Mask On, F*ck It, Mask Off: Assessing the Role that Hip-Hop Plays in the Identity Development of Young Black Professionals

Re'Sean James Jetson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.
Mask On, F*ck It, Mask Off: Assessing the Role that Hip-Hop Plays in the Identity Development of Young Black Professionals

By
Re’Sean Jetson, M.S.E.

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Counseling Psychology

The University of Memphis
August 2022
Abstract

Young Black professionals are faced with unique challenges in navigating their ethnic and professional identities, especially in the workplace. They are underrepresented in high-status professional jobs and often assume they must adhere to behavioral and linguistic norms associated with the dominant culture in order to be accepted in predominately White workspaces. The process of adjusting one’s style of speech or behavior based on the social setting is known as code-switching. This study examined the experience of code-switching for young Black professionals in non-diverse workspaces with particular attention to the role of Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop has served as a tool for identity development for young Black individuals, especially with regard to the way that Black presentation is expressed within the genre and culture. It is possible that Hip-Hop, as a model of Black expression, could be used as a useful counter to negative aspects of code-switching. Using a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) approach, three broad themes emerged from interviews with seven young Black professionals whose workplaces were majority White: a) subjective experiences with code-switching at work, b) Hip-Hop as a contributing factor to authentic presentation, and c) the influence of Hip-Hop on young Black professionals’ racial identity development. The data were used to develop a theoretical framework of how Hip-Hop can be used as an identity-grounding tool for young Black professionals. Clinical implications and suggestion for future research are presented.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my lovely spouse. Without her support and encouragement, this process would have been nearly impossible. Therefore, I am extremely grateful for her.

“Dedication, hard work plus patience. The sum of all my sacrifice, I’m done waitin’”

-Nipsey Hussle
Acknowledgements

The love and feedback I received from my support system, my spouse, my mother, family, Sasha, and friends; kept me focused throughout this entire journey. I appreciate them for ensuring that I took breaks and engaged in self-care when necessary. I have one of the best support systems in the world and could not have done this without them, therefore a lot of the glory is attributed to them. Thank you for allowing me to vent and for creating a safe space for me to emote and express my concerns. I would also like to acknowledge the Hip-Hop artists who heavily informed my playlists and motivated me throughout this experience. Namely, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Nas, Ab-Soul, Dom Kennedy, Levi Carter, Master P, Larry June, Lupe Fiasco, Max B, Isaiah Rashad, Mavi, Curren$y, Kanye West, Nas, Berner, Coodie Breeze, and many more.

I also want to shout out my dissertation committee, all of whom were devoted to assisting me in reaching this point. I am forever grateful for Dr. Suzanne Lease, my chair, as well as Dr. William Hunter, Dr. Sara Bridges, and Dr. Richard Lightsey. They truly went above and beyond to ensure that I had additional support.
Table of Contents

Introduction..............................................................................................................1

Black English.......................................................................................................2

Code-Switching.....................................................................................................4

Hip-Hop................................................................................................................7

Theoretical Approaches .......................................................................................9

   Critical Race Theory.........................................................................................9

   Racial Identity Development Theory...............................................................10

Study Purpose and Research Questions.............................................................13

Method..................................................................................................................15

Participants..........................................................................................................15

Design...................................................................................................................15

Data Sources.........................................................................................................17

   Demographic Questionnaire............................................................................17

Interviews.............................................................................................................17

Data Analysis.......................................................................................................18

Positionality Statement........................................................................................19

Results..................................................................................................................21

Code-switching: Subjective Experiences of Predominately White Workspaces

Black English: Comfort and usage.................................................................25

Functions and understanding of code-switching............................................26

Attitudes toward code-switching.................................................................28
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form………………………………………………..71

Appendix C: Example of Participant Recruitment Email…………………………..74
Introduction

It is a lonely and isolating feeling to accept a position as an employee and discover that you are the only Black employee or that the number of Black employees can be counted on one hand (Woods, 2019). But this is a common experience for many young Black professionals. Research suggests that young Black professionals are underrepresented in high-status jobs (Carter & Davila, 2017; Wingfield, 2018), including at the highest levels of employment where there are only four Black CEOs in the fortune 500, one of whom is a Black woman (Wahba, 2021). Most Black professionals who work in white-collar positions work in environments in which they are the racial minority (Wingfield, 2015). In these workplace settings, Black employees are confronted with a set of normative behaviors that are characteristic of the dominant White (and often male) workplace and an awareness of how coworkers might be viewing Black employees through racial stereotypes. This can lead Black employees to surmise that to “fit-in” or be successful in the workplace, they must adjust the way they speak and interact with others, which often includes the way they engage in dialogue.

At its essence, language is a set of structured sounds and patterns with defined meanings associated with the sounds (Speicher & McMahon, 1992). In America, especially corporate/professional America, there is an expectation for how individuals should interact with and speak to one another in work settings (Bukowski, 2019; Wingfield, 2018). Traditionally, White Americans have created and established the norms for what constitutes “professional” speech and behavior in those contexts, which can lead marginalized groups to feel pressured to accommodate to these norms, abetting linguistic oppression (Bukowski, 2019; Makoni, 2003). This accommodation takes the form of adjusting speech, changing the level of affect vocally conveyed, and refraining from using colloquialisms; these adjustments to speech and behavior
are known as code-switching (McCluney et al., 2019; Reed-Clark, 2020). Linguistic oppression and stereotypes about minority groups result in diminished employment opportunities by privileging what may be considered “native” English (Bukowski, 2019; Makoni, 2003), increasing the pressure to engage in code-switching.

Although code-switching is viewed as essential for professional advancement, it often has negative psychological impact for young Black professionals (McCluney et al., 2019), including diminishing their racial identity and cultural interests to appeal to the shared interests of their [White] coworkers (McCluney et al., 2019) or feeling obligated to avoid and dispel stereotypes associated with their culture, which can lead to added pressure to perform (McCluney et al., 2019). Such accommodating behaviors might generate hostility from members of their culture and result in being accused of “acting White (McCluney et al., 2019).” Although the psychological impact of code-switching on young Black professionals is evident, current research does not address methods for young Black professionals to counter the toll and re-establish their racial and professional identities. There is a dearth of literature that connects Hip-Hop, Black English, and code-switching, but an examination of Hip-Hop and its celebration of Black English and other markers of “Blackness” suggest it could be a useful tool to address the pressures of code-switching. This study explored the connections between Hip-Hop, identity development, and code-switching and complements the existing literature by examining the potentially positive impact that Hip-Hop has on the identity development of young Black professionals. Code-switching, for young Black professionals, is often a learned skill, whereas Black English may have been present in their growing environment and more consistent with their authentic identity and expression. The following paragraph will examine black English through its definition and assess its legitimacy as a dialect.
Black English

Black English (BE) is defined as “Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 32, as cited in Koch et al., 2001). Despite theory and empirical evidence that support the use of Black English (BE) as a fully qualified dialect (Harris & Schroeder, 2013; Makoni, 2003; Rickford et al., 2015), many gatekeepers, such as employers and educators, inadvertently (or deliberately) pressure individuals toward adhering to more “correct” methods of communication, suggesting to speakers the need for “speaking and acting White.” It is easy for listeners to evaluate the sound combinations associated with BE and disparage it as lazy speech (Green, 2002). However, research suggests that many of the combinations associated with BE are systematic and based on previously set rules that reference specific environments in which the sounds occur (Bukowski, 2019; Green, 2002; Harris & Schroeder, 2013; Makoni, 2003).

BE can be linked to the western coast of Africa, where it resulted from trade expeditions between European and African countries (Dalby, 1972). The comprehension of English enabled enslaved Africans to code-switch to protect themselves from less linguistically diverse European counterparts as they were able to disguise their speech to prevent European colonizers from uncovering their plans to escape or revolt. Dalby further suggested that throughout history, code-switching has served as an essential function for the preservation of African American culture as well as the concealment of information from European Americans. Throughout the history of slavery, individuals who spoke in their native languages were severely punished. This led African slaves to develop codes within the English language as a means of keeping their masters oblivious to their plans, emotions, and cognitions (Dalby, 1972). Coded language, music, and musical style were the only forms of language that enslaved Africans brought with them to the
new world (Gilroy, 1993). Black music was important as a form of communication (Gilroy, 1993).

Although many researchers have championed BE as an acceptable method of communication, it is still considered “unprofessional” by mainstream society, further enforcing the need for Black Americans to speak in a manner that is more similar to a “White” presentation (Wingfield, 2015; Woods, 2019; Young, 2009). According to Pew Research Center (2019), nearly half of Black adults with at least a 4-year college degree stated that they often feel the need to code-switch in professional settings, whereas 37% of Black adults without a college degree endorsed similar feelings. Black adults without a college degree were almost twice as likely as Black college graduates to state that they have never felt the need to code-switch. Furthermore, data show that young Black adults are more likely than older Black adults to report the need to adjust how they express themselves when they are with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Considering that young Black professionals are more likely to code-switch when compared to other Black Americans, it is vital to understand not only what spurs this population to code-switch in professional settings, but also what may be beneficial for minimizing the need to code-switch or counteract the negative effects of code-switching while developing and maintaining a positive Black identity.

The Effects of Code-Switching on Young Black Professionals

Code-switching refers to the practice of interacting in different ways with regard to social context (Hua, 2008). However, if you ask a Black person for their definition of code-switching, they may define it as diluting their Blackness when there is no other Black individual around (Reed-Clark, 2020). It might include adjusting speech, decreasing the amount of affect (e.g., volume, expressiveness) when they speak, and refraining from using colloquialisms (McCluney
et al., 2019; Reed-Clark, 2020). When attempting to fit in an environment where they do not feel represented, Black adults may code-switch to the point that they present a different personality entirely. Bukowski (2019) found that socioeconomic status, race, and power in social settings were directly related to the perception of African American males regarding usage of BE as well as their thoughts about code-switching between BE and standard English (SE). Bukowski also found that, depending on the situation, the African American participants perceived code-switching as both detrimental and advantageous for them. For example, participants believed that code-switching from BE to SE helped them to acquire jobs or build professional relationships, whereas code-switching from SE to BE helped them to better relate to other Black professionals and Black clients through a shared cultural experience. However, due to negative stereotypes of racial minorities and underrepresentation of instructors and mentors in professional settings, participants also experienced a sense of linguistic oppression as they altered their ways of being.

