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How the Financial Crisis Changed Hip-hop

Steven Gilbers

Introduction: 'Talking About Material Things'

In early 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama remarked the following: “I love the art of hip-hop, [but] something I’m really concerned about is [that it’s] always talking about material things” (Obama, 2008). Considering the state of hip-hop at the time, this is an understandable concern. Especially when looking at mainstream hip-hop, it was difficult to find rap music with lyrical content that did not revolve around expensive sports cars, luxurious mansions, extravagant designer clothes, gold teeth, diamond necklaces, and most of all money—obscene amounts of money. It is therefore not surprising that artists such as 50 Cent, Kanye West, and Lil Wayne dominated the charts with songs like “Straight to the Bank” (2007), “Good Life” (2007), and “A Milli”¹ (2008) respectively, all of which were odes to money, materialism, and the luxurious lives only multimillionaires can afford. Rap lyrics were a sign of the times:

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in a period of economic prosperity, the richest in society were admired for their financial success (see, for example, the popularity of hypercapitalist television shows like *MTV Cribs* and *Pimp My Ride* during the 2000s), and music that embraced this attitude toward materialism was omnipresent and highly successful. When the financial crisis arrived in late 2008 as a result of Wall Street's greed and chronic mismanagement, however, public opinion on materialism and the pursuit of wealth changed drastically. Main Street no longer celebrated those who chased financial success at all costs but loathed them instead, the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged, and Barack Obama—who promised to bring change to Wall Street's avaricious culture—was elected president.

Having disproportionately held subprime mortgages during the pre-crisis housing boom, the African American demographic was among the most severely affected by the crisis (Mui, 2012). Hence, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the African American community was not among Wall Street's greatest supporters at the time, nor would it be unreasonable to assume that sentiments of dissatisfaction with and dissent against Wall Street might have been expressed in African Americans' primary cultural expression: rap music. Rappers have always used their lyrics to communicate the everyday social injustices experienced by African Americans that are largely ignored by the mainstream media. However, a description of hip-hop as merely being African Americans' 24-hour news channel is arguably too narrow; rappers do not just tell newsworthy stories of struggle and injustice, they rap about virtually anything they see around them. As a result, rap lyrics can be about any topic, ranging from block parties to drug dealing, from Los Angeles gang warfare to Atlanta strip clubs, and from family soul food dinners to exclusive parties on yachts. From this, it logically follows that when rappers' environments change, the topics they tend to address may change as well, as may the tone they use in doing so. This is illustrated by the observation that hip-hop went from being mostly upbeat and party-oriented to being primarily concerned with gritty gangster stories once African American neighborhoods were introduced to the devastating effects of Reaganomics² and the crack epidemic³ in the 1980s. Rappers also respond when they feel the situation in their community (i.e. the African American hip-hop community) changes. Evidence for negative responses of this kind can be

found in hip-hop's belligerent reaction to police brutality against African Americans (e.g. the 1991 Rodney King beating and the recent murders of unarmed black men by white police officers). Furthermore, former President George W. Bush's "slow and uneven response to the leveling of a predominantly black city [New Orleans]" (Walters, 2015) due to Hurricane Katrina, which greatly affected African Americans (Finley, 2015), not only prompted Kanye West to blurt out on live television that Bush did not care about black people (Strachan, 2015) but also sparked numerous critical songs such as Lil Wayne's "Tie My Hands" (2008). Positive responses may also occur, as evidenced by rappers' overwhelmingly positive reaction to the election of America's first black president, for example, on the 2008 song "My President is Black (Remix)" by Young Jeezy and Jay Z (2010), on which Jay Z jubilantly raps that his "president is black but his house [is] all white."

Considering that rap lyrics have always reflected their authors' environments and that the African American community was disproportionately affected by the financial crisis (Mui, 2012), the present chapter is concerned with answering the following research question: did the financial crisis change hip-hop's views on materialism and the pursuit of wealth as well as cause rappers to express dissent against materialism? This question is further divided into three subordinate questions, namely (1) whether the degree of materialism displayed in rap lyrics changed after the financial crisis's onset, (2) whether rappers, through their lyrics and other means, aligned themselves with activist movements against the culprits of the financial crisis, and (3) whether the hip-hop community's views on materialism and the pursuit of material wealth correspond to rap lyrics' content as it changed over time. These subquestions will be addressed from a sociolinguistic discourse analysis perspective (i.e. by studying the interrelationship between language use in rap lyrics and society) through qualitative and quantitative analyses of rap lyrics from before and after the financial crisis's onset, focusing on the degree of materialism and anti-greed criticism they contain. Moreover, they will be answered through interviews with members of New York City's hip-hop community that were conducted during the summer of 2011, and that were also used to establish some historical context to hip-hop's materialism as described above.

The Origins of Rap's Materialism

As the introduction's first paragraph makes clear, hip-hop culture—or at least hip-hop music—was extremely materialistic in the period before the financial crisis commenced. This raises the following question: how did a culture founded in an environment of poverty ever come to glorify financial wealth and material possessions on such a large scale?

