PRODUCING THE CAUSE: BRANDED SOCIAL JUSTICE, HIP-HOP, AND THE PROMOTIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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by
Chenjerai Kumanyika

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The dissertation of Chenjerai Kumanyika was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Matthew P. McAllister  
Assistant Graduate Program Chair  
Professor of Communications  
Dissertation Co-Advisor  
Co-Chair of Committee

C. Michael Elavsky  
Associate Professor of Communications  
Dissertation Co-Advisor  
Co-Chair of Committee

Matthew Jordan  
Associate Professor of Communications

Nicole Webster  
Associate Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education  
Civic and Youth Development

Marie Hardin  
Professor of Communications  
Associate Dean for Undergraduate and Graduate Education

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Many contemporary forms of culturally based civic engagement—including what might be called “hip-hop” activism—blur the lines between entertainment, activism, and corporate efforts. Such civic and cultural activities prompt several questions: What constitutes effectual communicative action in the contemporary public sphere? What are the limits of hip-hop activism and branding in helping organizations respond to the contradictory pressures of the promotional public sphere? What dimensions of meaning, participation, advocacy, protest, and human relationship slip through the brand’s dynamic processes of enclosure? Ultimately, what is the social and cultural significance of different forms of hip-hop activism in the age of social media and branding?

This dissertation explores these issues and others through a comparative case-study of the social-change efforts of two organizations, 1Hood and Street King (SK). While the organizations under analysis operate on very different understandings of what constitutes substantive social change, they both deploy heavy use of social media, the rhetoric of “movement,” the promotional capital of hip-hop celebrities, the language and techniques of branding, and the communicative tools of the hip-hop genre.

1Hood is a Pittsburgh-based, media savvy, grassroots coalition led by political hip-hop artists Paradise “the Architect” Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith. The coalition uses the texts and tactics of hip-hop activism to address a variety of injustices including local and national police brutality and murder, economic inequality, unequal media representation, and other civil rights issues. Simultaneously, local and national political issues serve as platform for the “hip-hop careers” of both artist/activists. The intentional development of
Hood as a brand assists these artists in mobilizing the efforts of an ideologically diverse range of local and national organizations, but also may complicate its relationship with other constituent organizations working on similar goals.

Alternatively, SK offers a model that its founders claim will eliminate the need for “inefficient” progressive coalitions like 1Hood. Associated with Hip-Hop artist and entrepreneur Curtis “50 Cent,” and a brand of energy drink, SK promises to donate 1 meal to a child in Africa for each energy drink sold. The company partners with the U.N. World Food Program and claims to be an example of “conscious” philanthro-capitalism at work. In addition to working to overcome the inherent contradictions of corporate, “bling” philanthropy, the brand is also strongly tied to Jackson's entertainment career rebranding.

After exploring theoretical concepts related to the promotional public sphere, the brand commodity, promotional capital, and constitutive rhetoric, this study uses a combination of political economy, textual analysis, interviews and participant observation to examine and compare the historical and ideological origins, specific branding practices, creative and cultural work, and constitutive rhetoric of the two cases.

The study argues that conceiving of complex sets of social relations as brands helps activists, entertainers, and corporate actors to gain leverage in the promotional public sphere. But the promotional mandate and discourse of the brand can quickly become predatory and all encompassing, foreclosing critical questions, fully democratic participation and alternative solutions to important social challenges.
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Chapter 1

Branded Hip-Hop Activism: Justice or “Just Capitalism”

January 10, 2013 marked an important mini-victory for the hip-hop fueled Justice For Jordan Miles campaign. Gary L. Lancaster, U.S. District Chief Judge for the City of Pittsburgh, announced that four police officers charged in the brutal beating and unwarranted arrest of Jordan Miles would face a new civil trial later that year (Lord, 2013). The incident occurred nearly three years earlier, and the first civil trial had resulted in a hung jury on accusations that the police beat and falsely arrested Mr. Miles. The decision to re-open the case was the result of three years of protest and legal maneuvers. Central to these efforts was an organization called 1Hood Media whose two-man team consisted of Jasiri “X” Smith and Paradise Gray. 1Hood Media was instrumental in influencing the leadership of the Alliance for Police Accountability (APA)—formed to address this incident—and for supporting the efforts of the APA and Miles’s family in a variety of ways. Their work included organizing marches and rallies via social media, blogging about the campaign, and other strategies of raising awareness.

In addition, 1Hood Media’s use of “hip-hop activism” (Tucker, 2005) was also an important component of the campaign. One such key hip-hop-oriented tactic was the production and distribution of a video called Jordan Miles, which provided a narrative of the case and called for an investigation. Jasiri “X” Smith wrote the song and 1Hood Media worked with youth in Pittsburgh to write, shoot and distribute the video. Uploaded
to YouTube in July 2011, the video became a central text of the campaign and was reposted on blogs throughout the United States.

In addition to contributing to awareness of the case, the video also helped Smith’s burgeoning career as a hip-hop artist and activist. Smith performed the song at a variety of national events ensuring that the case’s visibility lived beyond the short time frame of a typical news cycle. No one would argue that hip-hop was solely responsible for the decision to reopen the trial, but there is little question that the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign is an example of the ways that hip-hop activism may affect social justice efforts. Here, hip-hop was used by local artists to keep attention on an issue in their community, and to pressure the city to enact democratic judicial practices.

But this example illustrates only one form of hip-hop fueled civic engagement, and can be contrasted to another example that began at about the same time. This second effort was on a grander scale, and involved an international issue, a much more well known artist, and the involvement of powerful organizations. A hip-hop influenced effort aimed at “fighting hunger” was launched in August 2011 by hip-hop artist and entrepreneur Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson and advertising executive turned social entrepreneur Chris Clarke. Clarke and Jackson had unveiled a new brand, Street King (now SK), and a branded product, SK Energy Shots, as the first strike in the “Just One Movement.” For each SK Energy “shot” sold, the company committed to donate a meal to a hungry person. After a period of negotiation, SK was able to secure a partnership with the United Nations World Food Program (WFP). SK, its parent company Pure Growth Partners (PGP), and several of Curtis Jackson’s music industry affiliates began an aggressive social media campaign involving YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and SK’s
own customized rewards-based platforms. By December 2011, the campaign had donated about 3.5 million meals according to WFP spokespersons. At the promotional website skenergyshots.com, 50 Cent is quoted as saying, “It’s our mission with SK Energy to really change children’s lives around the world.”

Speaking at the Chopra Foundation’s “Sages and Scientists” conference on March 5th, 2012, Clarke discussed the concept of “Just Capitalism” as a basis for philanthropic effort as well as “a critical movement in this world”:

I don't care where you live, what side of the fence you vote, I don't believe governments have the capability and they certainly haven't been showing it over the last number of decades, to take this world in a certain direction…the nonprofits can't fix this world.

He goes on to explain that he and his partners at the World Bank and the United Nations “crunched the numbers” and figured out that it would take $560 billion a year to eliminate extreme poverty. According to their calculations, these funds could be raised if businesses gave .8 percent of revenue away to a registered charity annually. Clarke spoke passionately on this issue:

I don't believe government is capable of fixing the world’s issues. So what I believe is we need to get business to have a heart and soul. And I don't think business, I think we all agree that business does have a, uh, a soul right now and so how do we do it? How do we inspire the future entre-, uh, you know the future leaders, the entrepreneurs to have a heart and realize that it is an obligation and a privilege in business to drive this agenda and give. ‘Cause the world needs its heroes and as (inaudible) was talking about superheroes, and I am certainly not saying that business people are superheroes, but we have an obligation to behave in a different way.

Following his speech, Clarke played a short video clip called "the business effect" (“Our Philosophy,” 2011) that outlined how just capitalism—led by what he called the
“Just One Movement”—would eliminate extreme poverty. After screening the video, Clarke discussed his new business partnership with Curtis 50 Cent Jackson.

Both the Justice for Jordan Miles and the SK campaigns, together with the organizations supporting them, can be considered instances of “hip-hop” activism. Each instance speaks to its audiences through the symbolic languages, personalities, and publicity strategies of the hip-hop genre. In addition, each of these cases involves some form of humanitarian or social justice action, heavy use of social media platforms, and brand-focused promotional strategies. But it is also clear that these activists’ efforts took center stage in their musical careers, providing them with significant promotional benefits and new audiences. Branding also played a central role in these organizational efforts. The artist/celebrities were able to mobilize their previous supporters in service of the social efforts they worked for while also enhancing their brand statuses with the reputational capital of civic engagement. Simultaneously, the brands were conceptual tools that figured into the emerging media narratives about hunger, philanthropy, police brutality, and hip-hop. Given the many similarities, and, as will be discussed, significant differences, between these two cases, there are several important questions that can be raised about these campaigns. This dissertation explores these questions through a comparative study of the work of each of the two organizations, 1Hood Media and SK, respectively, as cases of branded hip-hop activism.
Branded Hip-Hop Activism In the Promotional Public Sphere

The primary contributions of this study involve much more than the hip-hop activism campaigns under analysis. One such contribution is a reminder that sustainable democratic progress toward social justice requires the development and maintenance of dynamic, diversely populated, and critically informed public spheres. This is to say that while those interested in a more equal world must work toward specific communicative or material outcomes, this must be done with a commitment to preserving the variety of democratic capacities and critical literacies that every community needs in order to address its own social challenges. Of course, this is easier said than done.

The cases described in this study reveal an inescapable, promotional hall of mirrors in which categories such as activism, entertainment, non-profit, and for profit can often constrain our understanding of the underlying tactical instincts of actors in the social world. This is because social justice efforts, humanitarian efforts, and artistic careers are increasingly contingent on submission to various regimes, logics, and technologies of promotion and audience mobilization. The accumulation of what I call promotional capital is therefore an increasingly mandatory “first step” that blurs the distinctions between these areas of life activity and brings different kinds of actors into relations of apparent mutual benefit. These regimes and technologies are far from neutral. They require would be participants in the public sphere to understand, construct, and commodify themselves to varying degrees, according to the logic of cultural gatekeepers. As this study will reveal, this logic is often embedded in the platforms of social media.
But an equally important contribution of the study is the fact that there are many actors who feel that they must engage intentionally with this state of affairs. The urgency of their situation does not allow for theoretical speculation about a space outside of the promotional public sphere. Rather, they feel that they must accept its terms and navigate the vulnerabilities and hypocrisies of engagement, extracting moments of justice—such as the Jordan Miles trial and retrial—that may only delay or even disguise the advance of exploitative systems.

Amidst a wealth of descriptive information, this study contributes its most valuable insights with respect to four main questions in critical-cultural communications, and cultural studies en route to illustrating these larger conclusions. These four areas are:
1) The role of corporate philanthropic campaigns versus public sector oriented radical critiques of the status quo in addressing social inequality. 2) The implications of commercial culture, specifically promotional culture, and branding on the public sphere. 3) The nature of cultural work and career in such an environment. And, 4) the manner in which new media (specifically social media) has changed the character of democratic participation and activism in contemporary society. To say that this study contributes to these areas is not to suggest that the following pages deal with each of them comprehensively. Rather, in the context of a close look at the case studies, this project has something to offer more generally to the bodies of literature in each one of these areas.

The first of the aforementioned tensions are implicated in my choice to use the term “hip-hop activism” to describe both a strongly pro-capitalist philanthropic effort, and a set of efforts that protests capitalism as an oppressive force. There is a significant
body of literature that offers insights into what was meant by the term “hip-hop activism” when it first began to be used (Bynoe, 2004; Chang, 2007; Kitwana, 2002; Tucker, 2005; Watkins, 2005). Early uses of the term were closely related to the term “hip-hop politics,” and referred to a wide range of political efforts enacted by generations of citizens who grew up with hip-hop music as it became a popular and widespread cultural form. These forms of civic engagement often employed hip-hop performance, or other aesthetic elements of the genre as part of their political strategies. Additionally, these efforts often focused on issues that were articulated as being specifically relevant to the “hip-hop” generation including the prison-industrial complex and juvenile justice, as well as contemporary issues regarding education, health, environmental justice, racism, and sexism. Hip-hop activism often focused on mobilizing the hip-hop generation around these issues using the mechanism of electoral politics.

But the emergence of hip-hop philanthropic efforts such as “The Water Project,” led by Jay-Z and celebrated by Oprah Winfrey, Yele Haiti, led by Wyclef, SK, led by Curtis Jackson, and many others (News One, 2011) suggest that a new class of typically mainstream hip-hop artists are choosing different methods to engage with social inequalities. This is not to suggest that earlier forms of hip-hop activism have gone away or even become less common, but they must now compete with efforts by more widely promoted hip-hop artists, and with a less resistant vision of hip-hop’s role in the public sphere.

I wish to embrace this problematic notion regarding what constitutes hip-hop activism at the outset as central to this project. Doing so allows for the exploration of normative claims about the degree to which private sector-fueled philanthropy versus
public sector political processes should take center stage in addressing social inequalities. This study reveals that the consequences of these kinds of strategies as communicative practices cannot be separated from their overall impact as societal interventions.

In order to grapple with this tension it was necessary to envision a set of standards or ideals against which the realities of each case could be measured. What are some of the elements of a sustainable and democratic approach to social transformation, and what kinds of interventions can therefore meet the definition of activism towards that end? Works such as Edwards (2009), Garnham (1992), and Habermas (1991), comment in different ways on the necessary components of a dynamic, sustainable and democratic public sphere, and their insights were instructive in that regard. These three authors in particular offer useful insights on the way growth capitalist markets both enable and constrain the development of wide participation and free speech within democratically oriented communicative systems. The nuances of these relationships thus suggests that the business of democracy cannot be left fully to the businesses of corporate capitalism.

Closely related to the aforementioned questions about what counts as activism are questions regarding what counts as empowerment. While the specific term “empowerment” was not a central feature of either the 1Hood or SK campaigns, the differences between the two campaigns are very much related to a long history of debates about empowerment. These debates are particularly well developed in the literatures on development and feminism (Lundy, 2011). With development issues, a variety of scholars have responded to the problematic use of the term to describe top-down efforts in which empowerment is seen as something that can be given to particular populations from other nations that are empowered. This kind of definition was challenged by
conceptions of empowerment that focused on sustainable strategies that could help marginalized regions and populations build capacities and increase democratic participation (Oakley, 2001). Additionally, according to Batliwala (2007), several third-world feminists began to forge definitions of empowerment based on political transformation and “conscientization” (Freire, 1970), based partially on their critical analysis and rejection of western interventionist strategies. However in the early 1990s the idea of capacity-building became conflated with industrial growth and the spread of capitalist markets. Definitions of empowerment that included recognizing and challenging the disempowering structural effects of gender, race, and class hierarchies gradually took backstage to solutions in favor of the market and status quo. Organizations such as 1Hood Media and Occupy Wall Street can be seen as attempts to reposition critical consciousness, democratic participation, and structural change as central to collective conceptions of empowerment.

In order to understand other ideologies, namely those that inform the SK “movement’s” philanthropic aspects and the philosophies of Chris Clarke, it was important to engage literature on the history of corporate social responsibility, corporate philanthropy and their relationship to corporate public relations (Carroll, 1999; Dalzell, 2013; Ewen, 2008; Soskis, 2010; I. L. Stole, 2008). This literature helped to familiarize me with the long tradition of using corporate endeavors to manage public perception, thereby creating the impression that regulation or other forms of intervention are not necessary. Closely related to these ideas were the practices of cause related marketing, purchase-triggered donation, and other forms of commodity activism that attempt to explicitly link giving to profits rather than to do this work through foundations (Earle,
The SK campaign was connected to the specific legacy of philanthro-capitalism which focused on development and humanitarian work in the global south (Edwards, 2010; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; “The birth of philanthrocapitalism,” 2006; Warah, 2008). Many of these works either supported or critiqued the general assumptions of modernization while also updating them in light of more recent efforts with similar colonialist implications. My study primarily explores the communicative aspects of these strategies. Research on development politics helped me to understand what kinds of questions might need to be raised in the context of a public communicative discussion about eradicating hunger and other manifestations of extreme poverty and wealth inequality.