Additionally, Black professionals also feel the need to constantly be mindful of their body language; ensuring that their gestures are not overly emotive (such as wrist and neck movements) and reminding themselves to present as warm and approachable, so as to not be labeled as an “angry Black woman” or a “threatening Black man” (Reed-Clark, 2020). This constant monitoring might result in neglecting their identities to fit into a mode that is not their own. Expressing individuality while being marginalized in the workplace can also lead to subtle penalties, such as exclusion, microaggressions, and other workplace punishments (Lamonier, 2018). This can lead Black professionals to believe that presenting as Black is inherently “wrong,” which aids in difficulty formulating a positive racial and cultural identity (Lamonier, 2018; Young, 2009). Constantly receiving negative messages regarding how one should interact, especially regarding one’s racial identity, can lead to difficulty with fully understanding and
being comfortable with oneself. Black professionals are often caught in an impasse, which requires them to choose between their emotional and mental well-being and their career advancement (Gumbs, 2019).

Code-switching can also lead Black employees to diminish their cultural interests to appeal to the shared interests of their coworkers (McCluney et al., 2019), which ultimately suggests that their culture and identity are less important than that of their White counterparts. Young Black professionals in predominately White workspaces may also feel obligated to avoid and dispel stereotypes associated with their culture, which can lead to added workplace pressure (McCluney et al., 2019). This obligation to dispel perceived stereotypes can lead Black professionals to feel that they have to work twice as hard to be viewed as good as their White coworkers (Reed-Clark, 2020). Finally, code-switching might also generate hostile reactions from members of their culture, who accuse the Black professional of “acting White” (McCluney et al., 2019), creating an additional challenge to their identity.

Researchers must discover what could be beneficial for young Black professionals to develop their professional Black identity without feeling pressured to “fit into a code (Young, 2009).” Although it is clear that there is a psychological toll paid for code-switching, there is less literature on ways that young Black professionals counter the toll and re-establish their identities. This study explored Hip-Hop music as one such countering measure. There is a dearth of literature that connects Hip-Hop, BE, and code-switching literature, but an examination of Hip-Hop and its celebration of Black English and other markers of “Blackness” suggests it could be a powerful antidote to the pressures of code-switching.
**Hip-Hop**

Hip-Hop is defined as a cultural movement and musical genre that garnered widespread popularity in the 1980s and ‘90s and is also commonly referred to as the vessel for rap; the musical style of incorporating rhythmic speech as an art form (Bailey, 2014; Britannica Online Dictionary, 2020; Washington, 2018). Hip-Hop’s etymology traces the meaning of the word to two slang words: “hip” which referred to what was in vogue or “cool” and “hop” which denoted the physical movements associated with dancing to the genre (Bailey, 2014). Hip-Hop began in the post-industrial South Bronx as a countercultural movement based on the expression of Black and Latino youth who had been disenfranchised by society (Folami, 2007; Sims, 2011). Founded by DJ Kool Herc in the summer of 1973 (History.com Editors, 2020), Hip-Hop serves as both a voice and a platform for marginalized individuals to address social injustice and oppressive forces through the use of art (Bailey, 2014).

The rise of Hip-Hop into the mainstream media has been extraordinary (Bailey, 2014). “Ever since the 1980s, Hip-Hop has become a cultural product that is being sold and bought all over the world. It is a product that garners millions of dollars, produces waged activities, and boosts the American and the world economy” (Gadet, 2015, p. 76). Hip-Hop culture incorporates four forms of expression: a) emceeing (also known as rapping), b) DJing (the art of blending sounds and songs on turntables), c) b-boying/b-girling (breakdancing/dancing), d) and graffiti art/writing (Gadet, 2015; Washington, 2018). Since its inception, Hip-Hop has always aimed to establish a cultural connection and serve as a voice for oppressed and marginalized communities (Washington, 2018).

Green (2002) suggested that speech events, such as Hip-Hop and what it conveys, are unique features of Black English used to create depictions of Blackness. In other words, Hip-Hop
can serve as an indicator of how one may present their Blackness or communicate within their culture. Accompanying much of the recent Hip-Hop music is an element of “unapologetic Blackness.” For example, in Kendrick Lamar’s *The Blacker the Berry*, he engages in self-affirming dialogue with regard to his culture “Everything Black…I want everything Black” (Lamar, 2013, track 13). He continues by stating, “I’m African American, I’m African, I’m Black as the moon, heritage of a small village.” In the song, he is advocating for and endorsing Black features and stereotypes that had previously been frowned upon in society, such as having nappy hair, a round nose, or even being a “thug,” by re-claiming words and characteristics that had been used as insults by the dominant cultural group. Hip-Hop icon Beyoncé endorsed Black culture and Black features similarly in her song, *Formation*, stating, “I like my baby hair with baby hair and Afros. I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils. Earned all this money but they never take the country out of me. I got hot sauce in my bag, swag” (Knowles-Carter, 2016, track 12). These are two examples of how Hip-Hop has aimed to affirm Black culture by being unapologetically Black. Those sorts of messages resonate with listeners and may encourage them to adopt similar attitudes regarding pride in being themselves.

Wood (2004) found that for Black children, Hip-Hop can have a major influence on the development of their ideas, values, beliefs, and expressions of creativity. Hip-Hop can be viewed as a means for forming a cultural identity based in the pleasures and problems of Blacks in America. In other words, Hip-Hop could be a unifying medium in which Black individuals can hear stories they identify with, feel connected via universality, and potentially learn about themselves through music. Additionally, consumers are presented with images of personal representation that may be delivered by individuals with messages and qualities that they either currently hold or aspire to adopt. Through observing Hip-Hop artists negotiate their own
identities, it is believed that Hip-Hop consumers can learn to negotiate dominant narratives in their own identity formation (Razzante & Smith, 2018).

Sims (2011) interviewed 11 individuals, five men and six women, between the ages of 18 and 28, who identified Hip-Hop as a source of self-esteem, pride, and even a central source of strength. Five of the participants were White, four were Black, two were Latinx, and one was Asian American. The study provided experiences of celebrated diversity, empowerment, and the use of Hip-Hop as a means for developing a sense of one’s self. Hip-Hop was also viewed as life-affirming and educational for Black listeners (Sullivan, 2003).

Clay (2003) discovered that Hip-Hop culture plays a role in the fashion, gestures, and language of its consumers and can determine aspects of popularity. She further asserted that Black youth follow the model of other Black youth regarding what is required to be Black as well as their beliefs about the way their racialized identities are perceived by mainstream or dominant groups. Thus, Hip-Hop music and culture can operate as a source of identity formation and social status by young Black people (Petchauer, 2009). In this study, grounded theory methods, critical race theory, and the racial identity development model were utilized to assess the role that Hip-Hop music plays in the identity development of young Black professionals.

Theoretical Approaches

To guide the exploration of Hip-Hop and code-switching, the current study used two theoretical approaches, one at the macro level and one at the micro level. Critical Race Theory (CRT; Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Christian et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998), assesses themes of social justice, power, and privilege and was used as the macro level theory. The micro level theory of Racial Identity Development (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990; Speer, 2014; Vandiver et al.,
was used to inform the research and interview questions and assess the role that Hip-Hop music plays in assisting with identity development.

**Critical Race Theory**

CRT is an intellectual movement that aims to understand how White supremacy as a legal, cultural, and political condition is perpetuated, primarily in US society (De La Garza & Ono, 2019). Some researchers have criticized CRT, purporting that its integration is not an ideal methodology for dealing with theories of race (Gillborn, 2015). However, Christian et al. (2019) provided a rationale for utilizing CRT as a means of driving empirical inquiry regarding racial phenomena (e.g., racial inequality) in social, legal, and political life, noting that CRT has been utilized to discuss the effects and persistence of racism and racial inequality despite changes in the legal system. The authors then described other ways that CRT can be useful, such as providing insights into the fields of education, philosophy, and many other fields.

Happel-Parkins and Esposito (2018) found that privilege and oppression are attached to subjective positions through what Butler (2004, 2010) identified as “frames.” The frames can lead to discourses by which identity becomes intelligible or recognizable. For example, the idea of young Black professionals’ constantly suppressing their identities, personalities, and cultural characteristics to present as more amiable and warm to appeal to their White counterparts could lead young Black professionals to experience an identity crisis in which they no longer feel comfortable with themselves or recognize who they are. Ultimately, young Black professionals are subject to fit into “frames” or “codes” as a method for ensuring the comfort of their White coworkers. This is where the combination of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and racial identity theory can be beneficial by helping to understand the consequences that societal discourse based in systemic power differences has on formulating identity.
Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argued that CRT and poetic modes of expression can respond to challenges so that marginalized individuals who have been misrepresented by theories may now be empowered by theories. This occurs by taking into account their experiences and responses to racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Specifically, CRT can serve as a methodology that can provide a voice for communities of color through their history, culture, and experiences.