“Taking it back to the essence, when emceeing really came about,” hip-hop pioneer and historian JDL of the Cold Crush Brothers told me during the summer of 2011, “it was never about money. We never started this culture for money.” Indeed, when looking at the admission price for the first hip-hop block jam ever organized by Clive “DJ Kool Herc” Campbell on August 11, 1973 in the South Bronx—\$0.25 for the ladies and \$0.50 for the “fellas” (XXL, 2015)—it is clear that hip-hop was not founded to become the billion-dollar industry that it is today. At a time when there were no afterschool programs, hip-hop culture emerged as an outlet for young, disenfranchised African Americans in New York City's inner-city neighborhoods that allowed them to deal with the poverty and social injustices their community faced in a positive way. Nobody got involved with hip-hop culture for the sake of money, because there was hardly any money to be made back then. Says JDL:

If you gave a [hip-hop] party at the time, you'd make about 500 dollars. The deejay got at least 200 to 250 dollars of that because he had to pay for the records and all the equipment, and then the emcees got 50 dollars. Now, in the seventies, if an emcee got 50 dollars, he was at the top of his game, because he could take that 50 dollars, buy himself a pair of Pumas and a pair of Lee's [jeans], and still have change left.

The situation began to change once the music industry got involved. After the abovementioned 1973 block jam, hip-hop had quickly gained popularity beyond the Bronx and even beyond New York City, and hip-hop's early commercial successes such as 1979s “Rapper's Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang proved that mainstream audiences were interested in rap music. Record companies realized that there was in fact big money to be made off of hip-hop and started courting hip-hop artists. Capitalizing on

hip-hop artists' lack of knowledge about financial issues and the workings of the music industry—JDL: “We didn’t know nothing about contractual agreements, we knew nothing about entertainment lawyers, we didn’t even know how many papers does a standard contract has to be”—the record companies walked away with most of the earnings of early commercial rap. Having learned from the mistakes of their predecessors, the next generation of rappers made sure their contracts were in order and started really making money, a development which would significantly change hip-hop culture; what was originally a movement formed as an outlet for its followers had changed to be about acquiring wealth and displaying it. This displaying of wealth became even more important once rap videos started being played on MTV. Artists such as LL Cool J and Run-D.M.C. wore gold chains and sported the latest Adidas sneakers in these videos, inspiring their fans and other rappers to want the same. As JDL illustrates:

Emcees that used to be satisfied with not getting nothing or getting 30 or 40 dollars a show, they started seeing things that they never could’ve imagined they’d ever see. When it started being visual with the videos, (...) everybody wanted to have a big gold chain, everybody wanted to have a big Cadillac. And then every generation after that wants the same thing that the generation before them have or more.

As such, hip-hop’s seemingly ever-expanding materialism was born.

The second phase of rap’s ‘materialization’ was issued in during the second half of the 1980s when ‘gangsta rap’ emerged on the West Coast of the United States. Gangsta rap was characterized by explicit, violent lyrics that describe the everyday lives of America’s gang members and drug dealers, and many gangsta rappers were actually involved in criminal activities. The Compton drug dealer turned gangsta rapper Eazy-E, for instance, used the money he had earned from selling drugs to found his own record label Ruthless Records as well as the infamous rap crew N.W.A (Diallo, 2009). Although late 1980s’ and early 1990s’ gangsta rap mostly told tales of antiestablishment hell-raisers, gradually the role of the savvy, composed ‘hustler’ came to stand central in gangsta rap lyrics. Hustlers were not the businessmen of Wall Street but the much-admired

entrepreneurs of the streets, whose most important goal in life was to make as much money as possible, be it legally or illegally. Hip-hop's admiration of the hustler led to the popularity of 'mafioso rap' in the mid-1990s, a subgenre heavily influenced by classic gangster movies such as *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *Scarface*. Mafioso rappers such as Jay Z and The Notorious B.I.G. portrayed themselves not as street criminals but as mobsters with class, and the imagery surrounding their music corresponded to their lyrics about luxurious cars, suits, jewelry, yachts, mansions, cigars, and champagne. Even after mafioso rap declined in popularity again around the turn of the century, its imagery would stay around for years to come, as evidenced by the expensive chains and million-dollar music videos of artists like Rick Ross, Kanye West, and 50 Cent in the 2000s. To illustrate, on his song "Got Money" (2008), the extremely popular materialistic rapper Lil Wayne brags about wearing eight diamond chains at the same time and refers to himself as "Mr. Make-It-Rain-On-Them-Hoes," referring to the practice of 'making it rain': throwing stacks of 100 dollar bills up in the air into a crowd as the ultimate display of not having to worry about your finances. Moreover, the following excerpt from 50 Cent's "I Get Money" (2007) shows that rappers would often almost exclusively brag about their financial successes, unapologetically displaying their materialism during this period: "I ride, wreck the new Jag, I just buy the new Jag⁴ / Now, nigga, why you mad? Oh, you can't do that?" This taunting couplet could be considered evidence of just how out of touch with the struggling hip-hop community rappers started to become during this time, as 50 Cent is essentially making fun of the financial situation of virtually all of his listeners.

