act as a test to

authenticate one's Blackness. Those who are put to the test must use such artifacts to authenticate their Blackness and also defend their AA masculinity. Those who succeed in using those artifacts in the "correct" manner go on to fully embody the AA culture, and those who fail to use those artifacts are told that they aren't Black enough and go on to identify with a "liberal" party where everyone is accepted.

Holland et al. argued that the meaning given to the artifacts "*depends upon a collectively remembered history of use and interpretation that is a common part of the social commentary that accompanies most interaction*" (p. 36). I explained earlier in the text that rap imagery itself becomes an artifact, and one major artifact in rap imagery is the gold chain. The gold chain is collectively a symbol in rap music history and in AA world history. Gold chains are used as something common that is accompanied by majority of AA interaction. One participant stated that gold in the context of rap is a way to legitimize one's status. "*I think in general that the gold chain has been this status indicator.*" – (T20150426@0950S)

The participant went on to explain that when upcoming rappers are out selling their mixtape (CDs) that their status is constantly being communicated by the jewelry they have on. "*You don't see the guy on the corner selling his tape (CD) for \$1 with a big chain on. Usually he would have one gold chain with a small Jesus piece (medallion) on it. To you, he has already communicated his status because those who have made their music headline have a number of chains on at one time.*" – (T20150426@0950S)

Looking back at mainstream rappers, most of them would be wearing several gold chains at once. What this participant explained was that upcoming rappers status is being presented by ways in which their jewelry tells how well their music is being received and put out to the public. The more jewelry a person has, the more receptive he will become. Making a good point in how

the chain is valued, one participant said, “*The chain speaks more to the people outside of the one who’s wearing it, than it does to the person who’s wearing it.*” - (A20150428\*602P)

Participants agreed that they lean more toward the value of the chain because it authenticates and represents the same symbols that they associate with. Therefore, legitimizing one’s identity becomes evident by the value of the jewelry one has. This also can be viewed as ways in which AA recognize or accept performers on the rap stage.

This suggests that the meaning young AA males attribute to the artifacts are not arbitrary or individually asserted. This brings me to the point that the status quo is constantly being reproduced by adding value to the artifacts and the acceptance of the individual as being AA. Some participants agreed that to stray away from the status quo means that the individual does not present himself in a way that would identify with the AA culture. Although there are several other artifacts that I did not elaborate on that participants all claimed as a part of the AA culture, I want to clarify that it was the gold chain that all of the participants mentioned first when asked about artifacts. When I read through the transcripts, I began to realize that it is not just the chain that matters; it’s the reality of owning something gold, which holds the most value. In our society, we hold gold to a higher standard than actual money. Why is that? I asked myself. It is because gold is transferable across all borders. Although money is becoming universal as well, the value of money is different in every country. Gold is chosen in all exchanges, even in human behavior.

### **Social Learning (Observation)**

In this section, we discuss how observations depict the complicated ways the youth conforms to the dominant discourse of Blackness and how it propels the active engagement in rap music genre. Holland explains that individuals use discourse to understand the power behind

the artifacts. What I found was that discourse was nowhere in the equation when examining the meaning of the artifacts to understand one's identity. Holland et al. (1998) explained, "*The discourse and categories dominant in a society are 'inscribed' upon people, both interpersonally, institutionally, and within them. Selves are socially constructed through mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts.*" (p. 26). In this study, observation is defined similarly to the Merriam-Webster definition of observation as the "*act of careful watching or listening in order to gain information.*" My definition of observation is "*visual communication between performer and audience by which those behaviors are watched and imitated.*" Individuals are then socially constructed through observation of character and their artifacts.

Participants stated that they understand their Blackness through role modeling. "*When I was growing up all I listened to was rap music. My dad, my uncle and my step-dad all listened to rap music and growing up I wanted to be like them so I started listening to rap music also.*" – (T20150426@0950S)

"*My uncle put me on artist like Cannabis because he said that he was the only man I was always around. As I continued to listen to listen to it the more I started to identify with the messages...*" - (A20150428\*602P)

It was evident that role modeling was the key to understanding one's identity because participants explained that they also began to transition from their family role models to those they saw on TV and also what their family was modeling. Modeling is the oldest and most natural form of learning. Participants picked up on certain cues and learned how those cues either work or don't work.



Most participants described their understanding of Blackness through people they know. They made it very clear that Blackness is seen from actors whom they identify as respected Black people in their community. Participants' understood that those people who are well respected were those who had a following. They called those actors as "*people who name ring bells*" – (C20150430%0120H), meaning that it is a name that no one can forget such as; Rev. Dr. Martin L. King Jr., Mr. Malcolm X, Ms. Rosa Parks, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, Mr. Frank Lucas, Mr. Rick Ross, etc. Participants recognized these actors based on popularity and said that the most popular person in the community was the one who gave credibility to what Blackness is. Throughout the conversations, participants did not agree that they actually talked about Blackness; rather, they stated, these actors were people everyone wanted to be so they followed his recommendations and imitated his character.