**Racial Identity Development Theory**

Identity development models describe the developmental process through which individuals develop their sense of self, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors through their interactions in social contexts (Sanchez, 2013). Racial identity development theories examine the role that race and culture play in one’s personal and social identity with attention to privilege and oppression based on race and groups (Sanchez, 2013). Racial identity is defined as a sense of collective identity based on one’s perception that they share commonalities with their particular racial group (Helms, 1990). The essence of theories of Black racial identity is the transformation from a focus on Whiteness to the psychological and existential process of becoming Black (Cross, 1971; Steinbugler, 2015; Vandiver et al., 2002). Although the terms are somewhat dated now, Cross (1971) termed this racial transformation as ‘nigrescence,’ or the ‘Negro-to-Black conversion experience.’ Black individuals begin their transition from a worldview dominated by White hegemonic standards and attempt to enhance their sense of worth, approval, power, and status by emulating White social, cultural, and institutional determinants (Jackson, 2001). Recognizing that the internal experience of self as a racial being is incongruent with the experiences of the community they belong to (Steinbugler, 2015) can result in a dilemma that enables individuals to identify the racial gap in their perspective. This recognition serves as an
impetus for an identity conversion (Cross & Strauss, 1998). One’s experience with societal oppression can also spur progression through the racial identity stages proposed by Cross (1971).

Helms (1990) detailed the integral role that experiences with power differentials play in the process of racial identity development. She described one’s perceptions and level of investment in one’s racial group across four statuses: a) pre-encounter (pro-White beliefs and often negative beliefs about one’s racial group), b) encounter (racial awareness, questioning, and confusion), c) immersion-emersion (anti-White, pro-Black attitudes about one’s racial group), and d) internalization (positive racial identity). Individuals may not experience all of the aforementioned statuses or progress through them in sequential order; however, they may express elements of each status at any point (Sanchez, 2013). Research shows that the pre-encounter and immersion-emersion statuses are associated with lower levels of self-esteem (Parham & Helms, 1985), stress related to racism, perceived discrimination (Johnson & Arbona, 2006), and anxiety and depression (Carter, 1991). However, the encounter and internalization statuses were linked to positive self-esteem (Phelps et al., 2001), tendencies of self-actualization (Parham & Helms, 1985), and improved psychological functioning (Pillay, 2005).

For Black people, the process of identity formulation often requires them to encompass personality characteristics that are incongruent with their cultural group (Harper, 2007). Black individuals in predominately White settings might struggle with the dilemma of conforming to negative stereotypes about their social group or maintaining their authentic selves (Steele, 1997), which can often lead to feelings of isolation (Dahlvig, 2010). An individual’s identity and sense of belonging in a professional setting can impact the decision to continue their employment in that setting (Danielak et al., 2014). Individuals with a more secure sense of Black identity are
more likely to develop substantive relationships and establish a sense of purpose compared to those with lower levels of Black identity (Pope, 2000).

Stereotype threat refers to the situational predicament in which people believe themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. This experience can produce high levels of anxiety that negatively impacts performance and view of self (Steele & Aronson, 1995). To combat the potential of stereotype threat, Black individuals typically adopt mannerisms, attitudes, and personality characteristics not typically associated with their culture, intentionally downplaying their connection to the Black community (Fordham, 1988). Unfortunately, this is an approach many high-status Black individuals use, which often results in feelings of discomfort based on how they may be perceived by other Black individuals. Two penalties accompany a rejection of Black culture; being rejected by the Black community and suffering psychologically, emotionally, and socially (Ford et al., 1993). High-achieving Black individuals are often rejected by other Black individuals not due to their achievements, but because they appear, based on their presentation, to be detached from their community (Ford et al., 1993).

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

People who reach advanced stages in the racial identity model place high salience on issues of race and Black culture (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Hip-Hop might serve to increase the salience of race and culture in positive ways but the impact that Hip-Hop has on identity development is a poorly studied phenomenon, especially regarding Hip-Hop as a positive, identity-grounding instrument for young Black professionals. Using the theoretical frameworks of CRT and racial identity development, the current study explored the role that Hip-Hop music plays in the identity development of young Black professionals. The study inquired about the
experiences of young Black professionals at work, including code-switching at work, code-switching and its impact on identity development, and the potentially restorative role of Hip-Hop on identity development. The study examined the idea that listening to Hip-Hop is not merely recreational, but also a way for young Black professionals to discover and express themselves.

In synthesizing the existing theoretical literature related to young Black professionals’ professional and racial identities, it is clear that the primary reasons that young Black professionals code-switch in the workplace are: a) enhancing professional advancement, b) reducing the stigma associated with racial identity, and c) ensuring comfort for White coworkers and employers. The literature suggests that the benefits associated with code-switching in the workplace do not outweigh the costs for young Black professionals, including: a) feelings of inferiority, b) experiences with marginalization regarding emotional expression, c) decreased psychological functioning, and d) diminished racial identity. Despite the negative consequences of code-switching, there is a dearth of available empirical studies especially addressing young Black professionals’ experiences with code-switching or means to counteract the effects of code-switching, especially on racial identity. This qualitative study examined three research questions:

1. What are the subjective code-switching experiences of young Black professionals in predominately White workplace settings?

2. What role does Hip-Hop play in the identity development of young Black professionals?

3. What role does Hip-Hop play in providing an outlet for young Black professionals to express their authentic selves when working in environments characterized by code-switching?
Method

Participants

Participants were seven young Black professionals (five male identifying and 2 female identifying) between the ages of 25 and 32 ($M_{age} = 29.14$, $SD = 6.14$) who were employed in professional settings with all employed in jobs in which more than 50% of their coworkers were White. See Table 1 for participant pseudonyms and other descriptive information. Participation was not restricted to those living in Columbus, Ohio, but five of the participants were from the Columbus area. This recruitment area was targeted due to the expansion of the Hip-Hop scene in Columbus (Oller, 2017).

Design and Procedure

The research methodology for the study consisted of a qualitative, grounded theory approach to assess and analyze theoretical information that could be derived from the data. The approach focused heavily on the experience of the participants concerning their workplace experiences and how they connected with Hip-Hop to inform aspects of Black identity. Before beginning the recruitment process, approval was obtained from the university IRB. Participants were recruited via social media (i.e., Twitter and Instagram) and via snowball sampling in hopes that participants who completed the interviews would assist with the recruitment of future participants. Participants who were interested in the study were emailed an informed consent document and provided contact information. The researcher contacted each participant and assessed eligibility for participation via email. Each participant who was contacted met criteria for participation. In the recruitment email, see Appendix C, participants were informed of the qualifying criteria (i.e., identify as Black or African American, aged 18-32, daily listeners of Hip-Hop, and work in a predominately White workspace). If the participants believed they met
the criteria, they were scheduled for an interview to confirm the qualification. Upon consenting to participate, participants completed a brief oral demographic questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured interview via Zoom. Data from the interviews were analyzed with coding and memo-writing techniques. Theoretical sampling was utilized so that as data were collected and themes emerged, additional participants were sought to assess if having more participants disconfirmed the previous findings. This process of moving between sampling, data collection, and analysis was continued until data saturation was met.

**Table 1**

*Sample Description*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Daily Hip-Hop Consumption (hours)</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data Analyst</td>
<td>&gt; 6</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Statistics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>4 to 6</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Business)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>General Engineer</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree (Engineering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Felix</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lobbyist</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Administration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Program Approval Coordinator</td>
<td>4 to 6</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Counseling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Risk Manager</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree (Sociology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jaxon</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Business Analyst</td>
<td>4 to 6</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree (Psychology)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Sources

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire included questions regarding age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education level, amount of time spent listening to Hip-Hop music, type of settings in which they worked, and the estimated ratio of Black to White colleagues in their immediate workgroup. The researcher administered a brief, oral open-ended demographic questionnaire gathering the above information at the beginning of each participant’s interview.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Each interview was expected to last approximately 45 minutes. However, the shortest interview lasted 53 minutes and the longest interview lasted 112 minutes. Participants were asked at around 40 minutes if they were comfortable continuing beyond the allotted time. Each participant expressed that they blocked off additional time on their schedules to accommodate the interview and consented to continuing with the interview until its conclusion. Confidentiality was honored throughout the process of data collection, and pseudonyms selected by the participants were used in place of participants’ names.

The first interview was utilized as a pilot test to determine the efficacy of the interview questions. Subsequent interviews were modified to address any issues identified in the first interview. For example, the first interview lasted for 112 minutes, when interviews were expected to last between 45 to 60 minutes. Therefore, the researcher refrained from asking some of the additional questions listed in Appendix A, as many of the additional questions were covered in other responses. Questions were open-ended to provide participants with an opportunity to adequately express their experiences. The open-ended questions included items
such as “What is it like to be a Black professional at your workplace?” “Tell me about how you speak and behave at home, versus when you are in a professional setting?” “How has Hip-Hop impacted the way you view yourself?” “How has Hip-Hop shaped the way you view and express yourself professionally?” Follow-up questions were also asked to fully encompass each participant’s experience and perspectives regarding code-switching in the workplace and listening to Hip-Hop as a working professional. See Appendix A for the list of interview questions.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory provides guidelines for collecting and analyzing data (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis should coincide with data collection (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, researchers should not wait until they have finished their data collection to begin analyzing the data. This style of concurrent data analysis is useful for grounded theory as data and themes can arise and be constantly compared, and new directions for the study may emerge. According to Charmaz (2006), coding should be analyzed line by line. There are three types of coding methods associated with grounded theory: a) open coding refers to the practice of creating summaries for the data by use of preliminary labels, b) axial coding is used to extract concepts from the summaries, and c) selective coding refers to the process of developing the concepts into a formal framework with variables that are inclusive of the collected data (Charmaz, 2006).

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher. During the interviews, memoing was utilized by taking notes on a laptop to identify themes as they arose. The transcriptions from the interviews were coded manually by content and theme. Additionally, when analyzing the data, the researcher kept a journal of feelings and thought processes in
response to the participants to encapsulate their whole perspectives and to also maintain
objectivity and minimize researcher bias.

**Positionality Statement**

Identifying a philosophical stance is essential in qualitative research because it affects
how researchers select their research designs, methods for data collection, the type of research
questions/hypotheses they explore, what they classify as knowledge, and how that knowledge
may be discovered (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It was pivotal to be aware of and talk about
personal stance, bias, and positionality because these elements can cloud judgment when
conducting research. Being aware of these aspects can lead to producing more accurate and
significant results (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As a consumer of Hip-Hop and a young Black
professional who, at times, has utilized code-switching in professional settings, I understand and
am aware of the role that Hip-Hop has played in assisting with my identity development and
overall expression, but acknowledged that I must be aware of my own positionality and biases as
I approached the study.