A second category of issues, also central to this study, relates to the consequences of the intensification of promotional aspects of the public sphere. In the context of this study, this issue raises several other questions, namely: how does the growing importance of the need to project identities (individual, organizational, institutional) and mobilize audiences shape the content of communication as representation and ritual? How, do social actors navigate this concern in practice? To what extent has this transformed the meanings of “activism” and “work” in the cultural industries, and the social locations where they intersect?

Addressing these questions required an engagement with literature on promotional culture, branding, and cultural work. Authors such as Knight, Powell and Wernick describe the ways that contemporary promotional culture pressures both civil society and the public sphere, and this is discussed at length in chapter 2. In my initial
observations of these campaigns, I immediately noticed that various practices of branding figured significantly into the political efforts of each organization. A number of previous studies have identified and discussed the roles and functions that brands play in contemporary society. Terms such as “Brand Society” (Kornberger, 2010), “New Branded Worlds” (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010), and “Brandscape” (Carah, 2010) all speak to the widespread salience of the brand concept. Brands occupy the odd ontological status of being highly recognizable and observable, but also increasingly difficult to define. The definitions offered by a variety of brand scholars might be categorized as follows: brands can be understood as communicative structures. In this role, brands communicate certain aesthetics or messages about a product or company outwardly to consumers but they also may facilitate intra-organizational communication. Additionally, brands may also be constitutive of social groups, constructing and facilitating communication between members of a “brand community.”

Brands, then, are semiotic tools or platforms that serve a variety of purposes and facilitate signification in a variety of ways and in a variety of directions (Arvidsson, 2006; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004). Research on brand communities suggests that brands can play an important role as resources not just for the transmission of, but also for the creation of individual, communal, and cultural identities. In turn, such communities contribute to the construction of brand meaning, as both Arvidsson (2006) and Carah (2010) argue. But brands can also be used as tools to help organizational management, providing a framework for certain kinds of decision-making and supporting the ideologies of an organizational community, culture, or common purpose.

Finally, brands can be bearers of a variety of different types of value. En route to
creating brand equity for shareholders, branding techniques invite organizations and individuals to understand and present themselves in ways that will highlight their promotional value to key gatekeepers in the promotional public sphere. In this sense, branding helps actors navigate the promotional public sphere by creating a specific type of capital that has to do with audience mobilization. I call this form of value promotional capital, and this study offers many examples of its circulation. Additionally, this study differs from many of the aforementioned studies in its deep focus on two examples of organizational branding. This narrow focus allows for richer empirical data regarding how brands work in practice.

Another consequence of the promotional culture is the use of celebrities and high profile cultural workers in relation to corporate brand management, various humanitarian causes, social protest, and cultural production. To engage with this it is necessary to work from and develop the concept of celebrity itself. Such an unpacking may help to clarify how celebrity itself contributes to the other nodes of this system, and how it also works to constitute it. Among the many studies that have explored the concept of celebrity, Richard DeCordova’s *Picture Personalities* (2001) stands out as especially thorough in comparison to earlier works on the subject. Analyzing the “emergence and functioning” of the star system between 1907 and the early twenties, DeCordova reviews previous work on the star system (Dyer & McDonald, 1979; Dyer, 1979, 1998, 2004; Hampton, 1931; Jacobs, 1939; Kindem, 1982; Ramsaye, 1926; Slide, 1994; A. Walker & Rouben Mamoulian Collection, Library of Congress, 1970). Drawing on these accounts, he demonstrates how discursive and industrial practices create the identity of the star. A crucial methodological insight in DeCordova’s work is to focus on the star system as
something that emerged from industrial tensions, while also recognizing its individualizing tendencies. Since that time, work on celebrity has expanded to include “the historical pattern of the celebrity,” the public persona as text, the interaction with and influence of celebrity on the public sphere, and the celebrity industry (including the management and promotion of fame). David P. Marshall’s *Celebrity Culture Reader* (D. Marshall, 2011) includes a sampling of these perspectives from many prominent scholars on the subject. Finally, there is Graeme Turner’s widely influential work, *Understanding Celebrity* (2004). While DeCordova’s work is historical and Marshall’s collection covers a wide range of scholarly approaches to celebrity, Turner’s book focuses squarely on the production of celebrity as a commodity.

Taken together, these works begin to provide the tools to understand how celebrity functions as part of a system that has developed historically, within the context of a larger system of media production. Furthermore, they begin to look at aspects of the persona of celebrity and the discourses that construct their identity and constitute their usage. All of these factors are necessary to understand how high profile celebrities and high profile cultural workers become important resources in these campaigns and how various levels of celebrity influence might figure into the production of the campaigns under analysis.

Discussions of celebrity activism involve weighing the potential benefits of the widespread attention and resources that celebrity- and artist-led campaigns can mobilize against the political and cultural concerns that many onlookers have about these efforts. One frequently stated concern about celebrity-led philanthropic efforts is whether the funds raised from various efforts actually go to help the disenfranchised populations in
need. Between 2010 and 2012, Wyclef Jean’s Yele Haiti organization, the celebrity-connected and social media-fueled Invisible Children 2012 campaign, among other efforts, faced this criticism and gave a fairly extensive accounting of their finances in response (Watkins, 2011). While it is necessary for philanthropic organizations to use ethical and efficient accounting practices, excessive focus on this problem can draw public attention away from more fundamental issues. In response to a range of criticism leveled against their “Kony 2012” campaign, Invisible Children CEO Ben Keesey focused on refuting claims about financial misdeeds while mostly eliding other pertinent critiques of their strategy and representation in the video (Rainey & Benzinger, 2012). In other words, even if the financial practices of Invisible Children can withstand scrutiny, there are perhaps even more fundamental concerns that deserve attention.

Another category of concerns about high profile artists and activism involves the sincerity or psychological motivation of the cultural workers themselves. Does Angelina Jolie truly care about human sexual trafficking? Does Curtis Jackson truly care about kids in Africa? Similarly, some critiques focus narrowly on the psychological predisposition of citizens who only seem eager to embrace social change initiatives when the primary act of activism is shopping or other immediately self-gratifying modes of consuming or performing.

To be clear, this study does focus on issues of civic identity and the ways that corporate-humanitarian or protest efforts position citizens in relation to social problems. But rather than being concerned with “does the celebrity care?” questions, that seem mainly aimed at constructing celebrities or corporations as hypocritical or inauthentic, this project is focused on how cultural workers articulate and negotiate their position
within complex systems of power in their production of cause-related texts. Additionally, the roles of artists in these efforts are themselves meaningful texts within texts. Likewise, concerns about the incentives of organizations should be given at least as much emphasis as concerns about the authentic civic feeling of individuals.

One concern that motivates my interest in these problems is the emergence of certain high profile celebrity campaigns as increasingly dominant at the expense of other possibilities for connecting cultural work with social causes. I am particularly interested in the tendency of these types of activism to reduce complex geopolitical processes and problems into simplistic narratives. This critique aims partially at unpacking the ways that the narratives of media texts, organizational relationships, and production practices of these campaigns position corporate brands, civic organizations, protest movements, artists, and citizens in relationship to social problems.

While exploring different approaches to the concept of celebrity is necessary for the proposed study, the study is more squarely focused on gaining a richer conception of the cultural work that produces texts connected to the social justice efforts of artists and celebrities. Media scholars have revealed the ways that an understanding of production processes contributes to deeper literacy with the political economies and meanings of media texts (Kellner & Share, 2005). However, in truth, we may not be able to understand other aspects of the phenomenon such as contemporary social activism, or even corporate activity, without a better understanding of cultural work. One reason for this is that cultural/creative work has come to constitute a central component of several areas of modern life. This includes many areas that are not thought of as primarily artistic or cultural. Artists of various types are central to the production of a variety of
commodities. Design features and advertisements contribute significantly to their exchange value and even constitute their use value. In media industries, techniques of propaganda and audience assemblage and aesthetic design that were honed in art worlds have now become staples in all types of communication, not the least of which is political communication. The acknowledgement of the ubiquity of cultural work and its potential implications has been a central contribution of research in the creative industries tradition (Beck, 2003). The high profile of celebrity activist efforts and the extent to which they inform less well-known efforts suggest that the cultural work of producing images, sounds, and audiences is at the heart of social activism in the contemporary public sphere. Additionally, a more grounded perspective of cultural work in entertainment industries opens the door to understanding how this work changes based on the involvement of social causes.

Therefore, it is necessary to discuss some of the research that acknowledges the industrial context of cultural or creative work, but shifts the level of analysis toward the nature of cultural work as articulated through the conditions, lives, and perspectives of workers. Research in this tradition has begun to address several compelling questions. What are the conditions of work? How is production organized? How do workers understand their positioning in flexible and individualized creative management strategies? To what extent do workers experience autonomy? Is “good” work a possibility under a productive economy based largely on capitalist wage labor?

Finally, in relation to the aforementioned issues, these cases also raise important questions about the role that new media (primarily social media platforms in these cases)
plays in empowering or interpellating the efforts of social justice actors. This question is discussed in chapter 2 and taken up in a variety of ways throughout the rest of the study.

The Cases

In an attempt to speak to the aforementioned questions, this study focuses on the SK campaign, and various initiatives of 1Hood Media. As mentioned, SK Energy is an energy supplement brand launched in August 2011 by Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson, deceased Violator Management’s CEO, Chris Lighty, and Pure Growth Partners’ CEO, Chris Clarke. Street King then partnered with WFP and the marketing campaign of the beverage promises that a donation of one meal will be given away for each drink purchased.

SK was chosen because it offered an opportunity to study an integrated marketing campaign that operates at the intersection of a unique confluence of factors. The campaign brings together the large scale of Jackson’s influence in entertainment, the U.N. World Food Program’s authoritative presence in the humanitarian realm, and the corporate interests centering on the branded energy drink itself. While the campaign shares several features with other celebrity-led, development-focused initiatives, it is one of the few that has been led by a hip-hop artist and aimed at a hip-hop demographic. Additionally, the proposed title of Jackson’s long delayed album release, Street King Immortal, suggests that the campaign serves the dual function of branding the drink and rebranding Jackson’s celebrity persona. In the texts and accompanying “paratexts” (J. A. Gray, 2010) associated with the campaign, Jackson describes being changed by
witnessing the realities of hunger. Unlike the cases of Bono, George Clooney, Sean Penn, or other celebrities who built civic concern into their celebrity persona from early on, this case represents a dramatic shift for Jackson who has until recently maintained an exclusively individualist, and depoliticized image.

Finally, the SK campaign has made especially extensive use of social media. While there have been some offline promotions and events, the campaign was launched on Twitter and has generated significant traffic on that platform. The WFP Ambassadors webpage features a link to the SK Facebook page, implicating the non-profit organization directly in the marketing metrics related to the for-profit beverage, and points to other possibilities that deserve critical scrutiny. The campaign has also made use of user-generated content, inviting users to upload their own brand performances. All of these features constitute the campaign as an object of analysis that has much to contribute to discussions about branding, philanthropy, cultural work, and civic engagement in the contemporary public sphere.

The second case is 1Hood Media and its two central members, Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith. This case was chosen because it appears to exemplify a model of hip-hop activism very different from SK, one that involves radical protest and critique of the status quo. Like SK, however, 1Hood Media makes extensive use of social media. Through its prolific release of music videos on YouTube, 1Hood Media has established a national presence in the worlds of underground hip-hop and progressive activism. The organization has engaged with local and national movements against police brutality and local and national Occupy movements. However, it has also employed less directly
confrontational political strategies, such as media literacy workshops and community discussions.

As mentioned earlier, the decision to focus on these two campaigns was made in part based on their differences. The SK campaign is primarily a marketing campaign that emphasizes its purchase-triggered donation features. The celebrity of Curtis Jackson and the widespread influence of the WFP give the campaign a tremendous reach. In comparison, the scale of 1Hood seems small. Paradise Gray’s group, X-Clan, achieved international fame in the 1990s (“X Clan - Music Biography, Credits and Discography,” n.d.), and Jasiri “X” Smith gained considerable attention by the standards of a local underground act, but their level of celebrity is far more regional than Jackson’s. They have tapped into national movements such as Occupy the Hood and Occupy Wall Street, but they have also been close to more local efforts such as Occupy Pittsburgh and the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign. In these ways, we see significant differences that may help reveal important ideological and agentic characteristics about the range of such activity. The research questions that follow are therefore meant to elicit the data and analysis that guide the study’s contribution to the aforementioned areas and the questions that will be asked of each case.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What might citizens and researchers learn about the contemporary media/political environment in which these movements take place, and about their potential to produce various levels of social change in this environment?
In many ways, this is the broadest question motivating this study, as it establishes the basis for its scholarly and practical contributions. Some important dimensions of this question are addressed in Chapter 2, which lays out the theoretical framework that will be used to interpret the empirical evidence of civic engagement and cultural production in each case. Collectively, the subsequent research questions draw out the key empirical and analytical evidence needed to answer this initial question.

Research Question 2: What are the nature, incentives, and origins of the organizations behind these initiatives?

This question attempts to penetrate the vagueness of the term “hip-hop activism,” and understand what the organizational structures behind each respective effort are. In addition to identifying the principle actors in each case and the forms of value they reap from their investment in the organization, this will also provide a basis on which to assess what aspects of organizational structure or practices, representation, and resource distribution is affected by the structuring influence of particular activist/promotional strategies.

Research Question 3: How does the logic of branding influence each organization’s approach to its activist or humanitarian efforts?

There are many ways of understanding what the logic of branding is. This study approaches this question with a review of how other scholars have approached it and a subsequent exploration of what branding means in the context of each of these cases. One aspect of this involves the question, why are artist/celebrity and activist leaders of these initiatives motivated to brand them? Relatedly, what is the effect of branding when measured at various junctures of decision-making? An important underlying factor is
whether the technology of the brand really aids social efforts or whether it serves instead
to describe efforts as successes and to co-opt the value produced in these efforts for a
smaller subset of stakeholders.

Research Question 4: What are the central media texts created by these campaigns and
how are social inequalities, artist/activists, specific interventions, private and public
institutional actors, and the audience constructed within them?

Research Question 4.1: How do these representations flow from and contribute to the
logic of each hip-hop activist brand?

This question is approached through a consideration of how the audience is
rhetorically constituted as a subject in narratives that also involve other social
phenomena. Toward this end, specific texts will be deeply analyzed to support an
interpretation of the kinds of readings they make available, and the kinds of readings they
posit as more or less likely

Research Question 5: What kinds of cultural work go into the production of the
campaigns under analysis?

Research Question 5.1: How do the workers negotiate the relationship between art,
commerce, and civic engagement?

Exploring the differences and similarities across these organizations from the
perspective of workers allows for both practical and theoretical insights into the content
of cultural work and the potential sites of exploitation. The empirical data this question
elicits allows for a valuable exploration of the meaning of hip-hop careers, and social
justice activism in the contemporary settings of cultural production and public discourse.
These questions aim at fleshing out and critically reflecting on the term “produce” and the term “cause” in the phrase “producing the cause.”

**Research Design and Methods**

Why use a case study design? Yin (2003) has suggested that a case study design should be used when the phenomenon under investigation and what might be called the “epistemic interest” (Baptiste, 2004) meet several criteria. First, such a design is useful when the researcher seeks to ask “how” and “why” questions. This design may also be of use when the contextual conditions are both necessary to understanding the phenomenon in question and not fully distinct from it.

As such, I would like to argue that a contextual understanding is necessary when studying and comparing modes of activism. Various activist strategies can best be understood in reference to the organizations undertaking these strategies, in relation to the problems that they seek to address, and in the particular social and cultural moments in which they occur. Additionally, the richest insights about strategies of activism and their representations come from descriptions and reflection on data that seek to articulate the “hows” and “whys” of human practice discursively.