Hip-hop After the Financial Crisis' Onset

In late 2008, soon after the financial crisis commenced and a year after his hit song "Good Life" came out, Kanye West released the album *808s & Heartbreak*, on which he made a U-turn from his previous work both sonically and thematically. Instead of the upbeat, major key songs of his previous album, his 2008 record was marked by somber productions featuring introspective lyrics in which the rapper painted a significantly

different picture than he did the year before. On “Welcome to Heartbreak,” for instance, West again discusses his expensive material possessions. This time around, however, he is not boasting about them so much as he is lamenting the fact that none of his wealth can compare to the immaterial, priceless pleasure of raising a child. These lyrics suggest West’s views on materialism had changed, recognizing that there may be more to life than merely chasing material wealth. On the same song, he even acknowledges this by explicitly referencing his 2007 song “Good Life”: “Chased the good life my whole life long / Look back on my life, and my life gone; where did I go wrong?”

Although West’s changed outlook on life and materialism might have been caused primarily by events in his personal life at the time—for example, his mother died from post-operative factors after undergoing plastic surgery in November 2007, (Reid, 2007). There is evidence suggesting that what happened on Wall Street in 2008 influenced him as well, as there were plenty of other prominent rap artists whose lyrics and behavior started expressing their dissatisfaction with Wall Street’s as well as their own greed and materialism. For example, in 2011, 50 Cent—arguably the poster child for hip-hop’s materialism in the early 2000s—set out to serve a billion meals to impoverished children in Africa (Greenberg, 2011). Furthermore, on the 2010 joint album *Distant Relatives* by Nas and Damian Marley, many anti-materialistic messages were communicated in the lyrics. For instance, on the song “Count Your Blessings” (2010a), Damian Marley sings: “I’ve got love and assurance, I’ve got new health insurance / I’ve got strength and endurance, so I count my blessings.” And on that same song, Nas tells his listeners to quell their desires of owning a Rolls-Royce and rather appreciate the things they work hard for.

It could be argued that the observed decrease in materialism in the music of many established rappers might not be due to the financial crisis at all. Coming from humble backgrounds, it is understandable rappers would initially want to show off their newfound wealth and then later, as they get older, tone down their materialism and become more introspective about their consumption patterns. However, it is not just the established hip-hop artists who seemed to respond to anti-materialism sentiments in society: after the arrival of the financial crisis, a new

generation of rappers emerged, comprising artists such as Kendrick Lamar, Chance the Rapper, and J. Cole, whose work does not profess their material wealth as much, and who even explicitly dissociate themselves from hip-hop's culture of materialism. Having accumulated large debts as a result of his college education, J. Cole discussed his financial problems more often than he did his successes in most of his earlier songs. To illustrate, on the 2010 song "Blow Up," he raps about financial problems such as his outstanding student loans; "you make a good salary just to pay Sallie Mae"⁵ and his credit score in "she drop it low, lower than my credit score (...) what I got this debit for?" Furthermore, the two Caucasian hip-hop artists Macklemore and Ryan Lewis's song "Thrift Shop" (2012) was arguably the biggest hit rap song of the last few years, as it peaked at number one in countless countries around the world and went on to sell over ten million copies in the United States alone. Because of its subject matter, it is difficult to imagine the song being as successful as it was if it had been released in the pre-crisis era of hip-hop. That is because the song's humorous lyrics promote saving money by buying second-hand clothes at thrift shops—"I'm gonna pop some tags,"⁶ only got 20 dollars in my pocket"—in the process mocking the excessive flaunting of expensive products so common to rap lyrics and the high prices of designer clothing ("I'm like, 'yo, that's fifty dollars for a *t-shirt*..."). Such negative expressions of dissent against the celebration of materialism, brands, and corporations were also expressed by the Atlanta-based rapper Waka Flocka Flame, who came up in the music industry as a rapper with a particularly materialistic image. During a 2015 interview at the morning radio show, *The Breakfast Club*, he discussed how his views on materialism had changed:

I stopped wearing jewelry, (...) I'm not trying to impress nobody. You know I got paper.⁷ Why I got to keep showing you every day? Why I got to keep buying these new cars? Why I got to keep [buying] brands that ain't doing nothing for the people that I'm around? (Malphurs, 2015)

The examples above seem to confirm that rappers and their lyrical content became less materialistic at a time that coincides with the financial crisis. However, it is important to note that materialistic rap lyrics by no

means disappeared entirely. If they had, we would never have heard materialistic hit songs such as Rick Ross's 2010 songs "B.M.F. (Blowin' Money Fast)" and "Aston Martin Music" or Drake's 2011 song "Dreams Money Can Buy." Moreover, Kanye West's song "So Appalled" (2010) features a verse from Jay Z, in which he brags he could afford to spend 30 million dollars even when he just lost that same amount of money. Even Kanye West, who seemed to have completely quit materialism back in 2008, showed that he most certainly still cared about money on the 2011 song "Who Gon Stop Me" when he addresses accusations that he is racist against white people: "Heard Yeezy⁸ was racist/Well, I guess that's on one basis: I only like green faces." In this context, "green faces" refers to the green-colored portraits printed on dollar bills.