This acknowledgment included the assumption that Hip-Hop positively impacts Black
identity and assists with Black expression. For example, my fashion choices, gestures, use of
slang, daily mantras, affirmations, language, tone of voice, how I approach relationships, and
even conflict resolution can all be attributed to messages I have learned from Hip-Hop music and
culture. I also recognize that in acknowledging my biases, I believed that Hip-Hop served as an
antidote for code-switching in the workplace and I may have expected that all of the participants
of the study will hold beliefs similar to mine. Additionally, I held an assumption that because I
perceived code-switching in the workplace as an issue that needs to be addressed and solved, the
participants in the study will have similar beliefs, which may not be the case. I aimed to
understand and be aware that not every participant will regard Hip-Hop in the same positive manner as I do, nor will they view code-switching as an issue. I could potentially interview participants who view code-switching as the most advantageous skill they possess and celebrate code-switching as the answer to all of their concerns. Understanding what my potential biases were enabled me to constantly be aware and “check” my biases, as to prevent them from clouding my judgment when conducting interviews and analyses.
Results

The interview data were coded in three separate phases. The initial phase consisted of line-by-line coding, where the participant’s responses were coded into more concise statements that split out aspects of the responses that were not relevant or substantive. This phase allowed the coder to categorize the data, assess for assumptions, clarify implicit meanings, compare data, and identify gaps in the data. Descriptive codes were also a vital aspect of this phase in the analysis; these codes are typically used to summarize the primary topic of each excerpt (Saldaña, 2013).

The second phase of the analysis consisted of axial coding, where line-by-line codes from the first phase were organized into higher order categories. Grounded theory methodology relies heavily on a constant comparison of data, which was achieved by conducting the first two phases of the coding following each interview, so the higher order categories could be applied to subsequent interviews for inclusion and comparison. For example, the first interview was line-by-line coded, and higher order categories were coded directly after the line-by-line codes. Next, the second interview was line-by-line coded, and then the higher order categories from the first interview were used for focused and axial coding of the second interview. Any additional higher order categories that did not exist originally for the first interview, but emerged from the second interview were added to the list. This process was followed for each subsequent interview. No new categories were added in the last two interviews, indicating that saturation had been reached.

The third phase of the analysis consisted of selective and theoretical coding, which were used to synthesize and integrate the codes that were selected during axial coding (Saldana, 2013). Once saturation had been reached (i.e., higher order categories were no
longer emerging), all of the higher order categories were placed into larger themes that appeared to capture the essence of those categories. This occurred by listing out all of the higher order categories and grouping them together where they seemed to thematically cluster. After the larger themes emerged, the primary researcher took the larger themes and developed the logistical flow among themes and resulting theory that materialized from the higher order categories.

Several steps were taken to ensure quality and rigor within the data analysis process. As qualitative research does not claim to be completely objective, to obtain a certain level of neutrality, the author maintained a journal to write about potential biases that may have arisen during the analysis of each interview. For example, this researcher noted feelings of excitement when artists such as Kendrick Lamar and Tupac were mentioned as these are personally favorite artists. In addition to identifying potential bias, the writing ensured the process of introspection and incorporated reminders to be mindful of how researcher bias may inform the process of analysis. The constant bias checks served to enhance objectivity during the data analysis process.

Three broad themes emerged from the data collected from participants: 1) code-switching: subjective experience, 2) Hip-Hop: authenticity, and 3) Hip-Hop: identity. See Table 2 for a list of the codes and categories generated by this open coding process. The bolded headings represent preliminary themes that were supported by the coded data, the italicized headings are the axial codes that emerged, and all other headings represent categories’ descriptive codes, or codes that summarize the primary topic of each excerpt (Saldaña, 2013). The numbers in parentheses represent the number of data excerpts that fit within each category, sub-category, and code.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code-Switching: Subjective Experiences (217 total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Black English</strong> (66 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Usage (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Comfort (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Attitudes (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Professionalism</strong> (61 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Young Black professional (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Response to racial issues (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Influence on formal presentation (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Influence on informal presentation (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Productivity (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Function of Code-switching</strong> (29 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Safety (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Stereotype Threat (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Advance corporate ladder (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Age component/Young (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Limited (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Workplace Relationships</strong> (21 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Connection (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Support (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Inclusion (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Attitudes toward Code-switching</strong> (17 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Amount implemented at work (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Change in perception over time (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Impact of Power Differentials</strong> (12 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Benefits (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Social climate (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Political component (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Supervision (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. White privilege (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Subjective Understanding of Code-switching</strong> (11 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Conform (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Survive (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HIP-HOP: Authenticity** (117 total)

1. **Requirement of Authenticity** (11 total)
   a. Real (9)
   b. Vulnerability (2)

2. **Spectrum of Blackness** (9 total)
   a. Variety (7)
   b. Encouraged to be self (2)
Table 2 (Continued)

Themes, Axial Codes, and Descriptive Codes

3. Artists of Impact (94 total)
   a. JAY-Z (29)
   b. Kanye West (26)
   c. Tupac (24)
   d. Kendrick Lamar (15)
   * Number of times the artists were mentioned across all transcripts

4. Lyrics (26 total)
   a. Motivating (9)
   b. Inspirational (9)
   c. Community Experience (8)

5. Self-Care (10 total)
   a. Decompress (6)
   b. Unwind (4)

HIP-HOP: IDENTITY (115 total)

1. Ongoing Relationship to Hip-Hop (67 total)
   a. Introduction (23)
   b. Benefits (19)
     1. Doors opened (12)
        a. Connection (7)
   c. Circumstances (16)
   d. Beliefs about society (9)

2. Lessons Learned (43 total)
   a. Influence (39)
     1. Aspects associated with personality (17)
     2. Impact on formal presentation (8)
        a. Mask (1)
     3. Comfort implementing Hip-Hop lessons at work (7)
     4. Impact on informal presentation (6)

3. Hip-Hop as a Motivating Factor (5 total)
   a. Keeps you focused (3)
   b. Affirmative (2)

Code-switching: Subjective Experiences of Predominately White Workspaces

This overall theme addresses the daily work context for many young Black professionals in predominantly White workspaces and the perceived demands on how they should present at work that exceed the demands specific to the job tasks. Seven subthemes emerged from the data that fit under this first theme of code-switching: subjective
experiences, all of which could be described as consciousness of how the participants presented or could be perceived by work supervisors, colleagues, or customers. This awareness appeared to serve as a catalyst or contributing factor in decisions to code-switch in professional workspaces. Participants reported that they had to manage their presentations at work in order to make occupational progress, but there were participants who alluded to this management as impeding the work that they did, as it felt inauthentic.

**Black English: Comfort and Usage**

The use of Black English is connected to code-switching as participants were deliberate about when and with whom they use it. For example, Ann shared the following “when I worked predominately with Black students, the work environment was conducive to it. I used it way more in my previous environment.” She further expressed that she aims to “read the room” to determine who it is safe to use Black English around. Eric expressed that he “never [uses] with management, but if I’m familiar with somebody, or somebody on my level, then I might do it ‘bout 40% of the time.” He further stated that he uses it with “colleagues, or somebody that can’t affect my job directly. I use it with family, friends, pretty much anywhere outside of work. At work, I might think twice before I say any type of slang.” When providing his experience with using Black English at work, Jaxon shared that he “hardly ever” uses it. He further expressed that he uses it with “everyone else in my life, family members, household, friends outside of work, and with other students. It just stops when I get to work.” Felix expressed “it’s very selective and rare that I employ [BE].” Nicole expressed that “I only use it when talking to other Black folk, so about 30-40% of the time.” She went on to express that she has to “feel” others out before she uses Black English with them. X reported that he is comfortable with using slang with everyone, as he reports
“being comfortable in myself and comfortable in my Blackness. When I became more comfortable, my work increased as well, because I was at peace.” He went on to express that he uses Black English with everyone, as long as there is not a “language barrier.”

According to most of the participants, their comfort using Black English in the workplace was relatively low. Their comfort levels serve to highlight the changes in how they present themselves – their masks – depending on who they are around. For most of them, that meant changing when they were around their White coworkers, complicating their experiences of being young Black professionals at work. Their caution in using Black English at work with White colleagues is rooted in their understanding of the necessity of code-switching.

**Function and Understanding of Code-switching**

Participants in this study strongly communicated the function of code-switching as a precipitating factor for expressing their decisions to code-switch at work. In over 20 responses, participants indicated that their understanding of the function of code-switching impacted how they presented themselves in the workplace. Safety, as it relates to a function of code-switching, appeared in the transcripts over ten times. As Ann explained “if you’re too Black, it’s considered radical and I think sometimes it entices fear in others, kind of like an intimidation thing. So, we have to dilute our personalities or identities.” Jaxon expressed similar sentiments, reporting that it assists with “people’s assurance in me, people’s assurance in their own safety, keeps me from appearing angry or upset.” Morgan described the safety component from a survival standpoint, reporting “it’s how you kind of survive in any environment that you have to live in that’s not exactly a place where you’re even close to a majority.” X referred to the function as “it’s not really needed anymore. I understand
that you have to make people feel comfortable to work around you, but I don’t think it should be to the detriment of yourself and your community.”

Participants also provided details of their experiences with addressing stereotype threat as a function of their code-switching. Ann stated that “I am the least intimidating Black female they’ve met. Easygoing, I’m not sassy, bossy, rude or loud, typical stereotypes they associate with Black females. I’m able to not portray those stereotypes that they have, those preconceived biases that they have.” She continued by stating “I’m doing a disservice to the authentic part. Am I debunking the stereotypes and giving them a better perception on Black females, or am I hurting the next girl to come after me?” Morgan expressed how he aims to be calm during workplace disputes as a means to “defy the stereotype of angry Black men.”