For example, in the SK campaign, my research questions focus on the ways the cultural work of entertainment organizations affects organizational relationships and creates particular representations of social justice problems. Therefore, texts such as the advertisements, news reports, tweets, and web pages generated by the campaign cannot be understood separately from the institutional contexts and agendas that produced them.
In a similar vein, the second case, which focuses on the activism of the 1Hood organization, operates as part of broader organizational efforts in Pittsburgh and across the country. 1Hood is responding to a political environment that is affected by the larger context of the social conditions in Pittsburgh and various controversial examples of violence by police. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed impossible, to address the full range of various politics touching these issues, the deep focus of a case study design will allow discussion of the social conditions that inspired 1Hood’s involvement. Other case studies from various organizational contexts have provided significant clues on how to address the problem of comparing different kinds of organizations (Basu, 1994). Those cases in which the true focus of the study is sets of human practices have been especially instructive.

Data Collection

In each case, differences in organizational structure and in my ability to gain access meant that different kinds of data were available and relevant for this study. In both cases, I reviewed online media related to the campaigns and conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews. In the case of 1Hood, I was able to conduct offline observation of events in which the organization and its stakeholders were involved.
Introductions

I conducted a total of six interviews for the SK campaign between June and December 2012. SK and Pure Growth Partners share an office in New York City, and I was able to schedule an interview on the premises by emailing and calling employees that I identified on linkedin.com and on the Pure Growth partners webpage. Similar research on the website for Nightline yielded the name of a photographer who had been hired to shoot images for the SK campaign during Curtis Jackson’s WFP-sponsored trip to Somalia and Kenya. Nightline was also present on the trip to document Jackson’s observation of WFP’s work. I was able to secure an interview with this person. I contacted the WFP directly and eventually secured an interview with a public relations spokesperson who was also responsible for coordinating celebrity relations. I had hoped that my some of my music industry contacts would assist me with the process of gaining access to influential actors in the campaign. This strategy proved less successful than I had hoped but it did yield two interviews. One of these interviews was with a top-level music executive at Shady/Interscope, an Interscope subsidiary to which Curtis Jackson is signed. This interview helped me gain perspective on how workers on the record label side understood the SK effort. The second music industry interview—the less useful of the two—was with a former business associate of Curtis Jackson. Because the SK campaign has a fairly high profile, there were also a fair amount of news and promotional interviews with Curtis Jackson, Chris Clarke, and other campaign members that I drew upon for my analysis. However, these were treated as what they are: produced texts. All

1 A list of the interviews and the interview questions are included in the appendices
of these interviews related to the SK campaign were useful, but my analysis of this case relies less on interviews and more on other kinds of data.

Interviews played a more central role in my analysis of 1Hood. In this case, I also interviewed six participants. Although the organization’s two central members, Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith, travel quite a bit, they are located in Pittsburgh and are easily accessible. Their interviews provided a wealth of information, but my goal was to triangulate their accounts with other sources in order to arrive at a more holistic view of the topics at hand. To that end, I also interviewed an additional original member of 1Hood’s coalition who is no longer directly affiliated with 1Hood Media. I spoke informally with several individuals who were members of the 1Hood coalition in its early form. I also interviewed the leader of a Pittsburgh-based male mentorship program, who has worked with and known members of 1Hood for many years prior to the start of the organization. He has also worked with the Heinz foundation in a decision-making capacity regarding grants that 1Hood received. Since 1Hood’s relationships to a variety of initiatives figure into the analysis, I also interviewed two members of Occupy Pittsburgh (one of whom was also a member of the Justice for Jordan Miles effort) and a remote, livestream producer for Occupy Wall Street’s New York location.

The Internet and Social Media as Sites of Research

Internet-based media texts were an important source of data related to both cases for two main reasons. Most importantly, in my preliminary research the Internet appears to be the primary distribution channel for the audio, visual, and written media texts of
these efforts. Second, while social media in particular are not the focus of this study, they have proven to be deeply woven into many of the aforementioned research questions. As such, internet documents became essential for understanding the interests of both the artists and the cause-related organizations, as well as the interests of other parties, such as advertisers.

There are several resources, scholarly and otherwise, that offer ways to think about the conceptualization, planning and execution of online data (Catanese, De Meo, Ferrara, Fiumara, & Provetti, 2011; Herring, 2004; Kozinets, 2009; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). These studies vary widely in terms of their scope, objects of analysis, and methodological assumptions. In addition to reflecting different disciplinary approaches, these differences also reflect the rapidly evolving nature of the social media world. New online platforms are constantly emerging, and past studies have tended to focus on the implications of specific applications. As a result, there is no broadly applicable template for this study. Therefore, I gained useful information by reviewing the methods sections of various studies that approached social media and other online spaces. These insights were combined to form an appropriate, coherent, systematic, and methodological approach for this study. Thus far, the best known comprehensive work on qualitative online methodology (and certainly the most relevant to this study) is Kozinets’s *Netnography* (2009). While Kozinets’s approach is more exclusively centered on ethnographic methods than the current study, there are several aspects of the book that inform this study.

With regard to data gathering, *Netnography* provides a useful history of approaches to researching online culture. For example, Kozinets identifies three types of
netnographic data: archival, elicited, and field note data. His suggestions about archival data may connect to the proposed study’s consideration of social media sites as texts, while the discussion of field data offers a way into understanding social media sites as sites of practice.

SK’s website, Facebook page, Twitter account, and YouTube page, the U.N. WFP websites, and Thisis50.com are all official online locations of the campaign, but its most public face might be Curtis Jackson’s Twitter account. Jackson, who has over 6 million followers and has tweeted consistently about the campaign since its launch, has stipulated that he will not respond to any tweets that do not include the SK hashtag. I gathered data from each of these sites for the period under analysis, between August 2011 and December 2012. There are several applications that assist filtering and analyzing the large amount of data from these platforms, which I have reviewed in order to select the best ones for this particular study.

In addition, I gathered as many news reports, press releases and news stories related to the campaign as possible. In addition to SK’s own site and Jackson’s site, Thisis50.com, I also monitored entertainment and news aggregation sites and collected articles from them as necessary, piecing together aspects SK’s history and brand narrative. One example of how these kinds of texts fit in is the third party and intra-campaign coverage of Jackson’s recent trips to Africa. My analysis focuses on how these texts construct Jackson, the problem, the solution, and even the audience/consumer/participant.

The strategy for 1Hood was similar. However, one difference between the cases is that as of this date, 1Hood does not have a central website. Rather, the organization’s
activities are distributed online primarily through the Facebook, Twitter, and blogging activities of Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith. Additionally, during the period under analysis, Jasiri “X” and 1Hood Media used YouTube as the primary location for most of their productions, but Jasiri “X” Smith also used sites like Bandcamp or iTunes for the release of some of his songs that were for sale. Many of the other organizations that 1Hood is involved with, such as the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign, have their own websites and social media pages and these were also valuable, although not central sources of data. Finally, an important part of the analysis focuses on the music videos, songs, commercials, and documentaries that the SK campaign produces. I also collected user-generated content that was uploaded in response to various calls from the campaign.

*Participant Observation*

There are several instances where participant observation supplements my analysis of 1Hood Media. I have conducted roughly 19 hours of participant observation at political/community events that 1Hood organized or supported. This included participant observation at a Justice for Jordan Miles Rally, at a closing event for 1Hood’s media literacy camp, and at the “netroots” progressive blogger/social media activism conference in Providence Rhode Island in June 2012.
Preview of chapters

Chapter 2 introduces and develops the concepts of the promotional public sphere, the brand commodity, and promotional capital. The chapter situates these developments at the locations of democratic discourse that necessitate this analysis. The central question that guides this chapter is, what is the promotional public sphere and how are brands and activism positioned within this setting and in relation to each other? The presence of cause-marketing and philanthro-capitalism mean that social justice action is increasingly connected to brand incentives. Another important development contributing to the concept of the promotional public sphere is that social media present us with new tools and metrics of media distribution and new related forms of value.

Chapter 2 also introduces the concept of the brand-commodities that help stakeholders negotiate the pressures of the promotional public sphere. The logic of these brand commodities is a crucial part of the analysis that frames this entire project. Robert Goldman’s (1992) formulation of abstraction, equivalence, and reification as consequences of commodification are reviewed theoretically in preparation for their application to the activist brand commodities under analysis. By pressuring organizations and individuals to invest more heavily in the technology of the brand commodity the promotional public sphere abstracts important activities in civil society from their contexts, creates false equivalencies between them and brand values, and ultimately presents them back to citizens in the reified forms of brands.

The value that is created is often circulated into promotional capital. This is an important form of value that circulates in the public sphere and whose production is
mediated by processes of commodification. Promotional capital involves an abstraction of the labor required to produce the audience-commodity and it is not necessary to convert promotional capital into financial capital in order for it to facilitate social exchanges.

Chapter 3 focuses on the specific background and details about the two case studies: SK and 1Hood Media. Essentially this chapter asks: What does the promotional public sphere look like in the context of the two cases under analysis? Who are the major actors in these cases and what were the contextual factors and incentives that resulted in the specific types of action that were taken? Ultimately, what happened? These questions are addressed by discussing the very different origins of two hip-hop activist brands. The origins of the SK campaign are explored by looking at the career of Curtis Jackson and Chris Clarke, the emergence of various discourses and stages of corporate responsibility, including corporate philanthropy, corporate social responsibility proper, and philanthro-capitalism. The United Nations WFP is briefly positioned within the field of development related to philanthro-capitalism. The origins of the 1Hood coalition and 1Hood Media are discussed in terms of Pittsburgh’s progressive community organizations, national movements such as the Millions More Movement that eventually became the 1Hood coalition, and the careers of Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith as both hip-hop artists and progressive activists.

Chapter 4 analyzes specific practices of branding used in each case, indentifying and describing the extent of the processes and logic of branding in the campaigns. The larger argument is that branding practices were essentially processes of commodification with various consequences. In the case of SK, the brand worked to translate the already
commodified Curtis Jackson’s audience (commodified as 50 Cent fans) and put them to work in a variety of ways in order to build brand value. SK becomes a flexible signifier as various manifestations of brand design reveal contradictions inherent in the campaign. With 1Hood, branding practices were initially a tool to enhance media attention. As the brand developed, it became able to attract money and its commodity prospects were highlighted. This development involved the separation (abstraction and equivalence) from its original inception as a multifaceted coalition.

Chapter 5 takes a more explicitly textual focus by engaging what Carah (2010) calls the social narrative of the brand. Key components of that narrative are the elements of story that can be inductively seen across multiple texts, including news stories and music videos. This chapter investigates how social phenomena, audiences, and cultural workers are situated within these narratives and how the narratives interact with the logic of the brand commodity. The problematics of SK’s social narrative result largely from the presence of hierarchy and consumption narratives throughout the campaign’s texts and the way the recipients of aid are depicted. The problematics of 1Hood’s narrative result from its depiction of populist tropes in narratives of social uprising and the organization’s appeal to patriotism.

Chapter 6 concludes the analysis chapters by exploring the nature of the cultural work involved with each case. The previous discussion of branding (chapter 4) focuses on the goals and strategies of branded activist work, while the chapter on texts (chapter 5) focuses on the texts’ social narratives that result from that strategy. Chapter 6 follows up on these components and asks, “what is the labor required to build these campaigns and how do the workers understand it? What kinds of contradictions and tensions must
workers reflexively negotiate in order to perform this work?” Here, the chapter considers work and the worker within three very generally defined categories: public relations, the production of media texts, and social media promotion.

Finally, chapter 7 concludes this study with a review of the entire project and a discussion of key insights, limitations, and potential areas for future research. Ultimately, the chapter (and dissertation) asks, what is the social and cultural significance of different forms of hip-hop activism in the age of social media and branding?
Chapter 2

Promotional Public Sphere, The Brand-Commodity, and Promotional Capital

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce four concepts that will be used in the analysis in subsequent chapters. These four concepts are: the promotional public sphere, the brand commodity, promotional capital, and the social narrative of brands. The discussion here will explain how they serve this particular analysis, and how my usage of these concepts aligns or diverges from other usages or closely related concepts. Additionally, this discussion should offer the reader some sense of how these concepts function in relation to each other.

This analysis explores the texts, practices, and political economy of each case of branded hip-hop activism, as responses to conditions that are present in the social environment. Viewing each case as a response helped me assess actors more holistically, as either partially or thoroughly reflexive agents in the field of cultural production, while also enabling me to take political, economic, and other pressures (in short, structural pressures) into account. All responses are not equal. That is to say, the analysis of responses should assist the normative evaluation of strategic and aesthetic decisions that comprise various activist strategies. But rather than simply decry or applaud a particular choice in a vacuum, this process of considering conditions and responses prompted me to consider why actors chose a particular course of action from a range of other possible choices. With this I explore (theoretically, here, and then with more empirical evidence in chapter 3) a specific set of conditions in the social world that SK and 1Hood’s efforts,
respectively, respond to. The term that I use to describe this set of conditions is the “promotional public sphere.”

What is the Promotional Public Sphere?

My usage of the term “promotional public sphere” is borrowed from Graham Knight to describe a contemporary environment that is saturated with political, economic, and cultural groups/subgroups; i.e. promotional speech, advertising, integrated marketing, branded texts, and other strategically deployed communicative forms and platforms. In such a framework, “any fixed or immutable distinction between the promotional signifier and the signified breaks down” (Knight, 2010, p. 175). It therefore also becomes difficult to conceive of or access spaces or moments outside of the omnipresence of promotion, even for democratic processes or philosophical reflection. Likewise, it is impossible to come to assess the value of the communicative forms and political movements that constitute this environment without referencing the broader promotional field.

Such a conceptual framework can best be approached by focusing on the overlap between certain elements of the works of three specific authors. Graham Knight’s articles on branding and activism (Knight & Greenberg, 2002; Knight, 2010), Andrew Wernick’s *Promotional Culture* (1991), and Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the *Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1983) all flesh out necessary dimensions of this phenomenon.

Graham Knight recognized the dominance of “promotionalism” in his 2002 work on Nike, and in his 2010 work in *Blowing up the Brand*. His coinage of the term “promotional public sphere” begins to combine Wernick’s account of the creep of
promotional culture with Habermas’s pessimism about the transformation of the public sphere into a realm of private interests. Knight examines the way that brand logic invites both corporate and activist actors to amplify their identities as a way of negotiating the uncertainties and competition of a multiplicity of voices in mediated public spaces. As a result, Knight’s promotional public sphere fleshes out both unexplored and latent implications of Habermas’s concerns regarding the possibilities of the twentieth century public sphere to function as an idyllic standard that guides how various interests co-exist and co-govern democratically in the processes of civic society.

In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas describes changes in the development of a sector of modern eighteenth century society that created a context for bourgeois liberals to be informed about, and debate important issues (1991). Habermas argues that the development of laissez-faire capitalism helped to create the conditions for this process largely through a culture of newspapers and deliberation and by permitting the establishment of certain communicative modes. Ultimately, though, it was also the pressures of capitalism that would move the public sphere to a place of spectacle and private promotion in the service of private accumulation. But Knight and others suggest that even before its transformation, the bourgeoisie public sphere was already rife with tensions that predicted its eventual transformation. Many of these tensions stemmed from the exclusion of various groups from participation and the privileging of certain publics over others (Eley, 1994; Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1988; Ryan, 1992). Because the common assumption of private property as the basis of self-interest was a unifying feature among the included stakeholders, there was less need for the
particularly perlocutionary and strategic modes of communication that often replace reasoned deliberation in contemporary activist struggles. This would soon change.

Among a variety of factors that led to the transformation of this public sphere, several encouraged intensification of the promotional ethos. First, a variety of movements against slavery, for organized suffrage, and for labor rights, revealed the instability of the bourgeoisie public sphere and opened it up to a variety of identity-politics. The politics of representation in property, governance, and other dimensions of social interaction required a new focus on race, gender, and class identities of would-be citizens. Thus, the primary characteristics that Knight identifies about the promotional public sphere are the overflow of constituent parties that are pressured to advance private identities and agendas, and the importance of branding as a promotional technology and currency by which to do so.