Such examples show that it should definitely not be concluded that *all* rappers expressed their dissatisfaction with materialism or that hip-hop abandoned materialism entirely, for there is a clear lack of uniformity among rappers, with certain rappers seemingly expressing dissent against materialism while simultaneously glorifying it. In this respect, it is important to note that before the crisis, rappers were also not a completely homogeneous group with regard to the topic of materialism. In 2004, for instance, the aforementioned Kanye West released a song titled "All Falls Down" in which he critically examined his desire to acquire expensive material possessions. Nevertheless, a qualitative analysis of rap lyrics from both periods does seem to indicate that rap music as a whole became less materialistic after the onset of the financial crisis.

Quantitative Analysis of Rap's Materialism

The previous section showed that although there is evidence that pre-crisis rap was more materialistic than rap music from after the onset of the financial crisis, there are plenty of instances of rap songs from the latter period that were at least as materialistic as those from before the crisis. The present section of this chapter attempts to objectively analyze whether rap lyrics indeed became less materialistic after the crisis' onset by quantitatively analyzing rap lyrics from before and after the crisis' onset regarding how much materialistic content they contain. To this

end, a corpus analysis study was conducted in which notable rappers' lyrics from a three-year period before and a three-year period after the crisis's onset were compared to each other to see if there was a change in the amount of materialistic references they contained.

It has to be noted here that on their own, the results of this quantitative study will not be entirely transparent, for information on increases or decreases regarding the relative frequency of materialistic terms does not reveal whether the materialistic terms were used in a more positive or a more negative context. In theory, it could be that rappers rapped more about materialistic topics not because they were more enthusiastic about materialism, but because they felt the need to condemn or criticize it more than they did before. The computational frequency analysis discussed in this chapter simply does not distinguish between (hypothetical) phrases in rap lyrics such as "I don't care about money" and "money over everything;" both tokens of "money" would add to the amount of observed references to materialism. Nevertheless, arguably the most straightforward interpretation of a decreased use of materialistic terms in rap lyrics would be that rappers were less concerned with materialistic content. Taking this approach to the data will inevitably mean that a few of the corpus's tokens will be misinterpreted, but this is a rather surmountable problem considering the large size of the corpus (namely over 600,000 words with nearly 4000 tokens of materialistic terms; for a full description, see the Design section below).

As will be elaborated upon in the Design section below, the corpus was designed to be representative of the diverse rap music landscape. Therefore, if the quantitative data analysis were to reveal that rappers indeed used significantly less materialistic terms overall, the conclusion could be drawn that hip-hop as a whole changed concerning materialism, even if certain individual rappers were found to have gone against the average trend of the group.

Design

To analyze rap lyrics from before and after the crisis quantitatively, a corpus of rap lyrics from before and after the onset of the financial crisis (fall of 2008) was created. The corpus comprises the lyrics of 1191 rap songs

from the periods 2006 until 2008 (573 songs) and 2009 until 2011 (618 songs), which makes for a total number of 623,021 words (300,889 words for 2006–2008 and 322,132 words for 2009–2011). The songs incorporated in the corpus are taken from 13 different rap artists: 50 Cent, Drake, J. Cole, Jay Z, Kanye West, Lil Wayne, Lupe Fiasco, Nas, Rick Ross, Snoop Dogg, The Game, T.I., and Young Jeezy.⁹ Artists were selected for analysis if they could be considered sufficiently relevant and influential to the genre of hip-hop between 2006 and 2011, something which was loosely determined along the following parameters: (1) commercial success and popularity (e.g. album and/or single sales or streams, social media followings, etc.) and (2) critical acclaim. In addition, it was made sure that the selected artists were not all from the same geographical area in order to prevent the corpus from being clearly biased toward any particular regional scene.