Participants also expressed the desire to move up the corporate ladder as another function of code-switching. Eric stated “People like people that’s similar to them. They’ll hire somebody that they would have a drink with, so I think just trying to move up the corporate ladder, it’s important to try to fit in and not stand out.” X referenced similar experiences regarding the function and climb, reporting that “it’s made it easy for me to be able to get a beer with people. People don’t want to work with people that they can’t get a beer with.” He went on to state “code-switchin’ allowed me to network to a degree.”

Nicole expressed skepticism regarding this climb, stating that:

The whole ideology of climbing the corporate ladder, they sell you this American dream and you think that there’s space for you in that. I’ve learned as a young Black person; you're not a part of that dream and you need to reconfigure your own. I stopped with the ideology of you can climb up the corporate ladder and be happy,
because no, oppression is always going to exist in that space. I had to change my thoughts to survive capitalism. I have to work, and I have to play the game to a certain degree, but I need to find some type of joy even within all of that, and it’s totally separate from that. So, my Black womanhood consists of finding the things that give me joy and set aside what I have to do to get a bag.

**Attitudes toward Code-switching**

According to almost all participants, code-switching was deemed as something that was necessary, although they wished it were not. These attitudes served to complicate the experiences of being a young Black professional and workspaces characterized by code-switching. Ann shared her many experiences as a young Black professional, reporting that “I see the benefits of it. I’ve benefitted from it, but I feel as though it’s inhibiting us as a community of Black professionals, because if we’re not being our true authentic selves, is the work we’re doing authentic?” Jaxon shared that he believes “[code-switching] serves a purpose. I’m a little bit more rebellious towards it now. As I’m becoming more comfortable in my own skin, I feel like it’s an unfortunate tool that has benefits but should seldomly be utilized.” Felix reported “I am firmly against it being a thing.” Regarding its necessity, Morgan expressed similar sentiments, stating “I wish it wasn’t a thing that was necessary, but I doubt it’ll change in my lifetime, maybe my kids will be able to be free in the office.” Nicole expressed that:

I think it’s hilarious, the thought of doing it. I felt the need to try to put on a good front or whatever. I stopped doing that, especially when I saw that they were showing up authentically as their selves and honestly, it was starting to give me a headache.
Eric was the only participant who had mixed or positive feelings toward code-switching, as he reported, “I don’t think necessarily it’s a bad thing. I used to work for a Black accounting firm, and we did some code-switching when we went to see clients. I think it’s important, but I don’t really know how to feel, to be honest.”

**Impact of Power Differentials**

Participants in this study communicated the impact that power, privilege, and microaggressions had as a precipitating factor for code-switching at work. Ann reported that early in her life “seeing how sometimes being the radical and this out loud, Black and proud person would get in trouble, I chose the route that benefitted me [code-switching].” She went on to express “it really had a great impact on how I code-switch now, on top of our current social climate.”

**Hip-Hop’s Influence on Authentic Presentation**

The second theme encompasses the messages that participants perceived from Hip-Hop that supported authenticity as Black individuals, in any space, including the workplace. Four primary subthemes emerged from the data, all considered contributing factors to the phenomenological experiences of authentic expression for the participants. The subthemes were Hip-Hop’s requirement of authenticity, the depiction of Blackness as a spectrum, artists/lyrics of impact, and the influence of self-care, listed in order of relative importance to participants. Importance was determined based on the number of times a particular condition was mentioned by the overall group of participants included in this study. The aforementioned themes could be classified as potential countering messages to the perceived demands for young Black professionals to manage their self-presentations in predominately
White workspaces; messages that encouraged expression of their authentic selves even in White workspaces.

**Requirement of Authenticity**

Participants in this study strongly communicated the impact that Hip-Hop’s requirement of authenticity had as a precipitating factor for expressing their authentic selves. With the content occurring over 10 times in the transcripts, participant responses indicated that messages around authenticity had a significant influence on their ability to present themselves in an authentic manner. Requirement of authenticity refers to a reminder or maybe even a demand to be genuine and true to oneself, as Ann and Morgan expressed. Ann explained “[Hip-Hop] forces you to be intentional with your words. Your words are translated to who you really are and how you are going to portray this person, your authentic self.” She continued by saying:

> Hip-Hop reaffirms its intention. In Hip-Hop music and culture, you don’t want to be no fraud. You don’t want to be no opp. There is this connotation of always reinforcing the listeners to be real. It reaffirms its original intention, authenticity. It promotes the fact of being real. Be real, but don’t be stupid. It reaffirms you to be Black, knowledgeable of who you are, and authentic.

Morgan expressed similar sentiments in that “there is the aspect of real, the real Gs move in silence,” in relation to expressing that Hip-Hop reminds him to be true to himself and move in a manner that is consistent with his calm demeanor.

Other participants provided examples of artists who impacted their ability to be authentic and vulnerable through their music and outward expressions. X explained that:
The greatest thing I’ve learned from Hip-Hop music and culture is to never be ashamed of who you are. If you’re the weirdo, just be comfortable in your own space and be true to you and express yourself. I’m comfortable in my own skin. I’m comfortable expressing myself how I want to express myself. I ain’t never not been confident, like shit, y’all the weird ones as far as I’m concerned.

The Spectrum of Blackness

Participants also seemed to recognize the importance of Hip-Hop’s depiction of the spectrum of Blackness as another causal condition of authenticity, as it was mentioned nine times. Jaxon expressed that Hip-Hop has “so many different characters and colors with their own level of success. You can be the biggest, the wildest, and still have importance. You can walk around with a harmonica and a flower dress and still be respected and successful.” He went on to state “there’s a message given that there’s more than one way to do it.”

X expressed similar sentiments regarding the spectrum of Blackness depicted in Hip-Hop, which encouraged him to present more authentically, stating “we could name people all day, but what these people have in common is being comfortable in their skin and Blackness.” Felix explained that Hip-Hop “re-affirms what I’ve learned in terms of Blackness. It has taught me a lot about life in its complexity and nuance, especially for Kanye and folks like that, it talks about things in a different sense.” He went on to express how he felt validated through the spectrum of Blackness depicted in Hip-Hop, reporting “this nigga know me!” regarding Kanye being who he was and presenting in a manner that was not “overly stereotypical.”

Nicole expressed a similar resonation when listening to Kendrick Lamar’s The Blacker The Berry, stating that:
The song makes me feel my Blackness in a deeper way and it attributes to how I’ve evolved in my thoughts and consciousness of what it means to be Black, and not necessarily a Black woman, but just Blackness and what Blackness means. I identify that type of Hip-Hop with my edginess, how I dress, and it really helps to peel back the layers of what it means to be Black.

**Artists of Impact**

Participants named various artists who encouraged them to embrace their authentic selves, thus reducing the desire to code-switch at work. For example, X shared the following “Tyler, the Creator is the perfect example of being comfortable in your skin. He has always been the weird kid and embraced that.” Nicole expressed appreciation for NoName, stating that “she provides voices for Black women, encouraging you to educate yourself and understand the plight we are up against.” Morgan expressed that artists like Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole inspired him to be “introspective” and take “mental health” into account. Jaxon explained that seeing artists such as Donald Glover and Andre 3000 express themselves unapologetically provided messages that “you can be who you are and still be successful.” He also described a level of “self-acceptance” associated with seeing artists express themselves in a manner that felt true to them. Nicole suggested that Tupac encouraged her to be a “real G” about stuff and to present a certain “swagger” about herself. Some participants were able to provide examples of lyrics that encouraged authenticity. Nicole stated that “how you gon’ win when you ain’t right within” by Lauryn Hill as she described succinctly “it really teaches you to get right with yourself and just have a deeper learning of self, to be honest.”
**Self-Care**

Participants described how Hip-Hop informs various hobbies, chores, and approaches to self-care that help them to rejuvenate following a day of working in predominately White workspaces. Felix described how Hip-Hop was “paramount” to his downtime, reporting that, “Hip-Hop is the core of my music library. Music is how I escape and declutter, mentally. Even the content that I create in terms of poetry or essays; it’s always around Black culture or Hip-Hop.” Nicole shared how listening to Hip-Hop informs her approach to self-care:

I would definitely say when I’m trying to unwind and I have my face mask on before I read, or if I’m smoking a blunt. That’s my self-care, just having it on in the background to set the mood, especially after you dealt with a long day of them folk at work like, sheesh!

**Hip-Hop and Identity Development**

The third and final theme addressed how participants had incorporated the modeling and messages about authenticity into their personal identities and actions as young Black professionals. Three different subthemes emerged from the data, all considered to be contributing factors to the phenomenological experiences of Hip-Hop’s influence on the development of identities for the participants. The subthemes were participants’ ongoing relationship to Hip-Hop, lessons learned from Hip-Hop, and views on Hip-Hop as a motivating factor.

**Ongoing Relationship to Hip-Hop**

Participants in the study communicated the impact that their relationship to Hip-Hop had on the development of their Black identities from a young age. Many participants
described how Hip-Hop meant a lot to them as they have grown with the genre over time.

Jaxon described his relationship to Hip-Hop, stating “it means the world to me. It’s my favorite form of entertainment. Whether it’s to escape or just as inspiration. It’s so all encompassing.” X began describing his relationship with Hip-Hop by saying:

Damn, I hate to be cliché, bro. Hip-Hop saved my life. In a multitude of ways, just the life aspects, from a mental aspect, from a spiritual aspect, shit, emotional aspect. There’s so many compartments of Hip-Hop that without it, I feel like my life would be empty.

**Lessons Learned from Hip-Hop**

Participants in the study communicated the impact that the lessons learned from Hip-Hop had on the development of their Black identities. With some form of lessons learned from the genre being mentioned in the transcripts over 40 times, these participants clearly connected Hip-Hop to their personal and racial identity development. For participants, being influenced by the genre was reflected by how they defined aspects of their personalities, presented themselves in formal and informal situations, and were comfortable with expressing these influences in the workplace.