But over the course of the twentieth century, the aforementioned expansion of advertising as the handmaiden of commodity logic, and the increasing reliance of media systems on funding from advertisers were both crucial factors that shaped the nature of self-expression and communication in contemporary public spheres. The expansion of commodity logic meant that “ad men” and other influential cultural producers encouraged citizens to manage the complexities of modern life by acquiring a worldview and communicative practices that were deeply intertwined with the fetishized meanings of commodities (Marchand, 1985). In such a disposition, expressions of identity and societal value were to be realized through rituals of self-promotion that were product and lifestyle centered.
This function of advertising discourses and commodity-logic as pedagogy about how to engage the public sphere has exploded with the expansion of ad-funded media. From the advent of television onward, the priorities of advertising have been acknowledged as the primary structuring force pushing these mediated messages, rituals, programs, and platforms into most areas of the lives of citizens. As advertising messages became the most extensively circulated representations in the everyday life of post-Fordist capitalism, their modes of address and their tactics of message positioning became pivotal standards for social, recreational, and political communications.

Wernick enters his discussion of the emergence of promotionalism through the example of Wedgewood’s eighteenth century glassware in order to describe the emergence of complicated and multi-directional promotional dimensions of commodities. But his discussion of the spread of promotionalism takes place atop the background of changes to mass-production focused Fordist capitalist processes and technologies. Post-Fordist theorists such as Aglietta (1979) argue that the inability of capitalists to extract additional surplus value from factory workers, the increasingly organized resistance of workers to factory conditions, the fragility of public funding that undergirded Fordism, and other pressures, induced businesses to transform both production practices and the way that owners conceptualized markets. Over time these changes included an increased investment in information technologies and computer-based industries, as well as more flexible and decentralized organizations of labor. Simultaneously, increased opportunities for capitalist expansion were built on the conceptualization of consumers as distinguishable groups who sought to purchase and express themselves through specialized goods.
In this context, the signifying properties of commodities took on a more central level of importance based on their abilities to differentiate products for specific consumer groups. The properties of products that highlighted or signaled their meaning, “commodity-signs” by Goldman and others, became a dominant principle in market relations. In turn, as commercial markets and commodity-logic expanded to involve more spheres of human activity, market relations moved beyond simply the realm of advertising experts to become a dominant organizing principle of modern society (Goldman & Wilson, 1983). The production of meaning and the shaping of human consciousness and lifestyles was now integral to the production of the full range of modern commodities. In this way, “promotionalism” expanded from being the bounded instrumental concern of a set of specialists. It was now a widespread communicative rhetoric through which citizens, businesses, and other organizations, individuals, and groups are required to construct themselves and interpret the world. Describing this, Wernick argues “The range of cultural phenomenon that which, at least as one of their functions, serve to communicate a promotional message has become today, co-extensive with our produced symbolic world” (p. 182).

Wernick also highlights the multi-directional “vortex” of promotional signs as a prominent feature of promotional culture. The process begins as advertising discourses attach various signifiers to products and this sign-value then appears to be a prominent feature of the commodity. But the commodity then also becomes a sign of and advertisement for the advertiser. An energy drink, for example might thus be infused with the celebrity aura of a hip-hop artist or the humanitarian aura of a philanthropic campaign. When choosing to consume this drink over others, citizens now interact with
the symbolic meaning of the hip-hop artist and the establishment of a personal connection to humanitarianism. This part is fairly straightforward. But now the drink operates simultaneously as an advertisement for the hip-hop artist and for the humanitarian campaign. Through packaging and other advertising discourses, the drink points back to each of these as potential sites of future consumption or engagement. Eventually, any medium through which advertising takes place, such as music or political action, also becomes an advertisement for products and for the advertisers. In this way, political, artistic, and humanitarian action are all drawn into the dominant promotional logics, promotional aesthetics, and promotional communicative aims.

One example (and consequence) of the reach and multi-directionality of promotional signs is an intensification of the relationships between corporate marketing efforts and humanitarian causes. Corporate actors see social issues as opportunities to sanitize their reputations and fetishize brand assets in the process of launching or reinvigorating them. The roots of this practice in corporate philanthropy date at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century and are discussed more in chapter 3. The terms that scholars and practitioners use to describe the many forms of this practice include corporate philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, cause marketing, commodity activism, brand-aid, conscious capitalism, and the recent form of philanthro-capitalism.

Advocates for these practices celebrate the way that such campaigns craft humanitarian “solutions” from marketing incentives, such as the desire to target demographics that are sympathetic to certain causes. Since the profit incentive is not going away, the argument goes, it might as well be put to work addressing social problems. Often this philosophy includes a view of government regulation or various
interventions from the non-profit sector, or both as being inefficient, and ill equipped to address social inequalities. Those in favor of deregulation and more corporate autonomy frequently position philanthropic campaigns as examples of the superior efficiency and humanitarian efficacy of the private sector, and therefore as promotions for a program of decreased investment in the public sector. As a result, advocates of cause marketing often contribute to the reification of the promotional impulse as a naturally occurring and inevitable reality that must simply be embraced as a component of the governing function of capitalist markets.

The least effective critiques of these forms of philanthropy simply claim that it is unethical, and lament a citizenry who can only give when motivated by vanity or consumption. Likewise, these critics decry a private sector that can only be motivated to act in the public interest by profit. These critiques are least effective when they describe the problem as an inevitable human problem by locating the source of the problem in individual greed or individual corporate corruption.

More structurally focused (and effective) critiques point out several other problems. The promotional logic of philanthropic campaigns often causes these campaigns to avoid advocacy and investment on controversial social problems that risk tarnishing or politicizing brand messages. This creates a filtering effect wherein markets, financial profit, and promotional capital, become the social mechanisms that choose which inequalities receive financial support and publicity. In addition, these campaigns often lack adequate transparency and tend to emphasize the cause more than the business. As organizations try to make themselves more attractive to funders they are pressured to adopt the priorities of their corporate backers. In this way, the promotional public sphere
pressures humanitarian and activist organizations to adopt the commodity logic of branding.

*Field of Cultural Production*

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu adds insights regarding the promotional work of artists in contemporary public spheres (1983). Broadly, Bourdieu examined how the value of works of art and the status of artists themselves were constituted in the specific social conditions of their production, exchange, and interpretation. In so doing, Bourdieu mapped a “field” in which artists could be interpreted as actors who reflexively deploy dispositions, performances, and utterances meant to position them within hierarchies of social mobility. In the field of cultural production, we see that the appearance of economic or political motivation has different implications for artists at different locations in the field depending on the corresponding structure of legitimating force. For example, some constructions of aesthetic value required that artists “appear disinterested” in economic gain while simultaneously learning the dispositions necessary to acquire different kinds of capital.

While, Bourdieu's analysis of the Field of Cultural Production contributed to his broader project of decoding the reproduction of social hierarchies, it likewise contributes to the description of the promotional public sphere and the specific cases under analysis in two ways. First, when looked at through a Bourdieuzian lens, the cases no longer appear as either realms of democratic discourse in the name of social justice or purely economic concerns in the name of wealth accumulation. Alternatively, Bourdieu assists
us in seeing how these concerns become mutually contingent within a field where all acts
of production and performance have simultaneous political, aesthetic, and economic
significance. Secondly, as we look at the efforts of artist/activists and their organizations
to craft specific political and career agendas, keeping such an analytic framework in mind
can help us better attend to the complexities of how specific choices may attempt to
challenge structural inequalities while ultimately serving to reproduce them.

In summary, points made by Knight, Wernick, and Bourdieu all help to flesh out
the promotional public sphere. Within the public sphere, branding processes operate as
myth and technology. But the use of this kind of technology has predictable
consequences.

The Commodity Logic of Brands

The proliferation of brands and their extension into a variety of areas of life
activity is another factor that makes the study of the promotional aspects of the public
sphere especially relevant. While the history of brands can be said to extend as far back
as 1100 BCE, branding practices reached new levels of institutionalization within
marketing firms and “mediatization” in popular culture (Arvidsson, 2006) since the mid
1990s. Scholars have attempted to keep pace with these events, producing literature that
strives to assess the functioning of brands as discourses and sources of meaning in
popular culture, as interfaces between corporations and consumers, as sets of specific
creative and consumptive practices, and to a lesser extent as economic objects (Aronczyk
& Powers, 2010; Arvidsson, 2006; Holt, 2004; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004; Moor,
2007). Literature on all three of these aspects of brands come from a variety of disciplines, often with very different agendas ranging from the deliberate and profit-focused refinement of brand strategy in the service of corporate ends, to the critical unpacking of the interplay of brands and capital in historical and spatial transformations of the social world. However, as some ostensibly critical brand studies attend to the many uses and forms of brands, and as they try to be inclusive of the infinitude of sites of brand-activity and brand-related meaning production, the politics and ideological stakes of brands and branding have tended to dissolve into a complex of decreasingly tangible concerns.

My focus on the commodity logic of the brand is therefore an effort to reclaim the politics of branding by building on useful critical components of this literature. Amidst a variety of other insights and useful history of branding practices, Arvidsson (2006) builds on Lury’s (2004) discussion of the brand as exemplary of the status of the object in contemporary society. In Lury’s view, both brands and informational capitalism pursue “an open-ended and interactive” relation to the consumer. To this, Arvidsson adds that brands can be seen as (an embodied paradigm) that reveals the status of the logic of informational capitalism. This is an extremely important insight and Arvidsson's fleshing out of this idea is instructive. However, Arvidsson’s use of the term “informational capitalism” is a reflection of his focus on the ways that the logic of informational capital is “distinct” from the logic of industrial capital. Although Arvidsson makes the useful suggestion that the logic of informational capital can coexist with the logic of industrial capital, Goldman (1992), Harvey (2011), and others recognize that the form and logic of the commodity are central to both industrial and late capitalism. My analysis joins with
this view and consequently focuses on the ways that brands reflect similarities in the logic of industrial and post-Fordist capitalism.

In this context, I argue that the logic of brand development is a commodity-logic: it is the measurements, priorities, and consequences of the commodity-form that are at work in locations where branding becomes a salient discourse. As a result, the focus on the commodity sign-layer of brands offers increased clarity regarding the power-relations that surround them, without invalidating the complexity and relevance of other dimensions of brand ontology.

Among the work of several scholars on the topic of commodity-signs and the fetishization of media products, Goldman’s work (1992) is particularly useful. By developing a description of the effects and consequences of fetishizing the commodity-form, in the context of product advertisements, Goldman provides important clues to the shape that commodification might take in each of the cases under analysis. Based on Marxian principles, Goldman identifies three consequences or “moments” of commodification: abstraction, equivalence, and reification.

Following Bologh (1979, p. 21), Goldman defines abstraction by saying that abstracted entities “refer to a subject or purpose that appears independent of objective condition of existence” (1992, p. 21). In this way, qualities (that Goldman calls human) are “separated from the total situation which it is really a part and situated within a new context provided by the commodity” (1992, p. 24). Judith Williamson discusses a similar process, arguing that ads provide “meta-structures” in which “signifieds are continually reformed as signifiers,” and in which signs become signifiers of “referent systems” (1978, p. 99). Both Goldman and Williamson use examples of perfume advertising to
show how concepts like “sexiness” or “femininity” are abstracted from their situation in actual social relations in order to be resituated as qualities connected to a particular branded scent.

The current study asks similar questions about abstraction, but in the context of music and social justice related brands rather than simply looking at the branding of specific products. In the context of this study, the concept of abstraction is useful as a guide to questioning how branding affects various aspects of social activism. To what extent do the branding practices of each social justice or humanitarian effort situate or extract the characters, activist processes, and creative works from their relationship to the living, material world?

The second effect or moment of commodification that Goldman discusses is equivalence. As part of abstraction, Goldman also argues that commodity relations require the conceptualization of individual parameters of commodified objects such as quantity, quality, exchange-value, etc. This ontological “splitting” is a prerequisite that allows different objects to be compared based only on their commensurable dimensions. This then allows objects that are qualitatively different to be positioned in relations of false equivalence. In the context of labor, which for Marx was one of the most important sites of commodification, the abstraction of money allows for very different types of labor to be rendered equivalent and therefore commensurable.

In the context of this study, the social narratives of brands construct the purchasing of an energy drink or the launching of a marketing campaign as comparable to other kinds of social protest based on layers of their signification that are represented as roughly equal. Promotional speech, such as “one meal served for every drink purchased,”
is an example of this. In the context of 1Hood Media, the processes of branding invite audiences to associate the virtual presence and circulation of 1Hood Media’s branded texts with the physical presence and participation of the 1Hood coalition that preceded it.

Finally, Goldman engages the much-discussed concept of reification; he points out the ways that the processes of commodity-fetishism represent the products of human labor as alien and spontaneous entities. As primary elements of the sign-layer of commodities these meanings now appear to naturally emanate from products. In the context of this analysis, brands that appear to exist as affective, processual, and financial entities should be seen as the reification of a variety of human labors.

Like all processes of commodification, branding is often meant to highlight exchange value of the branded item in service of the accumulation of capital. But there are a variety of different kinds of capital that circulate in the promotional public sphere. Next I will argue why a form of value that I call promotional capital is one of them and why it is an important analytical concept for this project.

Promotional Capital

The concept of “promotional capital” and some contributions to its development are necessary to understand aspects of value produced by the brand commodities and the acquisition of specific types of capital by actors in the promotional public sphere. In general my usage of the term refers to accumulation, circulation, and documentation of

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2 I would like to distinguish my usage of the term from its straightforward use in some marketing circles to denote funds in a marketing budget. This is not to say that there is no relationship, but this usage restricts the term capital to mean “money” and doesn’t connote the circulation of capital through other forms.
the ability to mobilize the attention of audiences. Promotional capital is an abstraction of
the labor required to mobilize the audience-commodity. It therefore circulates through
various forms some of which are measurements specific to certain platforms that operate
as currency. Promotional capital can be converted into money (economic capital), but it
may not have to be in order to be exchanged and influence social relations. However, to
clarify this I will attempt to situate it in other closely related terms.

Bourdieu’s concepts of both cultural and social capital, as outlined in *The Forms
of Capital*, contribute quite a bit to establishing the contours of promotional capital
(Bourdieu, 1986). In what might be called an expansion of the “economy of practices”
(p. 46), Bourdieu argues that by allowing “to be foisted upon it a definition of the
economy of practices which is the historic invention of capitalism” (p.46), and by
defining other forms of social exchange as non-economic, that economic theory has
failed to identify the relationships between economic capital and these other forms. He
then situates cultural and social capital as less “material” forms of economic capital.

Bourdieu spends the rest of his essay discussing cultural and social capital and the
conversions between these forms and more material economic capital. Social capital
differs from promotional capital in that it deals with specific personal relationships
between individuals that may be leveraged in certain ways. Promotional capital differs
from this in that it is only about relationships in aggregate form and doesn’t rely on any
development of individual relationships. But in this process there are several aspects of
his discussion that point to the existence and nature of a fourth form, which can be called
promotional capital. For example, in Bourdieu’s description of social capital he argues,
“the social capital that accrues from a relationship is that much greater to the extent that
the person who is the object of it is richly endowed with capital (mainly, social, but also cultural and even economic capital)” (p. 52).

Although Bourdieu deals with conversion later on in this essay, what he is describing is the conversion of an already accrued form of capital into social capital. Describing this form of capital, he argues that the possessors of this sort of capital “are sought after for their social capital, and because they are well known, are worthy of being known” (p. 52). This suggests that the fact of being well known is itself an additional form of capital. Bourdieu then goes further, “they do not need to ‘make the acquaintance’ of all of their acquaintances, they are known to more people than they know and their work of sociability when exerted is highly productive” (p. 53). In other words, the power and productivity with which individuals can convert money, particular kinds of knowledge, or specific group or network belongings into more group relationships is a function of the possession of a different kind of capital. This form of capital, which has to do with being well known, clearly has some relationship to, but is not fully reducible to, conceptions of fame or celebrity.