All songs that these 13 artists released within the period of 2006–2011 were selected in order to create a corpus as representative as possible of each individual's work during the respective period. Due to the fact that not all artists released the same amount of material in this period, some artists are more strongly represented in the corpus than others. This was not deemed a significant problem, for the individual differences with regard to the amount of words could easily be canceled out by using relative frequencies rather than absolute ones to compare the materialism in the work of individual rappers. In addition, it was decided that in light of the aim to create a corpus as representative of hip-hop as a whole between 2006 and 2011 as possible, differences between artists concerning the amount of material released should be represented in the corpus as they reflect the landscape of hip-hop music at the time, namely accounting for the fact that some artists appeared more often than others on the radio, television, and so on

For the present study, the hip-hop corpus described above was computationally analyzed using UNIX tools. Whether a change in the amount of materialistic references had occurred following the crisis's onset was analyzed by measuring how often certain words related to money and materialism were used before and after the beginning of the crisis. The items selected for the current analysis were *money*, *cash*, *dollar*, *diamond*, *gold*, *rich*, *bling* (slang word describing particularly shiny jewelry), *dough*

(slang word meaning ‘money’), *million* (including derivatives such as *millionaire*), *chain*, and *bank*.¹⁰ Two different frequency measurements were performed: (1) per individual rapper for the period before the crisis (henceforth: pre-crisis period) and after the onset of the crisis (henceforth: post-crisis period), and (2) for all rappers combined for both periods as well as per year.

Results

To test the hypothesis, it was determined for each rapper how often the abovementioned materialistic terms were used relative to the size of their individual corpora for both the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods. Table 7.1 and Fig. 7.1 show the results of these measurements, with the former also showing the post-crisis/pre-crisis ratio per artist (numbers below one indicate a decrease and numbers above one indicate an increase in the usage of materialistic terms). The ratios reveal that although the majority of the artists used materialistic terms less often in their lyrics after the beginning of the crisis than before, some of them actually used such terms more often in the post-crisis period.

Table 7.1 Relative frequencies of materialistic terms for all analyzed rappers’ lyrics (sorted alphabetically)

	Rel. freq. 2006–2008 (%)	Rel. freq. 2009–2011 (%)	Post-crisis/pre-crisis ratio
50 Cent	1.48	0.79	0.534
Drake	0.51	0.52	1.020
J. Cole	0.60	0.39	0.650
Jay Z	0.40	0.44	1.100
Kanye West	0.32	0.52	1.625
Lil Wayne	1.20	0.74	0.617
Lupe Fiasco	0.29	0.25	0.862
Nas	0.62	0.26	0.419
Rick Ross	1.58	0.98	0.620
Snoop Dogg	0.34	0.41	1.206
The Game	0.56	0.47	0.839
T.I.	0.42	0.84	2.000
Young Jeezy	0.76	0.81	1.066

Fig. 7.1 Relative frequencies of materialistic terms for all analyzed rappers' lyrics (sorted from highest to lowest relative frequency in the pre-crisis period)

On average, the rappers selected for analysis used words related to money and materialism more often before the onset of the crisis ($M = 0.0070$, $SE = 0.0012$) than they did after it arrived ($M = 0.0057$, $SE = 0.0007$). However, a paired samples t-test revealed this difference was not significant ($t(12) = 1.430$; $p = 0.178$).

A frequency analysis of all the rappers' lyrics combined per year (meaning that some artists are more strongly represented in the corpus than others on the basis of the fact that they released more music that specific year) revealed the relative frequencies of words related to money and material wealth presented in Table 7.2.

The relative frequencies of these words for the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods are displayed in Table 7.3.

On average, words related to money and materialism were used more often before the arrival of the financial crisis ($M = 0.0075$, $SE = 0.0001$) than they were after its arrival ($M = 0.0052$, $SE = 0.0005$). An independent samples t-test revealed this difference was significant ($t(4) = 4.373$; $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

On average, lower frequencies for words related to money and materialistic wealth could be observed in lyrics from the post-crisis period compared to lyrics from the pre-crisis period, especially in the case of 50 Cent, Lil Wayne, and Rick Ross—rappers who were greatly materialistic before the crisis but showed remarkable decreases in their usage of materialistic terms after the crisis commenced. However, the frequency

Table 7.2 Relative frequencies of materialistic terms per year

	Rel. freq. (%)
2006	0.77
2007	0.75
2008	0.73
2009	0.42
2010	0.59
2011	0.55

Table 7.3 Relative frequencies of materialistic terms per period

	Rel. freq. (%)
Pre-crisis (2006–2008)	0.75
Post-crisis (2009–2011)	0.52

difference between pre-crisis and post-crisis lyrics was not found to be significant across all rappers when assigning equal weight to the work of each rapper. When looking at a more accurate portrayal of the hip-hop landscape between 2006 and 2011 (i.e. not assigning equal importance to each individual artist but instead taking into account that some artists were more strongly present because they released more music), however, a significant difference between the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods regarding the relative frequency of materialistic terms was found. This provides support for the qualitative analyses' findings that post-crisis rap lyrics were less materialistic than pre-crisis ones. In Table 7.2, it can be clearly observed how around the time the crisis first arrived, a rather large drop in the use of materialistic terms occurred, followed by a slight increase again, one which does not, however, come close to any of the pre-crisis values.