X described his lessons learned from Hip-Hop stating “as a kid, it taught me what it meant to be Black, the importance of being Afrocentric, about our history, culture, love, sorrows, fashion, death. It can teach you so much.” He also expressed “the greatest thing I learned from Hip-Hop is never feel ashamed of who you are.” Ann expressed how she learned “Hip-Hop reaffirms who you are and about the commonalities of being Black.”

In terms of Hip-Hop’s influence, Eric expressed that he learned to explore style and fashion due to his relationship to Hip-Hop, expressing “I remember we used to always look
to see what Dipset was wearing and their style. The way we talk is influenced by Hip-Hop, even though we might change the slang up, it helps you be close with Black culture.” Nicole described how Hip-Hop influenced the way she dresses, expressing “Hip-Hop allows me to explore eclectic styles.” She expressed that she learned to “put on a suit and tie and make it Black excellence. Hip-Hop and the artists teach you to master the art of putting on a mask.” X also described similar fashion influences inspired by Hip-Hop, as he expressed “it’s helped me have the confidence of being unapologetic regarding how I’m dressed. If I want to wear Jordans or show off my tattoos, I’m comfortable just being me and it’s like, shit, you either rock with it or you don’t.” A few of the participants spoke to how Hip-Hop influences both their informal and formal presentations. In terms of additional influences on formal presentation, Eric expressed that:

> People like JAY-Z wearin’ suits and doing what he want to do with his hair, it’s showing that you can still be in the corporate world and do that type of thing. I’m growing my hair out and I don’t feel threatened by it. Long as I carry myself a certain way and I’m good at what I do, nobody should care about what type of hair I have. Seeing JAY-Z like that has really been a big influence, just seeing him growing his hair and being able to evolve over the years.

A few of the participants described their comfort with utilizing fashion and language inspired by Hip-Hop in the workplace. Ann expressed that “when working with children, we can’t collectively help if we’re not aware of the criteria of the kid. Dialect, language, if you don’t understand the language, we can’t talk. There has to be some type of communication.” X expressed feeling comfortable utilizing fashion and language choices inspired by Hip-Hop in the workplace “because of what happened in 2020, with a lot of companies on the
whole kick of inclusion, it’s giving us more leverage and comfortability in spaces to just be us.”

Regarding how Hip-Hop has impacted the participants’ beliefs about society, some participants expressed multiple impacts that Hip-Hop contributed to. Eric reported that artists like “Dame Dash and JAY-Z changed my view on ownership and that we can make it in society. You don’t have to be born with a silver spoon to be able to own your own and make it.” Jaxon stated that Hip-Hop being “counterculture” that it has “opened my mind to understanding how culturally important it is and how it blends into other forms of creativity, whether it’s fashion or business. It has opened the door to understanding the importance of culture.” Nicole reported that Hip-Hop informed her that “you have to know what to do when you need to do it in order to survive. You have to develop survival mechanisms, and I think that’s heavily embedded in Hip-Hop culture, it’s just the art of surviving.”

**Hip-Hop as a Motivating Factor**

Participants also shared their perceptions of the motivational impact of Hip-Hop music and culture. Ann shared that Hip-Hop music “keeps me focused, there’s a lot going on everywhere, it’s a lot to get a person distracted, it’s been keeping us motivated.” Similar to Ann, Jaxon described the benefits he received from Hip-Hop as “something that keeps you going. Keeps you inspired. It keeps you motivated.” Morgan described points of connection as benefits experienced from the genre, expressing that “Hip-Hop is a way you meet the real ones.” Nicole expressed that:

It affirms me when I’m feeling low from work and feeling not good enough. It makes me feel like the society that we live in and tell us that we no good, they don’t know nothing, they don’t know what they’re talking about. At the end of the day,
they want to be like this, and they try to mimic Hip-Hop culture, and the fact that I am the culture affirms me. It makes me feel like I am a part of something larger.

Summary

The results introduced a new model of identity development for young Black professionals in the workplace and how Hip-Hop music facilitates aspects of identity development. Figure 1 depicts the relationships among the primary themes. The caution in using Black English at work or when not around other Black individuals and the perceived need for code-switching were common across participants. Participants mentioned very similar perceived pressures to engage in code-switching, although their actual experiences of code-switching varied greatly. The perceived necessity for code-switching at work may be more important than the actual experiences themselves. In other words, the experienced pressure to code-switch appeared to outweigh the specific experiences with code-switching.

Based on the themes that emerged from the grounded theory analysis, the model indicates that young Black professionals in White workspaces experience and have awareness of the separateness (power) that influences their thoughts about the function of code-switching, need for code-switching, decisions/comfort with using Black English and self-presentation. Code-switching, presenting self based on expectations or perceived expectations of others, and not being one’s real self at work are all experiences of inauthenticity, which participants take as a given to be fundamentally damaging to mental/physical health.

This workplace environment with its perceived demands for presenting in ways participants saw as a performance or inauthentic occurs in the context of role modeling and meaning that participants take from Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop, through its messages of requiring
authenticity, acceptance of a range of definitions of being Black [spectrum of Blackness], modeling by impactful artists, and inspiration through lyrics, supports young Black professionals in developing comfort and pride in their Black selves, builds/reinforces social connections, and strengthens decisions to challenge majority determined social norms. For participants who engage meaningfully with Hip-Hop music, these contextual messages regarding authenticity and acceptance of self were internalized into aspects of identity and translated into increased comfort and pride as Black individuals. This more authentic sense of self, buttressed and shaped by Hip-Hop, might result in changed approaches or interactions at work or with oneself.

**Figure 1**

*Model of Hip-Hop Influences on Authentic Presentation for Young Black Professionals in Predominately White Workspaces*

The model displays the interactive nature (bi-directional arrows) of the authenticity messages from Hip-Hop on the young Black professionals’ subjective experiences of their workplaces. As depicted in the model, not every young Black professional is influenced by those Hip-Hop messages, only those who actively listen and internalize them. There may be
individuals who listen to Hip-Hop without intentionally engaging with the genre and those individuals may not be strongly influenced by the messages of authenticity conveyed by Hip-Hop artists and lyrics. The model also depicts the unidirectional nature of the role Hip-Hop plays in facilitating the identity development of young Black professionals through the participants’ relationships to Hip-Hop, lessons learned from the genre, and Hip-Hop’s role in aspects of self-care.
Discussion

This study explored the experiences of young Black professionals at work, including code-switching at work, code-switching and its impact on identity development, and the potentially restorative role of Hip-Hop on identity development. To guide the exploration of Hip-Hop and code-switching, the current study used two theoretical approaches. Critical Race Theory (CRT; Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Christian, Seamster, & Ray, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998) assesses themes of social justice, power, and privilege and was used as the macro level theory. The micro level theory of Racial Identity Development (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990; Speer, 2014; Vandiver et al., 2002) was used to inform the research and interview questions and assess the role that Hip-Hop music plays in assisting with identity development.

There were three primary research questions that guided the present study. The first question aimed to explore the subjective code-switching experiences of young Black professionals in predominately White workplace settings. The second question addressed how Hip-Hop influenced the identity development of young Black professionals. The third question explored the role that Hip-Hop plays in providing an outlet for young Black professionals to express their authentic selves when working in environments characterized by code-switching. Responses to all three questions are integrated into the theory describing the experiences of code-switching in the workplace (seen as an inauthentic way of being) and the role of Hip-Hop in restoring or facilitating a sense of authenticity.

Three broad categories emerged from the data collected from participants: (a) code-switching: subjective experience; (b) Hip-Hop: authenticity; and (c) Hip-Hop: identity. These three themes can be linked to the primary research questions, and reflect the common experiences of many young Black professionals in White workspaces, with the attendant
conflict between being oneself and fitting in to expected workplace norms and recovering or reclaiming a sense of self through the messages and philosophy of Hip-Hop.

**Subjective Experiences of Code-switching**

The subthemes that emerged from the data connect the first research question to literature and existing theory. The functions of code-switching (e.g., safety, stereotype threat, and advancing up the corporate ladder) emerged as an important subtheme for the young Black professionals’ decision to code-switch at work. Participants’ understanding of code-switching, the impact of power, privilege, and microaggressions on code-switching, attitudes toward code-switching, and comfort using Black English served as contributing factors for participants’ decisions to code-switch at work.

Participants in this study strongly communicated the functions of code-switching as precipitating factors for their decisions to code-switch at work, with safety identified as one of the primary contributing factors to participants’ decision to code-switch in the workplace. Regarding safety, Black individuals in professional settings have reported that they feel the need to work to carefully manage their emotions to reflect their work environment (Wingfield, 2015), detailing pressures to solely convey feelings of amiability and pleasantness, especially concerning racial issues. Young Black professionals are often required to code-switch in professional workspaces as a means of ensuring comfort for dominant race coworkers and employers, in essence, reinforcing language barriers (Young, 2009).

Additionally, Black men often feel the need to engage in emotional and behavioral practices to cope with environments in which their behavior is prescribed by dominant group norms (Pitcan et al., 2018). In professional settings, Black individuals have received
messages that suggest it is fine to be visibly Black, but it is not acceptable to be
individuals expressed that much of the advice provided to minorities regarding advancing up
the company ladder is focused on conforming or assimilating.

Studying attitudes toward Black English and code-switching, Koch et al. (2001)
found that Black individuals should take pride in BE as it is an important way to distinguish
themselves from the majority group. Participants in the current study ranged in usage, as
some participants reported that they use BE whenever they wish and others who expressed
they hardly ever utilize BE. Many young Black professionals may be reluctant to use Black
English because the dialect is negatively perceived in media and society and seen as
inconsistent with the stereotypic perceptions of professional individuals (Koch et al, 2001).