Rather than repeat the discussion of the various dimensions of celebrity explored in the introduction, I would situate celebrity in relation to the concept of promotional capital by saying that promotional capital is a specific form of value that is a part of what constitutes “the cultural power” of celebrity (P. D. Marshall, 1997), but it is also acquirable by non-celebrity actors. For example, it is not quite accurate to call every Facebook site with more than 10,000 likes a celebrity site, or to call every person who can assemble audiences a celebrity, but it is accurate to say that both have accumulated promotional capital.
The concept of “reputational capital” is also a close relative of the concept of promotional capital, but the primary difference is that reputational capital is a much more broad and inclusive term. This term is widely used in the worlds of advertising and corporate responsibility, but the concept tends to be loosely defined and it often includes a variety of parameters. In some usages of the term reputational capital, it describes an intangible asset that has to do with dimensions of the public image of an organization. Although reputational capital is often communicated quantitatively in a variety of statistical measurements, many of its components aim to describe qualitative features such as an organization’s reputation for being ethical, efficient, trustworthy, etc. Some of these parameters, such as “popularity,” are very much related to the attention-mobilizing work of promotional capital while other dimensions seem less focused. Some definitions of it specifically refer to the aura that brands and firms can build by associating themselves with celebrities. Other more recent usages of the term promotional capital connect it to the reputation building and performances of institutions such as universities, but these examples tend to imply that its meaning is based on the context of usage rather than developing the term itself in any detailed way (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 18; Hearn, 2010, p. 205).

Bourdieu’s description of cultural capital gives us important clues as to the specific forms that less material types of social exchange, such as promotional capital, may take. Here, Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital, which has to do with the possession, performance, and transmission of knowledge, exists in objectified states, as dispositions, and in institutionalized forms. Loosely following this template, we can also seek the appearance of promotional capital in these modalities. In the context of this
study, the objectified state of promotional capital can be seen in a variety of metrics that attempt to measure the reach of a person, organization, or brand within specific populations. Scholars such as Meehan (2005), Mosco (2009), and others have charted one form of promotional capital by looking at how media rating measurements have come to constitute their own commodity systems (Meehan, 2005; Mosco, 2009; Turow, 2012). These metrics often exist as elements on the intangible asset sheets of organizations that can help to rationalize organizational decision-making. Related but distinct forms of promotional capital include social media metrics such as reach, volume, attention, etc. that are used by organizations such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or CrowdTwist, all of which factor significantly in the cases under analysis.

Bourdieu describes the dispositional components of cultural capital as “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (p. 47). As promotional capital, these dispositions take shape as attitudinal elements of the promotional ethos. A promotional disposition or habitus would therefore include the social actor’s awareness of opportunities to acquire and cultivate a portfolio of followers, and their willingness to take advantage of such opportunities.

Finally, in its institutionalized form (which Bourdieu acknowledges as a special case of objectification), promotional capital can be seen in institutions that are culturally empowered with the specific ability to pronounce widely accepted legitimations of the ability of individuals to mobilize audiences. Professional ratings institutions and institutions that measure metrics are the most formal of these. Their assessments are increasingly the basis of other what other institutions use to assess the promotional power of individuals. Secondly, the providers of the aforementioned platforms, such as
Facebook, YouTube, or Klout, that enable measurement, are powerful legitimizing forces. As these platforms make their metrics more widely accessible, available, and easier to use, a variety of actors gain this legitimizing power. The increased institutionalization of promotional capital means that this form of capital enters into human practice as a more commonly recognized and exchanged form of value. These institutionalized forms of promotional capital increasingly mediate business decisions, hiring, and choices about who to work with, etc.

Social Media in The Promotional Public Sphere

The role that social media play in these campaigns and by extension in the promotional public sphere has advanced the ability of stakeholders in the promotional public sphere to acquire and circulate promotional capital, enhance brand-commodities, and use this currency to attempt to more effectively navigate the promotional public sphere. However social media can be difficult to define because new platforms constantly appear and older platforms disappear or are continually updated with interactive elements. At the most basic level, social media can be defined as a range of internet-based tools and platforms that support and encourage interaction between users. However, a more sophisticated, precise, and frequently cited definition is offered by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). These authors position the term in relation to the web 2.0 technologies that enable it and the new forms of user generated content enabled by it. They therefore describe it as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the
ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.”

As will be seen, social media in the case studies play important roles in branding, the production and distribution of media content, the gathering of marketing research, and the circulation of promotional capital. Both Tsaliki et al.’s collection (2011) and Richey and Ponte’s work (2011) recognize the utterly central role that social media play in political and humanitarian campaigns that involve high profile celebrities. However, because specific questions about social media were beyond the scope of these studies, they did not sufficiently bring debates about social media to bear on these subjects. Additionally, these studies were conducted before Twitter, which has had a significant impact on the dynamics of publicity, celebrity, and activism. As a result, issues of user-generated content, data-mining, the proliferation of audience engagement “rewards” platforms, and the nature of activist promotional work that uses social media platforms are all issues that deserve more discussion.

This analysis contributes to this research by revealing a number of ways that these platforms and tools intensify pressures on political, commercial, and artistic actors while offering them methods for negotiating the conflicting pressures of the promotional public sphere. Most obviously, social media offers tools and platforms for the distribution and exchange of messages. Both 1Hood and SK used media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and custom built blogs as the central media platforms to showcase their artistic and promotional products. But taking advantage of these platforms also introduces a variety of challenges. Knight (2010), Klein (2000) and others discuss the vulnerability of large corporate brands to attacks. Likewise, in interviews conducted for
this study, SK employees and their partners at the WFP also expressed concerns about the increased potential for “brand attacks” via social media. In addition to fears about attacks, those wishing to be heard in such a milieu must constantly keep up with emerging platforms, make decisions about which platforms to invest in, learn to use these platforms, and measure and maintain the audiences that they gather. These strategies have enabled the companies and organizations to save millions of dollars on advertising, but in the case of SK it is not at all clear that these efforts have translated into notable sales for the drink. In the case of 1Hood, the members of the organization describe being pressured by a media environment in which constant production of material is necessary to “stay current.” In other words, to choose not to maintain a media presence is to accept being a comparatively quiet and ineffectual voice in the promotional public sphere.

There are also several concerns inspired by the new forms and usages of user-generated content made possible by social media. A variety of researchers look at the way that processes of audience commodification, as originally discussed by Smythe, have been extended in the context of social media, and this will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 4. Audiences now not only perform the “work” of viewing texts, but also of producing and disseminating texts and promoting licensed content through their sharing activities on social media platforms.

SK, which is working with a more explicitly corporate model of media planning, has deployed a staggering array of social media efforts which include a YouTube user-generated video contest, relentless Twitter and Facebook campaigns, and an outsourced “SK Energy rewards” program that measures and rewards customers for their social media activity across platforms. In one example, the WFP linked to the SK Energy
Facebook page, and offered an online “hunger” quiz. The quiz served the simultaneous function of “educating” (personal communication, Bettina Leuscher, Oct 19, 2012) and promoting itself and its philosophy on hunger solutions in an effort to learn more about the audiences that its collaboration with Jackson was generating.

Another implication of the movement of content onto social media platforms involves data mining and the measurement of audience activity. The affordances of different platforms allow for a variety of different types of data collection. For example, computers can provide information approximating which user is watching a specific type of content and whether or not they simply looked at an advertisement, or clicked through and ultimately purchased the item online (Turow, 2012). Cellular phones can identify the potential consumer more precisely than computer impressions, and smartphones and tablets can identify the locations, consumption patterns, and other information about users. Music platforms such as iTunes regularly send information about the visual and audio content that users have in their digital libraries back to Apple via the internet.

The ongoing collection, aggregation, manipulation, and analysis of data enabled by the aforementioned various affordances offered by different platforms produces profiles of individuals and groups, according to career, location, age, lifestyle parameters, consumption trends, and physical measurement. These are then used to design tailored advertisements, political appeals, branded products and messages, and other personalized experiences of consumption (Turow, 2012).
The Meaning of Media Texts in the Promotional Public Sphere

An important conclusion that informs the analysis of both cases is that narratives play a crucial role in processes of branding, media texts, and other discourses within the promotional public sphere. As part of this, branding processes develop narratives that are circulated by brand producers, consumers, and other citizens. Therefore, the interpretation of media that are produced by branded activist campaigns requires some description and analysis of these narratives, situated within their political economic context.

There are a variety of ways of approaching the content and function of these narratives. Discussing the specific genre of advertisements, Williamson (1978) describes the way that ads, although fictional, draw “real” historical and future actors and events into their own abstracted referent-systems. In fact, it can be argued that human beings cannot access and interpret their own relation to historical, contemporary, and future events without narrative structures that allow them to select specific phenomena as particularly important. It is in this way that texts can be said to constitute audiences as already interpellated subjects, positioning them through traditional and semiotic rhetoric in particular social locations within hierarchies of social power. But the discussion of narratives as it applies to a variety of media genres provides useful insight into their structural elements.

As Stein argues, then, promotional discourse does not just constitute the brand, but also the consumer. Her 2002 article on the 1984 Macintosh ad discusses the way that the ad’s cinematographic approach situates the audience within a culturally salient brand
narrative. This narrative positions the Macintosh product as a revolutionary force, in opposition to the then hegemonic reign of IBM, which the ad semiotically connects to conceptions of a centralized, rigidly controlled, exploitative technocratic dystopia. Following Burke, Maurice Charland (1987) also applies the concept of constitutive rhetoric in analysis of state discourses related to a movement trying to achieve political sovereignty for Quebec. Both Burke and Charland argue that forms of individuality must be overcome to facilitate the rhetorical constitution of the collective subject.

Holt (2004) discusses brand narratives as myths and icons that address societal contradictions. Building on Holt, Carah (2010, p. xviii) discusses the social narratives of brands as “useful ingredients for production of the self.” He highlights the fact that such narratives are not stable stories dictated from brand designers to fans, rather they are evolving platforms that require the affective investments and creative participation of young consumers. A such, Carah highlights how brands ‘enable’ and ‘empower’ consumers in ways that lead the brand narrative to evolve in particular directions (Arvidsson, 2006).

What is important to note in the context of the branded activist media under analysis is that media narratives inevitably position audiences in relation to “others,” i.e. corporations, non-profit organizations, or governmental figures. Additionally, either the audience or any of these other figures may be cast as the heroes in this process. Brand commodities with narratives that resonate with audiences function more powerfully as magnets for promotional capital. In turn, brand commodities that acquire promotional capital are more useful as currency in the promotional public sphere.
Conclusion

This chapter has introduced several concepts, pointing to their interrelation and their relevance to the cases under analysis. I explored the concept of a promotional public sphere by reviewing overlaps and distinctions between certain elements of Wernick's discussion of the spread of promotional culture, Graham Knight's concept of the promotional public sphere, and Bourdieu's concept of the field of cultural production. Next, I discussed the “brand-commodity” as an increasingly relevant object of analysis within the promotional public sphere. Here, I suggested that Goldman’s descriptions of abstraction, equivalence, and reification are useful to apply to the analysis of the commodity-sign layer of hip-hop activist brands. I then began to flesh out the concept of promotional capital. Stating that it is one form of value produced by the brand commodity, I explored its relationship to concepts such as cultural capital, social capital, celebrity, and reputational capital. The chapter then discussed the ways that the diffusion and spread of social media technologies have enabled new kinds of brand commodity signs and new currencies of promotional capital. Simultaneously, anxieties about user generated content, data mining, and exploitation have surfaced in response to these technologies. In both of these ways, developments in new media necessitate further analysis of the state of discourse in the promotional public sphere. Finally, the chapter argues for the importance of engaging with narrative elements of brands when interpreting the texts of the campaigns under analysis. Among these narrative elements, I briefly argue that the rhetorical constitution of the audience as subject is particularly important and this concern will be taken up more thoroughly in chapter 5.
While I have tried to introduce these concepts in ways that makes their relevance to the cases under analysis fairly clear, the discussion here has been mostly theoretical. This should cause one to ask, what specific empirical phenomena should be understood as manifestations of promotional public sphere in the cases under analysis? The following chapter explores the origins and development of each case in an attempt to empirically ground the aforementioned concepts.
Chapter 3

Behind the Cause: The Roots of SK and 1Hood

There are several similarities that can be drawn between the hip-hop and new media strategies of the SK “movement” and 1Hood Media’s various efforts. However behind the media production and communicative practices of these organizations are very different views regarding what constitutes social justice. This chapter explores a variety of historical and contextual factors that informed the structure and strategies of the SK campaign and of the 1Hood coalition. My purpose in describing these factors is three-fold.

First, I aim to introduce important elements of each case as a foundation for the analysis that will take place in future chapters. The broad view offered here is necessary to contextualize specific aspects of each case. I will provide some context to the SK campaign by briefly discussing its relationship to trends in corporate philanthropy, development politics, and the music industry. I will also discuss the ways that these traditions of corporate image management and civic engagement are reflected in the career moves and public personae of Chris Clarke and Curtis Jackson, SK’s founders.

With regard to 1Hood, I will briefly explore the social conditions, national movements, individual histories, and specific events that led to the formation of 1Hood and influenced its structure and its actions. As part of this, I will introduce Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith, the coalition's most visible members.
Second, while each of these campaigns addresses social inequality in some way and media promotion plays a role in both cases, this chapter will discuss the key differences in the processes, assumptions, historical backgrounds, and guiding logic of each case. According to its owners, SK was founded to be a compelling example of “conscious” philanthro-capitalism at work. As we will see, a guiding belief of philanthro-capitalism is that the private sector can provide much needed leadership to both governments and the non-profit sector in the realm of humanitarian intervention. This view is based largely on the correct assumption that there are some areas of shared interest between these sectors. However, more thorough evaluation of this claim requires that we must also recognize the differences between the aid delivery, promotional messaging, and product focused “movements” of some philanthropic efforts and the much more complex functions and processes that comprise what I call the “ecosystem” of a healthy civil society and public sphere.

Third, while the other chapters offer analysis that speaks to specific theoretical questions within the disciplines of media and cultural studies, this chapter begins to document what I feel are important historical events and organizational relationships in specific contexts. The value of this contribution is perhaps especially seen with the less high profile 1Hood. With 1Hood, the focus in this chapter is on the development of the movement within the socio-cultural context of Pittsburgh between the years of 2005-2012. This historical exploration is admittedly limited because I have tried to restrict my presentation to those aspects that relate to the larger research questions. But members of 1Hood have indicated that as a research product, even this introductory account would be valuable because it pulls together information that is currently scattered across various
newspapers, websites, and other documents, and held in the memories of participants. Hopefully, the information gains new significance when brought together in this particular explanatory narrative.

**Introduction to SK**

In January 2011, Chris Clarke, the global chief creative officer, and executive chairman of SapientNitro, one of the world's most influential and internationally present advertising agencies, announced that he would be leaving the company to start a venture capitalist company. In September 2011, hip-hop celebrity and entrepreneur Curtis Jackson (aka 50 Cent) announced his intention to feed over a billion hungry people in Africa, in a variety of press releases and promotional events including one in Times Square (50 Cent Launches Street King in Times Square, 50 Cent Music, 2011). He would accomplish this by working with Clarke to launch SK (originally “Street King”), a liquid energy supplement, and by donating a meal for every supplement sold. The money would go directly to the WFP, who would handle the delivery of the meals and help to promote the effort. SK Energy shots was the first product in development by Pure Growth Partners, the venture capital firm founded by Chris Clarke in which Jackson was a partner. The initial press releases in popular media focused on SK’s philanthropic aspects, but both Jackson and Clarke also periodically discussed the business strategy of SK. Noticing that a similar drink, 5-Hour Energy, had a monopoly on the market with no definitive secondary competitor among several other energy drinks, Clarke and Jackson aimed at making SK Energy Shots the number two in the market (Greenburg, 2011). The
company then launched an integrated marketing campaign that worked with other celebrities, and relied heavily on social media and user-generated content to promote the cause and the beverage.