Participants seemed to use what they see through their visual lens people they would be able to emulate to conform to their own sense of Blackness. While other people may have noted that Black is defined by skin color, participants stated that Black isn't always Black and there is a huge misconception that everyone who looks Black is received as a Black.

When asked how rap influences their Blackness, some participants suggested that rap is not a direct influence but it reinforced their perceived notion of Blackness by what they observe.

*"Rap music has influenced me because I want to be like the rappers I listen to. I want to ride around in the nice car and show off. That's what the music I listen to preach to me and that's a way for me to self validate to know that I made somewhere in life..."* –

(J20150430#1055N)

*"When I was younger I wanted to be like the rap music imagery like sagging pants and being hard (tough guy) because what I was listening to I didn't understand and I was basically*

*listening to what was around me and the main black male figure in my household was my uncle and that's what his life was about (selling drugs and gang bang) and I would say that's why I wanted to be like that and he was a role model to me and my dad wasn't around. That's why I listened to the music and wanted to be like the rappers.*" – (T20150426@0950S)

Participants stated that the actors in the community are visually related to those seen in rap music imagery. So, for them, seeing the image of rappers and the behaviors in rap associated with Blackness reinforces the behaviors of what Blackness is. I asked participants to describe an artist and some similarities of both the artist and themselves. Participants clearly noted that they both are alike. Nothing more or less is portrayed in rap that doesn't happen in their observation with the actor in the community.

Participants discussed how family and the community help shape their blackness and how people in the community resemble those in the media, especially in rap music. What participants and others who are heavily immersed in rap music see are the rewards and respect that stem from the "tough guy" image, leaving the impression that to attain that same reward, participants must act in the same manner as those they see. Holland et al.'s "figured worlds" theory states that the discourse and categories become inscribed upon people institutionally and interpersonally, and that selves become socially constructed not through discourse but through modeling. Participants from this study claimed that discourse never happens because Blackness isn't talked about. *"Blackness is something you pick up on through the people around you and who you see identify as Black"*-(C20150430%0120H); which is a result from observation. Modeling the behaviors takes place of discourse while understanding "Blackness" and how it is figured. Participants agreed with Holland's point that *"actors are recognized, certain outcomes are valued over*

*others, and significance is assigned to certain acts*” (Holland et al., p. 52). In this study, those actors become role models seen as the artists themselves.

### **Identity**

Holland et al.’s (1998) explanation of identity is that *“people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are.”* (p. 3). As one participant stated above, the gold chain speaks more to the person who is observing rather than the one who is wearing it. Within the AA culture, young males continue to learn about themselves and others in relation to the dominant image found in their community. Those who are dominant, or what the participants would say, those who *“legitimize”* their Blackness, are those who possess the artifacts of Blackness while using them to support or reinforce their *“Blackness.”* These actors are those who use the dominant Black male image to gain social capital. I asked participants to describe a Black male that they admire looks. Participants described what others would say resembles that of media representation of the Black man: one who wears gold jewelry, drive a luxury car, has a group of women chasing him, and, most importantly, is exhibiting the *“tough guy”* persona. Here is what one participant’s understanding of Black male identity:

*“Sagging pants, Air Jordan’s, jewelry, definitely rap is a must, you have to be loud and aggressive and let people know you are ready to fight. That’s something Black people see more respect in than actually getting things done.”* - (T20150426@0950S)

On the opposite side is a different type of identity. Those who do not conform to the dominant Black male masculinity, create the pro-Blackness identity that also is modeled after certain artist. Two participants stated that they did in fact reconstruct their identity in the past year. When asked for detail about their previous identity, both said that they were under the

impression that they understood their identity through the “tough guy” mentality because they were raised in socially oppressive communities and they listened to music that was popular. They said that at some point that they begin to listen to different genres of rap music and began to construct their identity accordingly.

*“When I was young I modeled myself after what I heard and saw on TV and in music videos. When I turned 13, J. Cole mixtape had dropped and his lyrics really spoke to me. I thought differently about rap music and I begin to carry myself in that mentality of being better than commercial rap... Rap music became my second seed in my upbringing” –*

(C20150430%0120H)

*“Rap music has influenced me because I want to be like the rappers I listen to. I want to ride around in the nice car and show off. That’s what the music I listen to preach to me and that’s a way for me to self validate and to know that I made it somewhere in life when I have those artifacts...” - (T20150426@0950S)*

Toward the end of the interview, I asked the participants to allow me to briefly describe their appearance and style. I asked this to show how the participants perform their own understanding of their Blackness. Before I was allowed to describe them from my perspective, I allowed them to talk about the way they see themselves. All participants described themselves as Black and said that their identity was constructed through learning from people around them. All also claimed that they listened to rap music and related its content. Among the descriptions that I coded, two of the participants claimed that their identity has changed because of trends in the media. One participant in particular stated that he observes what his favorite rapper does and that he carries himself in that same fashion.