This quantitative analysis of rap lyrics' materialism is not without its limitations, most notably the fact that it does not discriminate between references to materialism in positive or in negative semantic contexts. To counter this limitation, one could consider a computational collocation analysis, that is, an analysis of whether the corpus's materialistic terms co-occur with negative or positive words. However, in order for such an analysis to be feasible, the corpus would need to be expanded to include millions of words, and considering that computers are notoriously bad at recognizing stylistic devices such as irony or semantic inversion, analyzing the poetry of rap lyrics might result in unreliable data even if the corpus were of a sufficient size. Another option would be to manually analyze each of the materialistic tokens in the corpus as was done in the in-depth qualitative analyses of rap lyrics that are presented throughout this chapter. Considering that there are nearly 4000 of these materialistic tokens in the corpus, however, this would be an unfeasible undertaking. It was therefore decided to accept the limitations of the quantitative analysis in its current form for the present study, instead comparing the

frequency analysis data to the in-depth qualitative analysis of select rap lyrics presented in the rest of this chapter on the basis of the likely, straightforward assumption that the degree to which a rapper cares about material possessions correlates to the degree to which he discusses these topics in his lyrics.

The aim of the quantitative analysis was to provide a more objective perspective to what was essentially a subjective analysis of rap lyrics' materialism as it developed over time, and to counter possible biases in the selection of pre-crisis and post-crisis rap lyrics for the qualitative analyses by zooming out and seeing if statistically verifiable conclusions could be drawn on rap lyrics' changing degrees of materialism. The quantitative data show that, overall, the rappers in the study's corpus discussed materialistic topics significantly less often on a group level. Naturally, a few individual rappers such as T.I. were found to behave differently than the group did on average, but this was to be expected considering that rappers and the hip-hop community cannot be considered a completely homogeneous group. The findings of this study should therefore definitely not be interpreted as indicating that each and every rapper became less materialistic following the crisis's onset, for such a claim clearly would be false. Rather, the findings should be interpreted as showing that even though some rappers might not have been concerned with expressing dissent against materialism, hip-hop *as a whole* did change to become less materialistic following the financial crisis.

Occupy Wall Street and the Hip-hop Community

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of rap lyrics discussed above indicate that although the situation is not entirely clear-cut, rappers' lyrics from after 2008 seem to be less about money and materialism than they were during the pre-crisis period. The question remains, however, whether rappers not only responded to the crisis by expressing their dissatisfaction with materialism but also by aligning themselves with protest movements and inspiring their listeners to do the same.

As stated in the present chapter's introduction, the African American community was disproportionately hit by the financial crisis (Mui, 2012). First of all, they were among the most severely affected by the subprime mortgage crisis many analysts believe triggered the recession (Davies, 2010). Due to the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act compelling banks to give out loans to low-income borrowers (in practice mostly African Americans and Hispanics) and the Clinton and Bush administrations stimulating homeownership among ethnic minorities (in 1985, homeownership among African Americans was 44.4 percent compared to 64.3 percent in the United States as a whole; Davies, 2010), banks were not prohibited from providing "bad loans to un-creditworthy borrowers" (Di Lorenzo, as cited in Davies, 2010, p. 30) but rather *encouraged* to do so. Such bad loans—subprime mortgages—had higher interest rates than the mortgages given out to more creditworthy borrowers, and hence became unaffordable once the period of economic prosperity came to a sudden end, causing many African Americans to default on their payments and lose their homes. Furthermore, unemployment rates among African Americans were roughly twice as high as white unemployment rates during the crisis, and between 2005 and 2009, African American households lost more than half of their median net worth whereas white families lost only 16 percent (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011; Patton, 2011).

Clearly, the hip-hop community had a reason to be upset with Wall Street's greed and government policies that had put them in this desperate position. To assess how the hip-hop community felt about Wall Street's role in the crisis and hip-hop's response to the crisis, I interviewed about 30 self-proclaimed members of New York City's hip-hop community in the summer of 2011. These were all impromptu street interviews, the majority of which were conducted specifically on 125 Street in Harlem—the Manhattan neighborhood that is home to the world's largest African American community—and inside that street's famous Apollo Theater. Interviewees included Billy "Mr. Apollo" Mitchell (the Apollo Theater's official historian and tour guide) and a number of other people who either worked at the theater or happened to be there at the time the interviews were conducted. The rest of the interviews were conducted in Midtown Manhattan's Rock and Soul record store, which is known for its

extensive hip-hop vinyl collection. Interviewees were asked how they felt about the crisis's effects on their community, what they thought of Wall Street and its role in the crisis, how they felt about hip-hop's materialism, whether they thought hip-hop's materialism had changed following the crisis's onset, and whether or not they believed that rappers were still in touch with the hip-hop community. These questions were asked to gain a better understanding of the sentiments present in the hip-hop community, so that this information could be related to the present study's rap lyrics analyses.