Participants in this study communicated the impact that power and privilege had as a
precipitating factor for code-switching at work. The awareness of power and privilege
differences intensifies the perceived pressure to maintain a positive representation of all
Black employees, including the need to code-switch (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Code-switching was deemed as something necessary, but not necessarily desirable.
These attitudes served to complicate the experience of being a young Black professional in
predominantly White workspaces. Responses varied from participants being able to see the
utility of code-switching, as well as those who were firmly against it. Although many
researchers have championed code-switching as a form of bilingualism (Koch et al., 2001),
others feel that it promotes inherent racism (Young, 2009) as it implies standard English is
the superior dialect. Code-switching does not advance achievements in diversity, but rather
encourages Black individuals to speak in a more “acceptable” manner (Young, 2009), which
was echoed by participants who wondered if they weren’t harming, or at least not helping, future generations of Black professionals when neglecting their identities and adhering to an “acceptable” standard (Bukowski, 2019; Young, 2009). Code-switching, self-presentations based on expectations or perceived expectations of others, and not being one’s real self at work are all experiences of inauthenticity, which is fundamentally damaging to mental/physical health (McCluney et al., 2019).

Critical Race Theory provides a means to examine the systemic pressures to conform to the dominant way of what is considered professional. Privilege and oppression are attached to subjective positions known as “frames” (Happel-Parkins & Esposito, 2018). These frames can lead to internal discourses by which identity becomes intelligible or recognizable. CRT can be essential as it aims to assist in understanding the impact that the cultural discourses, in this study the cultural discourses on White dominance in defining the workplace, have on formulating one’s identity. This is also consistent with Freire’s (1973, 1993) critical consciousness theory, which asserts that awareness of these discourses can facilitate the capacity to overcome sociopolitical oppression. CRT and poetic modes of expression can also address challenges faced by marginalized individuals who have been misrepresented by theories, so that they may now be empowered by theories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Hip-Hop’s Influence on Authentic Presentation

The subthemes linked to Hip-Hop’s emphasis on authenticity relate to the third research question addressing the role Hip-Hop plays in providing outlets for young Black professionals to express their authentic selves when working in environments characterized by code-switching. Hip-Hop’s requirement of authenticity emerged as significant subtheme
for the young Black professionals who participated in this study. The depiction of Blackness as a spectrum in Hip-Hop was also a significant subtheme that emerged among participants.

Participants viewed Hip-Hop’s requirement of authenticity as a precipitating factor for expressing their authentic selves. Hip-Hop has been used as a form of cultural capital for Black individuals to interact with one another and authenticate their Black identities (Clay, 2003). Bailey (2014) suggested that Hip-Hop serves as a demand for social justice, but also empowers listeners to implement change with both knowledge of self as well as knowledge of what is taking place in society. Although many of the participants struggled to express authenticity in their work environments, they were advocates for the impact that Hip-Hop has on authentic expression. Rubin (2016) expressed Hip-Hop has a substantial amount of influence on the communication of Black identity, considering that authenticity, purity, and resistance have always been necessary components of that identity.

Participants also seemed to recognize the importance of Hip-Hop’s depiction of the spectrum of Blackness as another causal condition of authenticity. Participants expressed that witnessing the spectrum of artists in Hip-Hop has encouraged them to present more of their authentic selves in their personal and professional lives. Additionally, Green (2002) suggested that speech events, such as Hip-Hop and what it conveys, are used to create depictions of Blackness that are considered to be unique features of Black English.

Participants named various artists who encouraged them to embrace their authentic selves, thus reducing the desire to code-switch at work. These artists primarily included JAY-Z, Kanye West, Tupac, Kendrick Lamar, and OutKast. Many participants related to the way that many Hip-Hop artists navigated the experience of being Black in America and expressed that this assisted with their connection to the genre as well as lessons learned
from Hip-Hop. Harper and Jackson (2018) reported that Hip-Hop artists often invite their fans into an emotional monologue of the pain and frustration associated with being Black in America. Other participants’ responses fit with Bailey’s (2014) discussion of how Hip-Hop empowers listeners to implement change with both knowledge of self as well as knowledge of what is taking place in society.

Participants described how Hip-Hop informs various hobbies, chores, and approaches to self-care that help them to rejuvenate following a day of working in predominately White workspaces. Four of the participants expressed that Hip-Hop allowed them to decompress and potentially relate to similar situations expressed in the music. Bailey (2014) reported that Hip-Hop does much more than simply addressing issues of racism, oppression, and inequality; it also offers a philosophical perspective on urban life and provides real-world solutions for the disaffected.

**Hip-Hop and Identity Development**

The subthemes in this final category most closely address the research question related to the role Hip-Hop plays in the identity development of young Black professionals. Participants’ ongoing relationships to Hip-Hop and lessons learned from the genre, served as contributing factors to the development of their identities as Black individuals over the course of their lives.

Racial identity development theories examine the role that race and culture play in one’s personal and social identity with attention to privilege based on race and groups (Sanchez, 2013). Racial identity is defined as a sense of collective identity based on one’s perception that they share commonalities with their particular racial group (Helms, 1990). The essence of theories of Black racial identity is the transformation from a focus on
Whiteness to the psychological and existential process of becoming Black (Cross, 1971; Steinbugler, 2015; Vandiver et al., 2002).

Participants in the study communicated the impact that their relationship to Hip-Hop had on the development of their Black identities over time. Rubin (2016) suggested that Hip-Hop can be used to communicate a journey of authentic self-expression and identification. Petchauer (2009) posited that Hip-Hop has been utilized as a means of constructing Black racial identity. Similar to participant responses in the study, Harper and Jackson (2018) stated that expressions in Hip-Hop can serve as a means of processing the trauma and hardship associated with being the “other” in America. Hip-Hop empowers listeners to implement change with knowledge of self as well as knowledge of what is taking place in society (Bailey, 2014). There is no single factor that facilitates the transformation from a focus on Whiteness in racial identity models but participants’ experiences suggest that engaging with Hip-Hop is one stimulus that prompts listeners to reflect on systems of privilege and oppression and transition to a different understanding of what it means to be Black.

**Study Implications**

The study provides insights into the commonplace nature of code-switching by young Black professionals and the inner struggles that can accompany that behavior. Many of the factors that influenced the phenomenological experience of code-switching for young Black professionals in this study are supported by existing literature. However, the strategies that participants employed when working in those environments can be useful in understanding how to utilize Hip-Hop music and culture, and potentially other genres that encourage authentic presentation, to encourage authenticity for young Black professionals.
By learning from the specific contributing factors that participants in this study raised, as well as the proactive behaviors that they developed in response to experiences in environments characterized by code-switching, we can use these professionals as examples to help others learn and develop similar approaches to experience a more authentic presentation.

The resulting model suggests how participants used messages they gleaned from Hip-Hop to support presenting as their authentic selves in the workplace. Modeling from artists who were comfortable and celebratory of their Black identities, lyrics that reaffirmed the importance of being your ‘real self regardless of others,’ and the depiction of the spectrum of Blackness, which asserts that Black identity is not monolithic, were foundational in setting the stage for positive identity development. Not all Black professionals will listen to Hip-Hop in the same way as current participants. However, clinicians working with young Black professionals could lean on these affirmations of Black identity if they are depicted similarly in other genres. Using the themes associated with emphasizing an authentic way of being could allow young Black professionals to reflect upon and analyze their workplace presentations to find out what could be changed.

The contents of the model suggest a work environment of authenticity and inclusivity could potentially increase work life quality for Black workers. Employers could facilitate an environment that is conducive for authentic expression. This type of environment requires a certain level of awareness of unspoken or unwritten rules of conduct, bias, and hierarchical power within the organization or department (Creary et al., 2021). The openness of an organization or department to examining these issues is directly related to collaborating with employees to create an environment that encourages and rewards
authentic self-expression, rather than punishing it (Wong, 2019). Thus, employers are key in helping organizations manage their work environments in a manner that would support personal authenticity. Olzmann (2020) suggested it is imperative that we reassess our current strategies and reimagine workplace environments to provide an inclusive and equitable culture that is free of institutional barriers, affording equal opportunities for each individual to succeed, thrive, and be their whole self. Employers could benefit from checking in with employees of color and collecting feedback from employees, which could lead to increased understanding and engagement by employees.

**Future Directions**

The emergent data highlights numerous future directions to expand upon the current study. First, future research studies should expand upon the current study by utilizing a larger sample and increasing the diversity of demographics (e.g., diversity of education, age, geographical region, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity, and ability status) to explore whether other connections to Hip-Hop arose. The present study was conducted primarily with Black men; further research could seek out participants with other gender identities to diversify responses and explore whether some influential aspects of Hip-Hop differed across other gender identities. Comments from the two women reflected the importance of their intersecting identities as Black and female and future research could probe more specifically about intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and code-switching across multiple norm expectations.

Future research might include the incorporation of focus groups, rather than individual interviews, to offer opportunities to assess for more commonality across responses. Additionally, a future study could benefit from utilizing a longitudinal approach.
to collecting qualitative data, as this could assist with tracking participant’s experiences over time, rather than relying on recollections or assessing at a single time point. An example of this could include a daily diary method in which participants make notes every day rather than relying on memory. In this case it could be concerning a work event in which participants engaged in code switching, or altered their self-presentation for others and if they listened to particular songs or connected with Hip-Hop messages to counter any stress from the workplace. Also, incorporating participants in the data analysis process by having them review interview transcripts and summaries, or conducting focus groups regarding the initial findings could improve the stability and consistency of the findings by decreasing the potential for researcher bias to impact the interpretation of the data.