In roughly the same time frame, Jackson’s entertainment companies also began to incorporate the SK (Street King) concept as a central component of their efforts to promote the persona and products of his entertainment alter ego 50 Cent (“50 Cent talks ‘Street King’ movement,” 2012). This included appearances discussing the philanthropic aspects of the project on ABC’s Nightline, on The Oprah Winfrey Show (50 Cent’s Hidden Talent, 2012), and in numerous hip-hop blogs. The record label that Jackson owned, G-Unit, released a hip-hop mix-tape called Street King Energy (Quake, 2011) and in 2012, Jackson announced that his forthcoming major label release would now be titled Street King Immortal (DelaCuesta, 2012). Jackson began to appear in interviews and in public wearing a diamond encrusted medallion that featured the SK emblem, and every post on 50Cent’s Twitter account began including the hashtag #SK:

50cent Look I'm not reading or retweeting if you don't have #SK in you tweet 2:11 PM Sep 30th, 2011 from UberSocial for BlackBerry

In contrast to Jackson, Clarke was a less public spokesperson for the SK movement, but he also has a significant record of public statements promoting the company and its philanthro-capitalist business model. His Linkedin.com account now lists his occupation as “Social Entrepreneur” and Clarke appears at events such as the (Deepak) Chopra Foundation’s “Sages and Scientists” conference at La Costa Resort in Carlsbad, California. As mentioned in the introduction, Clarke criticized the ability of governments and the nonprofit sector to effectively address world hunger, while
positioning large corporations as the world's potential “new heroes,” in his 2012 presentation on “Just Capitalism,” at this conference. He then closed by offering his collaboration with Jackson as an example of the power of this model (Clarke, 2012).

**Street King: Music Industry Background**

The SK campaign appeared at the intersection of factors related to Jackson’s career specifically, and the music industry more generally. One of these was the positioning and delay of 50 Cent’s fifth Interscope release (the final album in his recording contract). A second factor was Jackson’s relentless pursuit of diverse revenue streams within and beyond the entertainment industry. A third factor was the idea that hip-hop culture would enhance the selling of an energy drink. Each of these factors speak to the study’s larger research questions regarding the nature of hip-hop careers in the promotional public sphere and the conditions of the music industry itself as a component of the promotional public sphere. It is therefore important to proceed with some sense of these conditions.

Scholars have described some trends in the history of the music industry since the 1990s as the story of entertainment companies in the music industry refocusing investment strategies, or, as I like to think of it, remembering that they should be primarily invested in copyright monetization rather than tightly bound to particular formats (Burkart, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Wikstrom, 2009). This is not to say that the legal departments of major entertainment and publishing companies ever lost sight of the fact that their primary interest in artists and the artistic goods that they
produce was their value as licensed properties. But it is also true to say that entertainment companies and associations such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) expressed some fear and anxiety about the ability to monetize licensed properties on online platforms. The decreased retail sales of certain formats such as the compact disc, and the failure to see an equivalent increase in digital sales motivated companies to find new ways to monetize their copyrights (RIAA, 2006).

But the need for more extensive copyright and more efficient monetization strategies was also driven by the consolidation of ownership and consequent financialization. The productive activity of hundreds of labels in the 1950s had been reorganized into six major labels by 1988. By 1998, after Polygram was absorbed into Universal Music Group, that number shrank to five. In 2004, with the merger of Sony and BMG, the number of labels that dominated the market number shrank to four, where it remained until 2012. In 2012, EMI was sold and divided between Sony and Universal Music Group, creating three major music labels. However cultural industries scholars from various traditions have cautioned against too-simplistic an understanding of these changes (Negus, 1999; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Toynbee & NetLibrary, 2000). Their close analysis of how production was organized within certain genres via imprint labels, revealed complex processes that allowed for varying degrees of autonomy even amidst ownership consolidation.

What is clear is that as a result of consolidation an increasing number of entertainment companies and producers became subject to the logic of financialization (Bagdikian, 2004; Hau, 2006; Scherzinger, 2005). Some companies realized faster than
others that their primary energies should lie not in trying to fight for compact disc or DVD sales but to monetize licenses in whatever ways would be most lucrative to shareholders in the new digital and networked landscapes. Specifically, this resulted in increased pressure to minimize inefficiencies and risk. Branding played a key role here because it was seen as a way of managing the risk associated with artistic products. There was also an increased pressure to find new places (web platforms and sites) to exploit licenses and to redefine what licensing rights meant. Services like SoundExchange and digital performance rights organizations collected revenue based on new conceptions of internet property and new extensions of old rights regimes. The accessibility and interactivity of the new technological environment also meant that entertainment companies were under increased pressure to promote the commodities in which they were invested in ways that could cut through the infinite choices that consumers now had (Lam & Tan, 2001).

The publicized industry panics, technological utopianism, moral admonitions, and legal threats that surrounded peer-to-peer file sharing and other forms of musical exchange that were constructed as violations of copyright often reflected the industry’s own efforts to paint record labels as the victims of technological changes (Oberholzer-Gee & Strumpf, 2007). These “piracy panics” conceal the fact that large copyright holders in the music industry were extremely opportunistic with respect to these changes and they were able to successfully adapt to this new environment in a number of profitable ways. For example, some narratives have cited the lowered barriers to entry and increased participation enabled by digital music production as evidence of a radically altered balance of power between labels and individual artists (Lam & Tan,
2001). But more critical authors have noted that the digitization of music production also meant that there was more potential for major record labels to acquire the rights to distribute outsourced or freelance production. The use of freelance and independent producers (who no longer required expensive production investment) meant that risk could be offloaded to these producers. Digitization enabled the record labels to bring a larger portion of independent producers under their licensing regimes. Additionally, the new production and distribution platforms meant that internally produced products could be produced with less overhead.

Perhaps even more importantly, digitization offered new platforms for content delivery and new forms of measurement that were particularly attractive to advertisers (B. Klein, 2010). The emergence of 360 contracts, which gave record labels and advertisers a staggering range of upfront rights to content in exchange for their financial and promotional support, was an early signal that music could now join the television industry in accepting that its primary role was to enhance the delivery of audiences and the promotion of corporate brands. The ascendancy of advertising-heavy free and paid subscription-based platforms such as Pandora, Songza, Rdio, and Spotify have helped advertisers to take on an even more aggressive role than they had when radio had a more singular influence on the direction of musical culture.

Hesmondhalgh (2010), Burkhart (2010), Wikstrom (2009), and others have examined the legal rulings that helped to reorganize and define digital rights. What these analyses reveal is that the RIAA has increasingly used these contracts to extend their copyrights in ways that ensured profits would be protected and increased in the new digital world. The discourses that foregrounded piracy and copyright theft by consumers
assisted this process by suggesting that copyright owners needed to extend the duration and scope of their copyrights to make up for revenue losses that were constructed as being due to lost album sales (Sherman, 2006). But monetizing newly extended copyright means operating across genres and platforms. Consumers may still approach musical products from the vantage point of the songs and artists they like, but the artists, artists’ managers, and entertainment companies required specific kinds of musical brands that could generate revenue through multiple streams besides traditional music sales. It is in this context of the changing music industry and the cultivation of diffuse revenue streams that SK was conceived as a hybrid energy drink, entertainment, and philanthropic brand.

**Curtis Jackson: Hip-Hop Brands in The New Music Industry**

As indicated above, Curtis Jackson invested early in Pure Growth Partners and became a visible icon of one of its main commodities. His celebrity persona, “50 Cent,” is the face of SK and was its primary promotional engine for the product’s first two years on the market. Jackson’s career is an interesting case study in the entertainment industry of the past decade because the circumstances of his career required him to negotiate many of the aforementioned shifts. Jackson, the companies that worked with him, and other entertainment industry stakeholders needed brands that had certain characteristics in order to effectively survive the previously mentioned changes in the music industry and profit from them.

These characteristics included the ability to be distinguishable from other artists and entities, to be a visible presence across a variety of entertainment genres and
technological platforms, to function as a platform for assembling easily measurable audiences, and to operate as a unifying force between increasingly complex internal divisions of corporate production and management.

Jackson’s noteworthy success as a recording artist early in his career laid the foundation for several brands and business ventures (Charnas, 2011) that seemed to fulfill these needs. After signing to Columbia records in 1999, Jackson introduced the entertainment persona of “50 Cent” in his first single How to Rob. The single’s controversial lyrics—targeted at rappers then successful in the music industry—highlighted 50 Cent’s earlier career in crime and then detailed the ways that 50 Cent would rob several of hip-hop's most visible and successful artists if his music career failed. This theme and accompanying persona proved to be a successful strategy as it prompted several responses from prominent hip-hop artists, and created media attention.

On May 24, 2000, after the release of his single, Jackson was shot nine times while sitting in his car in Queens, NY, and consequently hospitalized (Odiaga, 2000). This enhanced his celebrity aura via the tropes of authenticity and street credibility surrounding his gangster persona, but Jackson subsequently lost his contract with Columbia and his forthcoming album, Power of The Dollar, was shelved. Columbia and many other labels now perceived the crime reality-based content of his unreleased songs such as “Ghetto Qu'r'an” as dangerous since Jackson had already been targeted to be killed. The label also feared that he might no longer be a productive vocalist, given that one of the nine bullets from his assailant’s weapon had pierced his jaw. After recovering, Jackson focused on the underground economy of mix-tapes, and continued to release
material between 2001-2002. Eventually, his underground efforts earned him the attention of the Shady/Interscope record label that signed 50 Cent in 2002.

In February 2003, Jackson released his first major commercial album *Get Rich or Die Trying*. Entertainment blogs amplified the record label’s alleged fear that album sales would suffer due to a high rate of internet piracy, despite the promotional hype surrounding its release. These fears proved to be unfounded. According to Nielsen Soundscan, this album sold over 872,000 units in less than a week, debuting at number one in Billboard’s top 200 (Garrity & Hall, 2003). His second Shady/Interscope release, *The Massacre*, was released in March 2005 and was an even bigger hit, selling 1.14 million copies the first week (Mayfield, 2005). His third release, *Curtis*, was less critically acclaimed but still achieved sales of 691,000 in its first week (Mayfield, 2007). These releases contributed to the recognizability of the 50 Cent brand and solidified Jackson’s rise to fame. He carried this success into a diverse and lucrative range of brands and business ventures, including an acting career, a record label, a clothing company, a film company, a lucrative beverage, a popular website, and eventually the SK energy drink. Riggs Morales, a senior A & R at Shady records discusses Jackson’s business acumen:

50’s endeavors have nothing to do with the music labels, you know, it’s like that’s how shrewd of a businessman he is. He saw early on like “okay the labels have a bit of a limited mind state, my mind state’s way beyond some of the ideas that they have.” So he took his fortune and he took initiative and now he’s doing...his production company’s his own. His uh movie production company’s his own. His label’s his own. So it’s not something (pause) from Street King down to any other business venture, it solely belongs to him.

Jackson thus benefitted from the changing nature of the music industry at the time of his rise to popularity. But the regimes of music copyright also presented certain
challenges, especially at first. Although he had achieved success with the persona of 50 Cent, Jackson and Interscope now jointly owned this name as a result of their contract. This presented problems for Jackson’s control and profits from his own musical venture. Shortly after the release of his first album, Jackson established the G-Unit record label and brand to establish majority ownership in a legal entertainment entity.

The G-Unit brand solved his shared-license problem but presented others. The brand was built around the group G-Unit (short for Guerilla Unit) that was comprised of Jackson, his childhood friends who publicly went by the names Tony Yayo and Lloyd Banks, and other rotating members. The label released three successful albums that generated the usual copyright-based revenue streams, but the group primarily served as the main brand for other brand extensions such as G-Unit Clothes and G-Books. The G-Unit brand also facilitated Jackson’s first entry into philanthropy with the G-Unity Foundation. But G-Unit also suffered from the legal problems of its members and several public disputes between them (Langhorne, 2012). While Jackson was generally good at creating and spinning personal controversies into album sales and publicity, he slowly began to distance himself from the G-Unit brand (Cantor, 2013). G-Unit remained active, but starting in Fall 2011 SK seemed to replace G-Unit as the center of Jackson’s business and publicity efforts.

Another important aspect of Jackson’s career that foreshadowed the interactivity and tech savviness of SK’s social media strategy was the development of his website brand “Thisis50.com.” Jackson was unable to own “50cent.com” because the website was mostly owned by Interscope. Rather than help build a website that he did not own and profit from, Jackson and his digital consultant Chris Romero purchased the domain
“Thisis50.com” and developed it using the Ning platform. Ning launched in 2007 as an affordable but feature-loaded platform to host one’s own social media community (Penenberg, 2008). One attractive feature of the platform is that Ning charges a small fee of $55 dollars for users to place ads on their page, but doesn't charge additional fees or commissions when users profit from those ads. As of May 2009, the site boasted over 430,000 registered users, 4 million unique viewers each month, and a million impressions a day (MacMillan, 2009).

The choice to use the Ning platform was noteworthy because it demonstrated Jackson and Romero’s early grasp of the importance of interactive, customer-focused platforms in networked integrated marketing. Like SK, the rhetoric of Ning privileges the concept of community. Ning’s website features the phrase “cultivating community” prominently as one of its primary slogans. Moderators of Ning platforms are called “community managers” and they are responsible for setting “Community Guidelines.” But each step of the website development also generated ad revenue while building the website and entertainment brands. While other hip-hop artists built their websites as centrally administered, thinly veiled, mini-worship destinations, “Thisis50.com” allowed users to host their own pages and submit their own creative material. Both “Thisis50.com” and Ning’s G-Unit communities used the website’s Soundcloud integration to allow users to upload songs and be featured on the site. This included the ability to embed brandable Soundcloud music players on their personal pages. Together, this allowed Thisis50.com to monetize user-generated content through ad revenue that

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1 Soundcloud is an online audio platform that began in 2007. It allows users to aggregate uploaded music on personalized pages, comment on that music, and share it via other social media platforms.
would result from the increased site membership and activity. On “Independent Fridays” the site solicited fan content from its considerable number of members who were hip-hop artists for a contest. They could also use this content to seek out possible future G-Unit artists, but there is no evidence of any artist being signed based on this process, suggesting that the prospect of a G-Unit deal was primarily a draw to increase membership and website activity. The prominent user-generated content element of the site helped enhance the brand’s image as a “community” of musically oriented members (Ehrlic, Brenna, 2011).

Romero and Jackson were also quick to take advantage of Ning’s partnership with Kyte, a video streaming platform. Kyte offered easily embeddable, customizable, and brandable high-resolution livestream players. In addition, it offered online tools that allowed the user to quickly edit and stream video content from a variety of devices, including cellular phones, and it offered the ability to host live chat sessions in conjunction with streaming video broadcasts. Kyte co-founder and CEO discusses the various ways that users such as Jackson and Romero can monetize Kyte’s content (Miraflor, 2008):

“There will obviously be pre-roll and post-roll opportunities,” continues Graf, “but we are looking beyond that to include full branding and skinning of the environment, providing tools to sell merchandise [and] tickets, host branded games, sponsorships, etc., all within the player, to take full advantage of all the Kyte platform has to offer.”

These features allowed Jackson’s entertainment companies to use their Ning sites as the channels for the release and redistribution of original content. Jackson and Romero also took advantage of Kyte’s editing tools to offer edited content they hoped would be more
dynamic and professional than the fuzzy, low budget video productions of their competitors (Toscano, 2009).

Additionally, all of this content delivered their audiences to the website’s advertisers. When the site redistributes Jackson’s Shady/Interscope releases, it is essentially remonetizing that content through advertiser’s sponsorship of those broadcasts. That fans may be reached in other ways by the site extended this revenue stream. In fact, Romero and Jackson were among the first to use the mobile features of Ning to target fans of the site on their cellular phones (Kapko, 2012). Many of these fans access the site as a destination for hip-hop focused entertainment industry gossip that is aggregated from other sources. This enables its owners to also monetize externally produced content through advertising revenues.

Given this background, it is clear that Curtis Jackson could appreciate the value of a well-built brand, technological innovation to extend and monetize branding, and that he could bring celebrity and business expertise to the brand-building process. SK offered Jackson an opportunity to remedy the shortcomings of the G-Unit brand, while extending the reach and value of his other investments with a philanthropic business model. But the philanthropic model of SK wasn’t primarily Jackson’s idea and SK also involved other stakeholders with different, older legacies and challenges. Therefore, to truly understand SK’s philanthro-capitalist model and rhetoric we must turn to these legacies.
Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a broad category includes philanthropic efforts, but it also refers to a variety of standards that corporations began to use to evaluate, manage, and communicate about dimensions of their internal functioning and societal impact. After the 1950s, the language of corporate social responsibility became a language widely used to discuss “the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 1953, p. 44).