*“I show my blackness by wearing snapbacks, letting my hair grow out, and being coordinated with style.” – (T20150426@0950S)*

*“I don’t say I perform my blackness intentionally, it’s just that I like to play my music loud, and be the person people see when I walk down the hall or wherever I am at.” – (J20150430#1055N)*

There is a belief that rap music influences Black masculinity. It is true that rap music affects the perception of the Black male image and the ways in which Black men perceive themselves. The Black male image in rap music is so dominant that young Black men have no choice but to accept or create a new identity. At times, it is because of the reward that the persona receives that males begin to accept the identity. Black masculinity is affected by both the image and the messages within the music. The lyrics’ purpose is to feed the mind with the image of the black male attitude and behavior. The image serves a purpose to physically see how the image is put together. During the interviews, participants discussed the rewards of the dominant rap image and that those rewards are seen as a social capital in their community. Participants practiced their identity by performing their Blackness in every setting/environment they are in. By performing Blackness, participants described the act of being seen and making their presence known to everyone.

## Chapter 5 – DISCUSSION AND FURTHER EXPLORATION

To explain how Blackness is formed, we have to look at the history of rap music and how it has maintained its presence in Black culture. Rap music plays a huge role in maintaining the Black culture and making sure the connection is shared among generations. Today's commercial rap music does not help maintain the message that Black culture changes the vision of what the culture looks like. Rap music has drastically changed over time and some would say that the reason for that shift is the media concentration of the music industry. Big companies are buying out local and regional record companies and changing the music selection. Other scholars would say that media concentration of the rap music industry is a form of gatekeeping. I wouldn't necessarily agree with that idea because a majority of rap music aired is parallel to the actual life story of the Black experience.

Using Figured Worlds, I found that the theory somewhat reflects the ways in which AA males construct their identity, with the discourse portion taken out and replaced with observation. One theory that I did find that would probably explain the construction of identity with the negotiation of rap music is social comparison theory, which explains that people have the expected effort to compare themselves with others for self-evaluation purposes. Developed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, it proposes that people seek information that fosters the evaluation of them, and that people are able to better understand themselves and the social standards that exist with regard to how people should appear, think, and act (Festinger, 1954). Looking at the study, AA males compare themselves to whom they see in their community and in the media and make every effort to change their personality to those individuals they wish to model. As stated in the study, participants made it very clear that they look to artists in rap music as a way for self-evaluation about how they should or want to be.

Although Figured Worlds was a good theory to use, I found that discourse in this study was not something that individuals use to make sense of their identity. As I continue to read more about the theory, I begin to wonder if the use of discourse in the way that was used by Hatt (2007) was accurate. I would claim that because observation is a pure and natural form of learning, people do more observational learning than we think. It shows that people understand right and wrong by observing specific behaviors that result in either reward or punishment. The students in this study observed things from other people and that they saw rewarded or punished. Students in the study even alluded to the observation of looking up to their role models to know how to manage identity characteristics. I do not discredit Beth Hatt study nor do I discredit the theory, I simply would recommend that we change the element to observation rather than discourse.

This study has answered some valid questions that I had for myself and that others may have about themselves. If we misinterpret how we shape ourselves, then we miss the opportunity to evaluate students' social identity as it relates to the social institutions that set the standards of how to act within the social world. Researchers must first acknowledge that one's social identity plays a major role in the behaviors associated with that person. I understand that we all have a standard behavior and that everyone should reach and learn how to turn on/off those identities, but some identities are so prevalent that one does not know how to turn them on/off because they have been inscribed upon them by their social world. Media representation subliminally inscribes certain acts and thoughts upon its audience members. One example is the use of rap music and negative behaviors. Because so many AA youth listen to and associate themselves with rap music, they learn that these behaviors are a part of their social norm. AA males begin to self-identify and compare themselves to the behaviors presented in rap music and,

by the time they realize that those behaviors are useful in those social settings, it is hard for other social institutions to teach appropriate behaviors.

When we look at mass media as a social institution, we see that people begin to learn about themselves and negotiate their identity through mass media images. In this study, we prove that mass media is not the only influence on identity, but it does have some influence on the ways individuals see themselves. Rap music as a social force in the AA community is used to reinforce the standards of the AA community experience. It is in relation to how AA sees other AA and how their experiences are the same across all borders. The production and preservation of Black culture is told in the struggle to maintain identity because of the concept that we have to identify who is “real” and who is not. This concept allows rap music to position itself as a tool to legitimize identities in the Black culture.