Future research might also continue to capture the experiences of young Black professionals working in predominately White workspaces and explore potential differences among types of workplaces (i.e., technology, business, education, natural sciences). It may prove beneficial to implement qualitative and quantitative studies in which opportunities for discussions and conversations with respondents can be offered. Studies aimed at addressing experiences of young Black professionals should be informed by specific and detailed accounts from this population to develop appropriate and culturally sensitive recommendations. Additional efforts may be required to develop culturally appropriate and valid measures for young Black professionals’ experiences in the workplace.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to this study include limits to external and internal validity. The lack of external validity is the inability to generalize the findings of this study to other groups, populations, or individuals because the results represent only the words and experiences of
young Black professionals in predominately White workspaces. Although it is never a goal of qualitative methods to state objective truths within a phenomenon, or to generalize the results (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007), the findings of this study are limited in application to the study’s participants. Therefore, future research, as discussed in the aforementioned section, is needed to support or disconfirm the initial findings of this study. Another limitation of this study involves the aspect of internal validity. The stability and reliability of the results of this study could have been increased had the participants been involved in verifying the data analysis for accuracy of their intentions. Participant verification was not used in this study’s research process. Involving participants in the data analysis process could potentially strengthen future qualitative research of the topic.

Another limitation of this study involves potential interviewer bias. Although measures were taken to avoid skewing the data collection and analysis, it is likely that some aspect of the bias of the researcher interacted with the research process. One aspect to consider is the interview protocol itself, perhaps the interviewer’s positive biases toward Hip-Hop prevented the participants from endorsing more of the negative aspects of Hip-Hop. All of these limitations are aspects for consideration and caution in future research.

The present study also has several strengths. First, the study was informed and conducted by a young Black professional who intentionally centered the voices of young Black professionals to allow their lived experience to shape the data, which then informed the recommendations for future research and culturally specific treatment. Additionally, by utilizing a sample of young Black professionals who work in predominately White workspaces characterized by code-switching, the research begins to address a gap in the literature to establish the inauthenticity linked to code-switching or other curated self-
presentations at work and how re-connecting to one’s Black identity through a musical genre so intimately associated with Black culture can be restorative.

**Conclusion**

This study focused on the experiences of seven young Black professionals working in predominately White workspaces. The participants’ responses in this study suggest that the experiences and subjective feelings toward code-switching can range from accepting and understanding its utility to wishing that it were not necessary. It is with humble appreciation of the participants’ courage to share their workspace experiences that this research has been completed.

The results of this study suggest that the topic of young Black professionals’ experiences in predominately White workspaces is a worthwhile topic for continued research. The findings further suggest that the relationship to Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop culture was an important factor in the lives and identity development of the participants. Lastly, the results indicate potential connections between Hip-Hop and Black racial identity (Petchauer, 2009), code-switching (Wingfield, 2010; 2015), and the restorative role of Hip-Hop (Bailey, 2014). It is this researcher’s hope that as more is understood about the impact of code-switching, that all young Black professionals’ workplace experiences can be as fulfilling and authentic as possible.
References


Appendix A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE

1. What is your understanding of code-switching in the workplace?
   a. How much code-switching do you do in the workplace?
   b. What function does it serve for you?
   c. What are your attitudes toward code-switching?
   d. If negative, what have you done to address your perception?

2. How often do you use BE in the workplace, if at all?
   a. If yes, what is your comfort level with doing so? Who do you use BE around?
      How do you decide when, where, and who to use BE around?
   b. What are your attitudes toward BE?

3. How does your identity as a young Black professional and your encounters with power, privilege, and microaggressions impact the level of code-switching you implement at work?
   a. Describe your relationship with your boss and colleagues? Elaborate on interactions with them.
   b. How do you typically respond to a racial issue that arises at work?

4. Please tell me a little bit about your relationship to Hip-Hop music:
   a. Follow up: When did you start? Who introduced you? What are the circumstances in which you listen to Hip-Hop?
   b. Follow up: When did you start? Who introduced you? What are the circumstances in which you listen to Hip-Hop?
   c. Do you associate Hip-Hop music with any aspects of your personality? Identity (as a Black person, as an employee?)

5. How do you include Hip-Hop into your down time/hobbies/ self-care?
   a. What benefits, if any, does Hip-Hop have during this time?

6. How do you view your identity?
   a. Follow up: What are your most salient identities?
   b. What does your identity as a young Black professional mean to you? To how you present yourself in formal settings? Informal settings?
   c. How has your view of yourself as a young Black person changed over time?
   d. How has Hip-Hop contributed to the way you present yourself in informal settings? Formal settings?

7. How has Hip-Hop impacted the way you express yourself?
   a. To what degree has Hip-Hop informed the way you speak or dress?
   b. How comfortable do you feel with utilizing language or fashion choices inspired by Hip-Hop in the workplace?
      i. If not, what prevents you from doing so?

8. What artists or lyrics have encouraged you to challenge how you view Black identity and expression?

9. How has Hip-Hop impacted/influenced your attitudes or beliefs about society?

10. Who do you admire in the Hip-Hop world in particular? How so?
a. Follow up: Can you remember your first hip-hop tape/cd? Who do you respect in the Hip-Hop community, why?

11. Has Hip-Hop opened any doors for you? If so, which and how?
   a. Follow up: has your love/knowledge of hip hop allowed to you experience things you would have otherwise not experienced had it not been for the music?

12. What, if anything have you learned from Hip-Hop music and culture?
   a. Follow up: What does hip-hop mean to you? What does it mean to people in your life? What messages are available to you in Hip-Hop music that you did not learn in school or home? Do any of the lyrics reflect your life experience? The experiences of your community?

13. What memories (positive and negative) do you have of Hip-Hop and your adolescence?
   a. Follow up: How have you used Hip-Hop to navigate your life?

Additional questions may include, but are not limited to:

- What Hip-Hop artists, groups, or lyrics do you identify with or relate to?
- What elements of Hip-Hop do you find to be empowering?
- What have you learned from Hip-Hop?
- What aspects of Hip-Hop do you associate with your identity/personality?
- How does Hip-Hop relate to your expression of self?
- Do you feel connected to any of your coworkers? If so, who? Describe them?
- How often do you engage in BE? At work? In other settings?
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Consent for Research Participation

Title: Hip-Hop & Professionalism

Researcher(s): Re’Sean Jetson, M.S.E., University of Memphis
Suzanne Lease, Ph.D., University of Memphis

Researchers Contact Information: rjhsns74@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 8-12 people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider

Voluntary Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not by taking part in an interview with the primary investigator. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to examine specific concerns related to young Black professionals in predominantly White professional work settings (defined as a workplace characterized by more White employees than those who identify as people of color), the experience of codeswitching at work, and the role Hip-Hop might have on identity development for young Black professionals.

Duration: It is expected that your participation in the interview will be approximately 45 minutes.

Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to respond to questions in a semi-structured interview format about your experiences in predominantly White workspaces, the impact of code-switching, and your relationship with Hip-Hop, as well as a brief questionnaire reflecting on personal, workplace, and coworker demographics.

Risk: Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include recalling previous potentially uncomfortable events with coworkers and employers. If you experience distress due to recalling the workplace event, please contact local mental health resources.
**Benefits:** Some of the benefits that may be expected include personal reflection of your responses to coworkers and employers in a professional setting. The findings of this study may provide information for training programs regarding the role and impact that professional standards have on young Black professionals in predominantly White work settings.

**Alternatives:** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is not to participate.

Who is conducting this research?
Re’Sean Johnson, a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Memphis, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology & Research is in charge of the study. His faculty advisor is Dr. Suzanne Lease. There will be no other research team members assisting during the study. No research team members have any significant financial interest or conflict related to the research.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose is to add to the literature regarding the impact of code-switching in professional settings on young Black professionals working in predominantly White workplace settings. You are being invited to participate because you have been identified as a young Black professional who works in a predominantly White workplace and consumes Hip-Hop daily.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview regarding experiences you have had in relation to other young Black professionals. This interview may be completed on any device that has access to internet and Zoom. The interview will be recorded so that your responses can be grouped with those from other participants and common themes can be identified. You may skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and can stop at any time.

What happens to the information collected for this research?
Information collected for this research will be used to publish/present the results. No identifying information will be collected or utilized for the purposes of this study.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?
We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Data will be collected via a semi-structured interview format on an online videoconferencing platform (Zoom) and no identifying information will be collected. You may choose a pseudonym for the interview and subsequent data analysis. Data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Individuals and organizations that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. The individual and organization include the Institutional Review Board at the University of Memphis.

What other choices do I have besides participating in this research?
Participation is voluntary. If you do not want to be in the study, then you do not have to participate.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?
It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. You may also end your participation at any time simply by discontinuing your involvement in the interview. However, if you have completed the interview and decide to withdraw from the study,
your results will not be included in the project. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?
There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?
You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?
You may direct questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study to the investigator, Re’Sean Johnson at rjhnsn74@memphis.edu or Dr. Suzanne Lease at slease@memphis.edu. You may also ask Re’Sean Johnson any questions prior to the start of the interview. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu.

I have read the information about the study. I understand that I will be asked whether I have read the information and agree to participate at the beginning of the interview.
Appendix C

Example of Participant Recruitment Email

What's up (Participant Name)!

Thank you for your interest in the study about Hip-Hop and young Black professionals. This study is being conducted by Re’Sean Johnson at the University of Memphis.

Participation includes a 45min-one hour interview with questions geared toward your experiences in the workplace and with Hip-Hop music. The interview will be conducted via the Zoom platform in a one-on-one virtual setting format with the principal investigator.

To qualify for the study, participants must:

- Identify as Black or African American
- Be between the ages of 18-32
- Listen to hip-Hop on a daily basis
- Work in predominately White workspaces.

There will be no formal compensation associated with the study, however, the societal benefits of discovering what could be beneficial for assisting young Black professionals in predominately White workplaces should be considered.

If you agree to participate in the study, please respond with your typical weekly availability so that we may begin the process of setting up a time to interview.

Please see the attached informed consent document regarding additional information about this study. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please contact me at rjhnsn74@memphis.edu.

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Re'Sean Johnson
Principal Investigator
*Doctoral Candidate*
The University of Memphis