While conducting these interviews, I encountered the same kind of views as the Occupy Wall Street activists would come to express later that year. "We've outgrown the whole pursuit of money and materialism; there's more important things in life," a woman working at the Apollo Theater told me regarding her views on hip-hop's materialism. Her colleague added that as far as the crisis is concerned, the people from Harlem and the rest of New York's African American population felt like they were forgotten by the rest of the country: "All the attention goes to Wall Street. When the economy is doing well, they profit; when it goes downhill, we are the ones who have to pay." The opinions articulated by the abovementioned interviewees were overwhelmingly shared by the other people I interviewed, with a few of these people adding that they believed the arrival of the financial crisis and the election of Obama had considerably impacted rappers' lyrical content.

From this information, it seems only logical to assume that the African American hip-hop community would actively support the message communicated by the Occupy Wall Street movement. However, the statistics tell a different story. Despite the fact that in 2011, African Americans made up 12.6 percent of the country's population, they made up only 1.6 percent of the Occupy Wall Street movement's activists (Captain, 2011). Possible explanations for this that have been put forward are, for example, that African Americans may feel there are more important issues for them to protest (cf. the later Black Lives Matter movement) or that they fail to see why they should join a protest against Wall Street that only emerged once whites started to encounter the problems that African Americans had been dealing with for decades already.

Whatever the reason for the African American community's (and consequently, the hip-hop community's) lack of involvement with the Occupy Wall Street movement may be, it was certainly not for a lack of effort by its most prominent spokespersons: rappers. Despite all belonging to the one percent in terms of their net worth, multimillionaire hip-hop artists and moguls such as Russell Simmons (co-founder of Def Jam Recordings) and Kanye West identified with the protesters' plight and attended the Zuccotti Park occupation (Perpetua, 2011), with artists like the Brooklyn rapper Talib Kweli even giving spontaneous performances on site to show their support (Sundermann, 2011). The sociopolitically engaged Chicago rapper Lupe Fiasco showed his support by donating tents for the protesters and by writing lyrics about their struggle. For instance, on his 2011 single "Words I Never Said," Lupe Fiasco rhymes that "crooked banks around the world would gladly give a loan today / So if you ever miss a payment, they can take your home away," and on "The End of the World" (2011), he dedicates an entire verse to the Occupy Wall Street movement. Moreover, through a Facebook post on October 21, 2011, Nas shouted out the 99 percent in reference to Occupy Wall Street's "we are the 99 percent" slogan, quoting from his song "Dispear" (2010b): "Who are the Masters? They are the gangsters / They are the bankers, (...) the Wall Street War Chiefs." In the song's lyrics, Nas describes a dichotomy in society, with on the one hand the politicians and bankers who wield all the power, and on the other hand the people who are the victims of this power monopoly. By referring to the elite as "Masters," Nas compares the way the "Wall Street War Chiefs" treat the country's citizens to the way slave masters used to treat African slaves.

Hip-hop Materialism 2.0

So where exactly does hip-hop culture stand on issues such as materialism, Wall Street, and corporate avarice now that the Occupy Wall Street movement has long died down, unemployment rates are decreasing again, and the economy as a whole is getting back on its feet? Has the decrease in materialistic content that was found in the qualitative and quantitative analyses of rap lyrics from before and after the crisis's onset

sustained, and have rappers remained as critical of corporations' greed as they were at the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement's existence? The answer is probably "no." Recently, there seem to be far fewer prominent rap songs that contain explicitly anti-materialistic messages to the same extent that songs like the earlier mentioned "Count Your Blessings" (2010a) by Nas and Damian Marley did, and with politically engaged artists such as Talib Kweli having moved on to support the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Wall Street lyrics appear to be in decline as well.

However, this does not mean that the crisis has not had a lasting impact on hip-hop music (cf. Table 7.2, which displays a strong dip in the frequency of materialistic terms in 2009 followed by a slight increase in 2010 and 2011 again). Anti-materialistic messages are still present in many rap songs in a way that they were not before the crisis, but these messages are delivered more subtly than in the years immediately following the collapse of the stock market. To give an example, on Drake's 2011 hit single "Headlines," he raps the following bars: "I be yellin' out: 'Money over everything, money on my mind' / Then she wanna ask when it got so empty." Hidden behind a typically materialistic hip-hop trope—"money over everything, money on my mind"—Drake expresses feelings of guilt about being so focused on pursuing material wealth. J. Cole takes a similar approach; on his appropriately titled song "2Face" (2010), he expresses how despite being critical of materialism, he cannot help but want all these expensive things for himself: "The fast life I done seen on the screen is addictive, money and clothes I done dreamed about / (...) Aye, tell me am I wrong for visualizing material shit I never had?"