Writings on CSR and on corporate philanthropy point to ethically oriented business discourse as a potential site of contradiction. A significant amount of writing in the area of CSR explicitly aims to address specific instances, patterns, and contexts of unethical corporate practices and “externalities.” Some of this research comes from non-business stakeholders who feel they have been negatively or positively affected by the attitude of corporations toward society or their particular context. There is perhaps even more writing on the subject from within business literature; see, for example, Carroll (1999), who offers an important and influential summary of the evolution of the concept of CSR from the 1950s through the 1990s.

Looking at the evolution of CSR through the lens of this literature, there are two primary trends that have relevance to this study. First, the concept of corporate responsibility gained momentum under the idea that corporations should follow the lead of the non-profit sector in giving proper attention to questions of ethics and the public
good. The 1953 A.P. Smith vs. Barlow decision, in which the New Jersey Supreme court issued a defense of corporate gifts to educational institutions, set an important precedent for philanthropic efforts (Soskis, 2010). Clearing not only A.P. Smith’s gift to Princeton but also retroactively clearing other such gifts, the decision paved the way for an explosion of foundations, smaller community and/or church-based groups, that provided goods and services to address inequality. However, this failed to quell the voices of groups that directly protested capitalist exploitation. It is important to stress that the effort of corporate leaders to appropriate goals, personnel, strategies, and above all rhetoric from these smaller groups was not new. But it was the widely accepted language of CSR, the new scientifically researched communication techniques, and the separation of the concept from any specific religious tradition that gave it a distinct character. It was no accident that business literature in this area proliferated during the 1980s in conjunction with the rise of the political logic of neoliberalism, de-regulation, and the related discourses of personal responsibility and individuality.

The second noteworthy aspect of CSR’s evolution is that it eventually came to be understood as a management discourse. Literature began to engage the technical and tactical details of how to insert ethical dimensions into existing business models rather than to question the foundations of corporate practice. This included an increased focus on managing the perception of responsibility and ethical practice by both the outside community and employees inside the company. This is not to say that all CSR literature focused on this trend. As mentioned earlier, the literature includes many radical critiques of the most sacred and foundational aspects of corporate practice. But the body of literature most attractive to industry leaders was one in which CSR appears as an
adjustment to supply and value chain management and a management technique for perceptions of the press, the public, employees (Ewen, 2008).

**Corporate Philanthropy**

The goals of “pure” philanthropy and corporate image management have a long history of entanglement. Rockefeller, especially after the Ludlow massacre and Ida Tarbell’s *The History of Standard Oil*, was considered the most hated man in America. Many of his charitable efforts were coordinated by one of the founders of public relations, Ivy Lee (Ewen, 2008). In the mid-nineteenth century, discussions of corporate giving aimed at addressing the work conditions and inequalities that were intensified in the context of the industrial revolution. Many of these discussions tended to focus on ways that the profit motive might be linked to broader social goods. Before the dispersed management and limited liability in modern corporate forms of business structure became common, firms tended to be owned by lone individuals, and ideas about giving and charity were connected to the individual ethos of business owners. For this reason, conceptions of the personal obligation of the businessman to his community and to his workers were one way of resolving this problem. Soskis (2010) calls this idea “stewardship,” but it can also be linked to Weberian concepts of personal vocation. In these conceptions, the business owner appeared as a deeply moral shepherd figure, blessed with unique gifts, and charged with a spiritual mission to give back to society. Both Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie popularized these ideas through their acts and explicit statements on the subject of giving.
One important implication of this was that the fact of wealth itself was not to be questioned; rather the steward's commitment was to be measured by the quantity and diversity of his giving habits. From the perspective of the corporate giver and those who subscribed to their philosophies, the problems of wealth were understood as problems of how to give back properly. With the help of early PR consultants such as Lee, Rockefeller managed his legacy and public image through the founding of the Rockefeller Foundation and other philanthropic groups, as well as through founding other institutions in the area of education in 1903, and medicine in 1901. He also gave directly to a variety of other interests throughout his lifetime, including churches and missionaries. Carnegie, who described his obligation in more secular terms, also gave widely to universities, libraries, hospitals and public goods such as parks, swimming pools, etc. But Carnegie took his ideas about the obligations of wealth further, and criticized the practice of passing down large fortunes to one’s family.

The discourse of stewardship ameliorated but ultimately failed to erase a fundamental tension between the publicly oriented practice of giving and the private accumulation oriented nature of the corporation. As corporate structures became more complex, philanthropic efforts required more oversight and this meant more pressure to justify why money that legally belonged to shareholders was being given away. “Scientific charity” was perhaps the first version of the currently en vogue idea that inefficient giving practices should be brought under the auspices of the private sector. But other businesses responded to these pressures in several ways. One way included a renewed focus on the working conditions and lives of employees. When charitable resources were focused on this population, it was easier to argue that they would
ultimately benefit the bottom line. An alternative way of responding to this was to make the argument that businesses relied on public goods, and that this justified giving to the community chests or public enhancing endeavors.

Finally, following IRS rulings on corporate giving in 1932 and 1934, corporate leaders realized that they would have to pursue legal protection for giving. In many cases the recipients of their giving were on their side. Joint lobbying on this issue resulted in several philanthropy-friendly sections of the 1935 Revenue Act that laid the foundation for the current range of foundations and charitable gifts. One important result of the legal sanctioning of corporate philanthropy was that it effectively silenced previous concerns expressed by Roosevelt and others about the reach of corporate influence into other areas of society through gifts. The presence of philanthropy in those other areas then led the way for businesses to claim that they should be leaders in those areas. This discourse of business leadership in the humanitarian realm would reach new heights in philanthro-capitalist discourse.

**Philanthro-Capitalism**

Around 2006, terms such as “Philanthro-capitalism” and “Venture-Philanthropy” began to appear in journalism and literature on philanthropy, foundations, development work, and humanitarianism (“The birth of philanthrocapitalism,” 2006). This movement took shape in the wake of the U.N.’s Development Declaration, issued on September 18, 2000 (Declaration, 2000). This created the U.N. Millennium Development goals, which gained a large degree of momentum due to several high profile development projects.
Some of these initiatives were new aid goals created by governments. The European Union issued a goal to contribute 66 billion euros to developing nations by 2010, and the U.S. Development challenge corporation pledged $15 billion to fight HIV/AIDS (Alagiri, Collins, Summers, Morin, & Coates, 2001). The declaration also provided new support to a slew of initiatives (some already underway) by non-profit organizations, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS. Billionaire philanthropists led several of these projects. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation then began unrolling an aggressive portfolio of initiatives, including over $200 million of research subsidies and over $700 million donated to vaccines and immunization. In 2010, a collection of billionaires that included Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and others signed a document called “the giving pledge” that committed them to giving away half of their wealth to socially worthy causes during their lifetime (Frank, 2010). In the case of Buffet, that would leave him with a mere $25 billion. The Gates organization also devotes resources toward the development of “social technologies,” funding charter schools and others projects outlined by the U.N. Millennium Development goals.

In addition to this influx of foundation efforts, there was also an explosion of literature that championed the role of large corporations in correcting the errors of the public sector. Michael Porter and Michael Kramer (1999) published research critiquing the functioning of foundations and this work became an important reference point for future philanthro-capitalist discourse. The titles of future books on the subject provided evidence of a strong pro-private sector ideological current. These included Matthew Bishop and Michael Green’s *Philanthrocapitalism: How Giving Can Save the World* (2010), Fleischman's *How Private Wealth is Changing the World* (2009), Wales, Gorman
and Hope’s *Big Business, Big Responsibilities. From Villains to Visionaries: How Companies Are Tackling the World’s Greatest Challenges* (2010), and David Bornstein’s *How to Change the World* (2007). These books and the publicity surrounding the initiatives shared two especially relevant elements. First, they argued that the humanitarian sector needed to take tough love from the private sector and submit to its leadership. In some versions of this argument, influential forces in the non-profit world needed to remake themselves according to the logic of businesses and business measurement practices.

The second element was a new focus on development politics and “saving the world” as the face of business. This movement went on the offensive, constructing “social entrepreneurs,” “big capitalists,” and indeed capitalism itself as the new heroes in the development sector. As discussed earlier, the language of heroes would be used explicitly by figures like Chris Clarke. Philanthro-capitalist efforts that have emerged since the announcement of the U.N.’s millennium development goals have focused on the treatment of HIV and Malaria, fixing extreme poverty and its effects, and improving educational opportunities. In the spirit of its philosophy, it has thrown large amounts of money at technology-based solutions to these problems, and public-private partnerships that tie the market incentives of corporations to the improvement of goods and services delivery to those in developing countries. There are few who have argued that the willingness of the wealthy to diversify the beneficiaries of their accumulated fortunes is a bad thing. But important questions have been identified by those who have critically analyzed the business-society relationship, including the broad impact of production practices in the private sector and the influence of corporations on the media and policy
environment (Cody, 2012). The WFP is SK’s non-profit partner in its stated goal of solving the problems of world hunger and it offers an important potential site for studying development-related contradictions.

To summarize, CSR can be thought of as a broad concept that refers generally to the efforts of private sector actors to address the broader societal inequities that might result directly or indirectly from their practices. CSR includes approaches such as corporate philanthropy and development-focused philanthro-capitalism, as well as specific business policy and management strategies that use the term “corporate responsibility.” The history of corporate responsibility is important to note in light of two specific claims that are made by SK spokespersons. The first claim frames the campaign as a method of solving the problem of hunger. The history of corporate philanthropy as a particular mode of corporate social responsibility situates SK as another example in a long history of business-enhancing philanthropic projects whose social contributions are structured and constrained by their ability to deliver enhanced profit and brand equity. In this context, SK’s announcement that it intended to spend $72 million on advertising in 2012 is consistent with the marketing-based logic of such campaigns. The second claim that may be critiqued in light of the history of CSR is that SK’s claim that their linkage of a product (the energy supplement) to philanthropy is a new tactic that breaks the rules of how business is done. The history of CSR reveals that these strategies are neither new nor rule breaking. Alternatively, the language of CSR and various corporate mechanisms for philanthropy have become standard and common components of business practice across many industries. In fact, corporate giving has become so commonplace that non-profit
agencies such as the World Food Program rely on strategic corporate giving for large aspects of their operating budgets.

The World Food Program

The WFP claims to be the largest organization addressing the problems of world hunger (“About WFP | WFP | United Nations World Food Programme - Fighting Hunger Worldwide,” n.d.). Regardless of whether this is true, the organization is responsible for millions of dollars of aid per year and has made significant strides in maintaining and expanding public attention on urgent hunger crises and inequalities. The organization operates in over 75 countries, and has built a network of partners to foster the delivery of food to regions that are in urgent need of it. In addition, the WFP pulls together important data on hunger. They secure food aid and distribute it by working with over 3000 non-governmental organizations. Some corporate partners are in the business of food production, and they donate products and in some cases develop specific products for regions in which WFP is working. In addition to these efforts to deliver food and raise funds, the organization also works to raise awareness about the problems of hunger. One of these latter strategies involves working with several celebrity partners.

The UN Ambassadors program establishes partnerships with well-known figures, often from the entertainment world, to gain the attention of their fans and supporters. These collaborations usually involve fundraising events, press conferences, press releases, documentaries, and specials. They have also begun to experiment with a variety of strategies that use social media, such as the artist features on the WFP website with
links to their personal pages, or mentioning the collaboration on the public figure’s or the
WFP’s Twitter feeds and Facebook pages (Personal Communication, 2012).

**Criticisms and the Problems of Development**

Critics of the WFP fall into several varieties. A common critique questions or
convicts the whole premise of development aid (Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997). Taking
issue with development’s underlying ideology of modernization, advocates of this
critique point to the ways that food aid creates dependency. In this view, aid functions not
so much as a short-term solution to urgent needs, but as an increasingly entrenched
system that requires local economies to accept extreme austerity measures. These critics
point to the decline of local agricultural economies and the failure of aid programs to
stimulate them despite the large amounts of money being spent. As James Shikwati, a
Kenyan economist put it, “no one can compete with the WFP” (2005).

WFP’s choice of corporate partners should also be a concern. By working with
large and controversial food and beverage producers such as Monsanto, Cargill, Tyson,
Coca-Cola, and Pepsi, and even oil companies such as Exxon Mobile (featured
prominently on their website), WFP is vulnerable to critiques that the productive
practices, monopolies, political influence, and other ethical violations of their partners
detracts from the organization’s stated mission. One example of this is that all of the
aforementioned corporate partners (there are many more) have dedicated millions of
dollars in support of U.S. farm subsidies (*Cultivating Influence*, 2012). This is
controversial because the low prices on exported agricultural commodities that have been
enabled by these subsidies has been cited by a growing number of analysts and observers as a primary cause of poverty and hunger in developing regions. While the WFP highlights natural and geographic challenges to building agricultural economies in developing nations, smaller farmers in these nations also face the obstacle of competition from Western nations on commodities such as rice, corn, milk, chicken, and others that are subsidized in the U.S (Wise, 2012). The inability of these smaller scale agricultural producers to compete with the large-scale multinational grain traders causes many smaller farmers to abandon the agricultural sector, which in turn lowers the democratization of regional food production and food sovereignty.

Upon the signing of the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, which provided the legal framework for food aid programs of future decades, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was explicit about its purpose:

The Agricultural Trade and Development Act is well designed for its purpose of “providing a means whereby surplus agricultural commodities in excess of the usual marketings of such commodities may be sold.” It will lay the basis for a permanent expansion of our exports of agricultural products, with lasting benefits to ourselves and peoples in other lands. (Eisenhower, 1954)

A key rhetorical move in this statement is the linking of the well-being of the broad American citizenry and people in other lands with the expansion of agricultural exports. This linkage ignores the now time tested pattern of sourcing the transport, delivery, and a majority of the profits from exported and domestically produced and subsidized food products to a handful of corporate food producers, including Archer-Daniels Midland, Cargill, and Bunge. Food Sovereignty scholars such as Eric Holt-Gimenez point out that, in practice, “food aid functions as a sponge to absorb commodities surpluses in the North and dispose of it at prices below the cost of
production in the South.” Such a system “devastated local agro-biodiversity and emptied the countryside of valuable natural and human resources” (Holt-Gimenez, 2008).

The safety of food production among the WFP’s large corporate partners has also been questioned. Aside from the inhumane treatment of animals, the more acute problems relate to the bacterial-laden supply chains and uncertain health effects of genetically modified foods that are increasingly standard in large-scale corporate food production. Even in the lawsuit-friendly United States context, victims of these problems have had little success obtaining accountability. The recent ruling by the FDA regarding food safety standards was both an acknowledgement of this problem and an acknowledgement that the U.S. is only at the beginning of addressing it. But there are also indications that suggest developing nations might be getting the least healthy of “safe” foods. Authors such as Michael Pollan (2002) have pointed to the ways that corn subsidies have led to the least healthy foods having the lowest production cost. As a result, these low cost foods with low nutritional value are frequently the foods that are “dumped” into food markets in developing countries.

The public-private partnerships that are encouraged by organizations such as the WFP and the Gates Foundation tend to support the for-profit goals of their corporate partners by offering them entry into new potentially lucrative markets, sanitizing their brand images, and helping them increase tax deductions and write-offs (Cody, 2012). Although there has been an increasing body of literature on the role of celebrity diplomacy with regard to development work (Cooper, 2007; Dieter & Kumar, 2008; Tsaliki et al., 2011), the media and discursive practices of influential players in the world of development policy, given the above dynamics, warrant additional scrutiny (Doughton
This study seeks to contribute to that literature. Ultimately, it was in the context of their public relations that the WFP agreed to work with the marketing and philanthropy of the SK product and campaign (Personal Communication, October 16, 2012).