While discussing the idea that Black men in this study figure themselves around the message of rap music and the imagery while being immersed in a dominant White Environment is very typical. It is very typical because seeing little to no representation of your own perceived reality pushes individuals to turn to a source that is derived from Black masculinity. In Iowa, there is a 1.5% Black male identity presumably. While that 1.5% of men has some significance towards the lack of Black male representation it also has the same significance by not having options to model after. Participants talked as if they didn’t negotiate their identity with rap that they identity would then be considered “White-washed”. Some participants talked about some of their friends in school who identified as Black but grew up in the White neighborhoods and grew up around White friends. Students from this environment grow up with an alternate view of “Blackness”. They grow up not experiencing the same type of Black prejudices as those who



grew up in the Black community, attended Black or low income schools, and associated with others who faced the same challenges they did.

Being in this sea of whiteness is a slight disadvantage to those who identify as Black. Several reasons explain this but the major concern is that those who grow up in the White communities become ignorant to the Black experience and lose their understanding of being Black in American culture.

To be more progressive as a Black culture, we must first model the behaviors associated with Black or African culture. Black communities need to stand up for the community and the people in it because our children will continue to grow up and lack the strength to fight for one another, and not against one another. The Black community must contradict the newest form of identity within rap culture. Things have to change and by solidifying what the Black male role is so that it will give the foundation towards a progressive culture.

### **Further Exploration**

Scholars and other researchers who want to put more knowledge and effort in the field on Black male identity or either Black female identity, one should consider the importance of hip-hop music as a means of finding oneself in the social world. Hip-Hop music is the center of one's upbringing in the Black community. When looking at the Black identity it is also important to recognize how a person authenticates their identity and how it is performed. It would be quite interesting to see how Hip-Hop is used as a way to understand culture not in males but females. Looking at gender and the presence of hip-hop and how it affects the Black woman identity is just as important as this study. This will give a small view of the Black culture and how individuals who identify as Black see themselves in their Black community and alongside their Black community members within a specific social area.

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## APPENDIX A.

## IRB APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4500  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 4/21/2015

**To:** Jovan Johnson  
5281 Dakota Drive Unit B, West Des Moines, IA 50265

**CC:** Dr. Joel Geske  
209 Hamilton Hall  
Dr. Tracy Lucht  
111 Hamilton Hall

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** The "Figuring World of Blackness" negotiated through Rap Music

**IRB ID:** 15-106

<b>Approval Date:</b>	4/20/2015	<b>Date for Continuing Review:</b>	3/23/2017
<b>Submission Type:</b>	New	<b>Review Type:</b>	Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

## APPENDIX B.

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. If you had to describe yourself, what would you say?
2. Different people have different understanding of blackness, how do you define Blackness?
3. Are there different types of Blackness?
4. How does one authenticate ones Blackness?
5. How does one learn to be Black? And where does it come from?
6. How do you know your understanding of Blackness is real?
7. How do non-black people see you as a Black man?

#### Transition to music questions

8. Define Hip-Hop.
9. Define Rap music.
10. How often do you listen to Rap music?
11. What type of Rap music do you listen to?
12. How does Rap music influence you perception of your future goals or lifestyles?
13. Do you see Rap music as part of being Black? Why or why not.
14. How is Rap connected with being Black?
15. Do you have to exercise or perform rap music to understand Blackness?
16. How important is Rap music to you? (Significance, explain why)
17. How has Rap music influenced your “Blackness” or Black identity?
18. Does Rap music have a function in the role of black men lives?
19. Do you have any other views or ideas about the relationship between Rap music and the Black male culture?
20. Do you think there are other aspects of being a Black man and the relationship between Rap and Blackness?
21. Has Rap shaped the way you think about:
  - a. Relationships
  - b. Self
  - c. Community

- d. Family
- e. Future careers

**The next set of question will engage the social performance of Blackness**

1. Where do you go to hang out?
2. What other things do you do on your spare time?
3. What are your friends like?
4. Describe them? (Where you know them from)
5. Do the people you hang out with listen to Rap music?
6. Are you friends Black?
7. If they did not listen to Rap music, would you consider them Black?
8. Where do you listen to Rap music? What does it mean to you to listen to Rap in those areas?
9. What do you guys talk about?

**Demographic Information**

22. How old are you?
23. What do you do for a living?
24. How long have you lived in the community?
  - a. If not where did you live before?
25. What the highest level of education you have?
  - a. High school, college,
  - b. Did you or are you involved in higher education, or training?