On his 2013 song "Chaining Day," J. Cole came back to this theme of desiring expensive things while condemning such feelings at the same time: "My last piece,¹¹ I swear, my guilt heavy as this piece I wear / (...) So don't take these chains from me, 'cause I chose this slavery." Playing with the polysemy of the word *chain*, which can refer both to necklaces and the chains that his enslaved ancestors were forced to wear, J. Cole dedicates an entire song to his own avarice, describing his desire to buy new jewelry as a form of slavery, and pointing out the irony of indulging in one of the deadly sins—greed—by buying jewelry in the image of Christ. That same year, Kanye West also described people's

addiction (his own included) to brands and luxury items in terms of slavery on “New Slaves” (2013): “You see, it’s broke nigga racism, that’s that: ‘don’t touch anything in the store’ / And it’s rich nigga racism, that’s that: ‘come in, please buy more’ (...) – new slaves.” Perhaps the best example of rappers subtly interweaving anti-materialistic messages in otherwise highly materialistic songs is Jay Z’s 2013 song “Oceans,” which features vocals from Frank Ocean. At first listen, the song merely appears to be about an extravagant yacht party somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that the song’s message is not as straightforwardly materialistic as one might expect. In a promotional video for the *Magna Carta... Holy Grail* album “Oceans” appears on, Jay Z remarks that the theme of the song is “duality,” explaining that the lyrics sound “like a celebration of where we are now, on some big yacht and throwing champagne in the water, but the undertow of the thing is [that] this same water is the water that brought us here originally, as slaves” (2013).

Duality, as Jay Z called it, is what characterizes hip-hop’s materialism today. Neither upcoming rappers nor already established rappers are likely to ever completely do away with the topic of money and material possessions, which is understandable considering the environments they usually come from. Moreover, judging from the hip-hop community’s widespread admiration of financial successes by hip-hop moguls such as Dr. Dre, whose Beats headphone company was recently bought by Apple for 3 billion dollars (Solomon, 2014), the hip-hop community has not completely turned its back on materialism and the pursuit of money either. But seeing the impact that the financial crisis had on society at large, and the African American (hip-hop) community in particular, it definitely seems to have left a mark on the way rappers touch on materialistic subject matter nowadays.

Conclusion

To conclude, the results of qualitative and quantitative analyses of the development of rap lyrics’ materialism as well as interviews with members of New York City’s hip-hop community show that hip-hop culture

as a whole indeed appears to have changed to become less concerned with materialism and more critical of (corporate) avarice. This development coincided with the arrival of the financial crisis, and considering that rappers have always communicated what they experience in their personal lives and what they see going on in the hip-hop community, it is not unlikely that this development was the direct result of rappers expressing dissent against materialism due to the financial crisis. Moreover, despite the fact that African Americans were not as involved with the Occupy Wall Street movement as one might expect considering their strong anti-Wall Street sentiments, it was found that many rappers actively participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement by protesting and attempting to mobilize their fans to follow suit. This confirms the idea that through their music, rappers can offer insights into their own and their community's critical conscience.

None of the abovementioned conclusions should be taken to indicate that rappers completely lost their materialism after the crisis began, however, nor should they be interpreted as indicating that *all* rappers responded to the financial crisis in a uniform manner. Materialism is still deeply rooted in hip-hop culture, and it is unlikely that it will ever completely disappear. The financial crisis's lasting impact on hip-hop is therefore not so much that it did away with rappers' materialistic desires, but rather that it caused many of them to evaluate those desires more critically than they ever did before the crisis. It also caused them to actively express their dissatisfaction with and dissent against society's materialistic behavior as well as their own, and it could be argued that by doing so, the rappers who expressed their dissent against materialism and greed brought hip-hop's 1 percent and hip-hop's 99 percent closer together.

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Notes

1. *Milli* is a slang expression meaning ‘one million dollars’.
2. ‘Reagonomics’ refers to Ronald Reagan’s trickle-down economics, which “affected the poor, among whom [African-Americans] are disproportionately represented, more negatively than the rich” (St. Pierre, 1991).
3. Crack, a cheaper, more addictive free base form of cocaine became widespread in impoverished African American communities so fast that its rapid increase in consumption and accessibility would later be referred to as the “crack epidemic” (Reinarman & Levine, 1997).
4. *Jag* stands for the expensive Jaguar car brand.
5. Sallie Mae is the nickname of the SLM Corporation (originally: Student Loan Marketing Association)—the organization that distributes student loans in the United States.
6. The slang expression *to pop (some) tags* means ‘to buy something’ (i.e. take the price tag off a product). The expression is usually reserved for expensive purchases (cf. Jay Z’s 2002 song “Poppin’ Tags”), so by using it in a context of thrift shopping, Macklemore humorously plays with its usual connotations.
7. *Paper* is slang for ‘money’.
8. Yeezy is one of Kanye West’s aliases.
9. The lyrics from Jay Z and Kanye West’s joint 2011 collaborative project *Watch the Throne* and Rick Ross’s 2011 collaborative project with other artists signed to his record label Maybach Music Group were also included in the corpus.
10. Specific slang alternatives for certain words (e.g. *mill(i)* for *million*) and alternate spellings (e.g. *dolla(h)* instead of *dollar*) were taken into account in the frequency analyses performed.
11. In hip-hop slang, *piece* can have many meanings (e.g. ‘gun’), but in the present context, it refers to a necklace in Jesus Christ’s image, a so-called *Jesus piece*.

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