**Chris Clarke Background—Advertising Executive Turned Philanthropic “Hero”**

The aforementioned critiques of development efforts were not a deterrent for eager philanthro-capitalists such as ad executive turned social entrepreneur, Chris Clarke. Clarke began as a director of television commercials and eventually went on to own and run several influential advertising agencies, including Pure Creative, Nitro, and Sapient Nitro. By many accounts, Sapient Nitro went on to become the largest digital ad agency and the twelfth largest independent ad agency in the world (Kaye, 2013). Clarke’s instincts and training in this regard helped him to acquire a large roster of clients for his companies and maintain relationships and contracts with them for many years. The apparently uncontroversial move that Clarke made from advertising executive to social entrepreneur reflects the close relationship between the worlds of advertising and philanthropy. Clarke started his career at a point when the power of branding had become a guiding logic in marketing.

An important component of the development of twentieth century advertising was its movement from being understood as a relatively one-way process of message design and transmission, to an audience-research driven, integrated process of transforming an unlimited amount of areas of life activity into platforms for consumer interaction with
complex and multi-modal product and lifestyle associations (Turow, 2012). As marketing
developed, the focus became more scientific, focusing on predicting the inclinations of
demographic groups and eventually individuals, and the connections of ad exposure to
purchases. Ad Age describes Sapient’s clients, for example, as “increasingly metric
hungry” (Kaye, 2013). But as brands joined physical products as central sites of
investment, management, and consumer interaction, the importance of interactivity, of
frequent measurement, and of creating the perception of authenticity, became
increasingly established as valuable to branding and marketing.

In interviews, Clarke reveals the importance of these philosophies about value and
consumer perception in several interviews, and it was clear that these insights played a
key role in the development of the SK campaign (Dickman, 2007).

Now, value to a consumer could be in a consumer’s mind. It could be, whether
you like it or not, eating McDonald's food, buying a can of Coke, you know,
buying and whatever it may be, but there’s that value equation for the
consumer…And, you know, there are a couple of great companies out there, but
there are not a lot of products out there from companies that fulfill a need.

In order to create customer experience and or perception of “fulfilling a need,” Clarke
understood the importance of giving advertising and branding experts access to the
product development process very early on. In fact, this was such a strongly stated belief
by Clarke that, even before transitioning into a social entrepreneur, he constructed
himself as a rebel within the advertising industry. Part of the way he did this was by
commenting that advertising as an industry had lost its way. It had lost its “soul” by
working to create the perception of value for products that actually had no value in the
lives of consumers (Dickman, 2007). But this wasn’t a total indictment of advertising or
marketing as a whole. Clarke agreed that value was ultimately in the eyes of the
consumer but he also stated that some products had more value in consumers’ lives than others. He saw the role of himself and his advertising agencies as assisting companies by being involved with product development. Pure Growth Partners takes this to a logical conclusion. By partnering with companies as a venture capitalist, Clarke’s company effectively owns SK and can use its “operational, management, and marketing expertise to develop products” (“Pure Growth Partners,” 2011).

In addition to involving advertising in the creation of brands and products, Clarke understood the important role of celebrity and the cult of personality. One of his early advertising successes illustrates his grasp of this and his skills for finding ways to deliver the celebrity commodity. In 1998 Clarke’s Pure Creative ad agency persuaded Australian football star Gary Hocking to change his name (on his official documents) to “Whiskas” as part of a promotion for Whiskas cat food (O’Leary, 2007). This humorous and potentially disturbing tactic helped raise money for his football club while forcing sports journalists, sports officials, teammates, and audiences to participate in the promotion either by their embrace, amusement, or outrage.

Another lesson that Clarke learned from his time as an advertising executive was how to bring different types of organizations together in the creation of value perception and, more importantly, in the name of profit. Cross-disciplinarity is inherent in the advertising industry because it brings together creative people and organizations, such as photographers, writers, video producers, statistical analysts, and MBAs that bring media buying rubrics and audience/consumer analysis. But Clarke showed some early vision in taking this to the next level. In the year 1999, Clarke worked with several large and influential Australian unions and a technology company called Virtual Communities to
put together a private-union partnership. This project would use union dues to purchase bundled computer hardware and internet services at a discounted rate. Critics of the deal argued that the union membership was being undervalued in the deal—after their equity stake in it was revealed to be less than 1%—and that the union leadership failed to realize that the value of their participation lay not just in their purchase of hardware and subscriptions, but also in their eyeballs and attention as targets of advertising. Some critics felt that this additional value of the union members as audience product should have been considered in the deal. But Clarke, who was described by an Australian journalist as “a Porsche driving advertising executive,” felt that his ability to get the union membership to agree to a salary cut as part of the deal was proof that it was a win-win for everyone involved. By 2005, the company was valued at $360 million.

Toward the end of Clarke’s career at Nitro he began to bring together these various influences and strategies in his own celebrity persona of a “social entrepreneur.” Currently, his LinkedIn page features this same moniker. During Clarke’s appearance at a Deepak Chopra conference he revealed his 1% Philosophy. This philosophy suggests that if 1% of businesses commit 1% percent of their profits to world hunger, many of the most extreme aspects of poverty can be conquered. The role of social entrepreneurs such as himself is then to create and deploy business models that will pressure other businesses to compete by also donating 1% their own profits. So, Clarke figures into the SK story as an executive, who has an advertising background, but believes in (1) marketing personnel involved in product creation, (2) the brand equity of celebrity, and (3) how such initiatives may shape the world, in a very neo-liberal view of social change.
**SK’s Philanthropy**

The aforementioned elements of Curtis Jackson and Chris Clarke’s background came together in SK’s philanthropic approach. This philanthropic business model and rhetoric had three components: the donation aspect, the awareness raising aspect, and the pressure on other businesses to follow suit. The first component involved a purchase-triggered donation model. A WFP spokesperson interviewed for this project describes the beginning of the relationship:

Pure Growth, um, approached, um, our colleagues from the private sector team for a potential partnership, uh. And, um, you know, there was a little bit of a back and forth about how to do this best. And then, um, September of 2011, you know there was the partnership that was lunched with, um, Pure Growth on the energy drink Street King, and the basic idea is that for every sold energy drink, um, a meal will be donated, um, to the World Food Program. (Personal communication, Oct 16, 2012)

In a Forbes article discussing the campaign’s philanthropy Clarke, CEO and founder of Pure Growth Partners cites a kind of “capitalist guilt” as motivating the partnership:

“It’s mind boggling that people are living under these circumstances,” he says. “It makes me feel like my motivation for some of the decisions I made early on were made blindly. If you weigh it morally after you’ve grown, it doesn’t make any sense.”

The WFP also picks up on SK’s message points about Jackson’s own childhood difficulties as part of his motivating impulse when discussing the campaign’s philanthropic aspect (which also constitutes the overwhelming focus of the WFP’s discussions of the initiative).

Curtis Jackson has very high goals. His, um, he had gone to Africa and seen hunger. Uh, he speaks very movingly about how he of course didn’t have an easy childhood and he really looked for ways of how he can have an impact in the
world. And so his goal is, um, to help collect enough funds to donate one billion meals over the next two years, and it’s just another, I think, um, very good example of, uh, people looking for creative ways of how to make a difference.

(Personal communication, Oct 16, 2012)

The second component of SK’s philanthropic effort involves the idea that through SK’s publicity efforts they will not just be feeding the hungry but also spreading awareness of the problem of hunger and of organizations like the WFP that are working to address it. There is some evidence that the “little bit of a back and forth about how to do this best” related to a discrepancy about whether or not the WFP wanted to be associated with Jackson’s image. A Nightline report (Nightline, ABC – 50 Cent, 2012) suggests that initially the WFP rejected his offer for this reason. Ultimately, however, Pure Growth Partners and the WFP reached an agreement and the WFP’s public discussions of Jackson focused on his philanthropic impulse rather than his music. The spokesperson showed hints of disapproval of Jackson’s musical content but reinforced the overall approach:

Well, you know our partnership is with Pure Growth and the Street King organization, but you know the thing is this: we're not judging what his songs say or his lyrics do and we don't condone it. But what was important for us was that somebody had a really big goal making a difference in lives of millions of people in Africa and Asia and has shown the business acumen to really pull something together there. So that was our interest in it, but you know we’re not in the business of judging lyrics or anything like that. (Personal communication, Oct 16, 2012)

The spokesperson also justifies this in terms of the positive PR that the WFP gets from the interaction:

And, um, I think it’s, you know, it brings us to audiences that normally might not have been close to the UN or been aware of what we, as the World Food Program are doing. And, uh, I think the response has been really fantastic if you see how his fans are reacting to this, uh…people really like that he is giving back and he’s so engaged on this issue. (Personal communication, Oct 16, 2012)
The final component of the SK’s philanthropic efforts involves the way in which the business model will be able to pressure other businesses to follow suit. This component is the topic of a trailer on Pure Growth Partners’s website called the Business Effect (“Our Philosophy,” 2011). The basic vision expressed in this trailer is that, inspired by Pure Growth’s SK example, consumers will demand that other companies follow suit by giving “just one” percent of their profits to a humanitarian cause. The aforementioned *Forbes* piece describes Clarke’s vision:

He believes that if Street King is successful, it will force beverage giants like Coca-Cola and Pepsi to initiate similar give-back programs. The United Nations says it would cost $3.3 billion per year to feed 90 million of the world’s poorest citizens for a year, or less than one percent of all corporate profits.

The contradictions and ambivalent agendas that inform the discourse of corporate responsibility are captured in the naming and nominalization of SK’s parent company, Pure Growth Partners, in which Chris Clarke is the most senior partner. The company’s website describes it as both “a brand and a creative consultancy” with a private equity arm that makes strategic investments. In this context the term “pure growth” can be understood as referring to the company’s focus on accumulating capital and profit. In the context of a consultancy, the term “pure” can signify an inclination toward reducing or stripping away all that does not contribute to the growth of capital. As such the term celebrates a return to the prime directive of industrial capitalism and it predicts eliminating various conceptions of the inefficient. The website supports this interpretation with this description: “We leverage our expertise in brand building
and creativity to solve business problems for brands with high growth potential.”

However, the company’s “philosophy” reveals a different connotation of pure growth:

We believe that every business and their customers are responsible for giving back. That’s why we strive to incorporate a strong give back component into every business we accelerate. We also know it’s important to lead by example. That’s why Pure Growth Partners donates a portion of our profits to the world’s leading charities that we believe have the power to change the world.

Here, the term “pure” suggests moral purity. Purity in this sense connotes freedom from the toxicities of unchecked greed. It is important to note that this statement of Pure Growth Partners’s ethics does not commit to any consideration of the ethics of production. Moral purity is defined by the strength of “the give back component.” It is this nature of this commitment that is the key element of the discursive modality (Fairclough, 2003). When this meaning of pure is activated (as it is in the statement of the company’s philosophy) the term “pure growth” suggests that the company is focused on ethical growth. Rather than the early connotation in which the consultancy’s focus is “strictly” about growth, this connotation indicates that the requirement of purity—defined here as “giving back”—is an acceptable and even mandated constraint on the growth of capital and profit.

It seems likely that the term “pure growth” was chosen precisely because of these multiple meanings. The term operates similarly to the phrase “just capitalism,” the title of Chris Clarke’s speech. Both terms suggest novel approaches in which ethics and concerns about broader social justice issues function in tandem with, rather than in opposition to, corporate plutocratic hegemony. Simultaneously the terms pure growth and just capitalism reassure potential investors with familiar capitalist logics that will ultimately provide the underlying value system.
governments and non-profits in his “just capitalism” speech communicated in no uncertain terms that although his approach was packaged with a new face and with NGO actors from the world of development, the solutions he was investing in relied on good, old fashioned capitalism. Critical observers should recognize the multiple ideological functions of these terms and their roots in the public relations history of corporate social responsibility.

**SK in Context: Concluding Thoughts**

The promotional rhetoric of the campaign to promote the SK energy drink and its philanthropic aspects describes the campaign as both a business model and a movement that brings innovative tools to social problems such as hunger. In doing so, it aligns itself with other kinds of social movements, and explicitly compares itself to them. Some critiques of philanthro-capitalist movements decry the material and ideological/promotional benefits that the business aspects of these campaigns offer to their wealthy initiators. But like other social movements, SK does offer its ground level supporters a role in its version of social transformation. For most, this role will be to facilitate food aid donations as its consumers, but they may also choose to be involved as distributors of the energy drink or advocates for the beverage. Through its use of user-generated content and social media platforms, the movement allows its supporters ways to share media, ideas, inspirations, and resources that build the value of the brand. In this way, the campaign also offers its supporters a motivational narrative and platform through which they can enact their own agency in regard to solving social problems.
As a combined hip-hop and philanthropy fueled rebranding mechanism and integrated marketing strategy, SK negotiates the pressure of the promotional public sphere with an interesting and somewhat unique set of tools. But the preceding discussion of the origins of the philanthro-capitalist model has hopefully shed some light on the origins of its inherent tensions and limitations. Among these is an inability of philanthro-capitalism to define social transformation outside of the delivery of services such as food aid. The building of sustainable infrastructure and advocacy on food policy are beyond the reach of this strategy. Secondly, as a movement, SK fails to include mechanisms to stimulate dialogue about the contradictions that may arise as a result of its corporate partners or overall strategy. Dynamic, multi-level, independent, and ideologically diverse structures of participation and marketing accountability are required to assess and engage these contradictions. Those dimensions of social justice require a different kind of movement with an entirely different background. In this light, we now turn to a contextual understanding of 1Hood.

1Hood in the Context of “The Public Sphere Ecosystem”

The case of 1Hood offers the opportunity to consider a very different understanding of what constitutes a transformative, social justice focused, communicative action. Pittsburgh-based 1Hood began in the fall of 2005 as a coalition to address a variety of challenges facing the city’s African-American residents. The collective aimed at using communal bonds, local organizational influence, cultural and artistic resources, and the power of coalitional politics to bring together the combined political influence
and public participation of many different organizations and individuals. Over time, the organization has come to be known primarily through its most active and recognizable members, Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith, and their nationally influential hip-hop media activism and media literacy programming. On the surface, the combination of hip-hop and social causes seems concordant with Street King. Both organizations work towards negotiating the possibility of social change with a degree of leverage in, and connections to the cultural industries. But as we will see, the differences are also significant.

The following discussion will introduce the background of 1Hood, focusing on the social conditions, personal histories, national movements, and specific actions that were influential in the coalition’s beginnings. In addition to providing details and accounts that will be the foundation of analysis in future chapters, this discussion aims to identify the legacies, relationships, functions, processes, and modes of participation surrounding 1Hood. This process of identification should also help to distinguish the understanding of social justice that is operational in philanthro-capitalist, integrated marketing managed movements from those at work in community-based, dynamic public-sector “ecosystems.” I call the context of 1Hood’s example an “ecosystem” because, as will be shown, the coalition was created in a complex and interconnected environment of changing social problems, community activism, and initiatives involving civic economics, race, social justice, and music.

Both 1Hood and SK use social media to invite national scrutiny on their causes. However, SK uses the techniques of internationally focused philanthropy and integrated marketing campaigns. Conversely, 1Hood draws on the history of relationships that it has
built through its connections and involvement with ongoing national, progressive movements. While the organization does work with local philanthropies, such as the Heinz endowment, we will see that 1Hood’s relationship to the specific social conditions in Pittsburgh or those facing marginalized populations in the United States is distinct from the abstract relationships of SK’s supporters to foreign “hungry people.” While SK’s music industry and advertising background leads to participation through celebrity studded announcements, "clicktivism” (White, 2010), and commodity activism, 1Hood’s history leads to an understanding of community involvement in which the politics of physical presence and participation, accessibility, and long term investment in mutual interests are combined with social media based strategies. Finally, both the 1Hood coalition and the SK movement use the promotional power of hip-hop artist-celebrities. But while Curtis Jackson’s civic involvement represents a relatively new dimension of his public persona that is being carefully managed from the “top down,” 1Hood Media’s current level of media influence are the product of long histories of music and activism combined with decades of community ties. In its discussion of 1Hood as an organization, this study focuses primarily on the careers and strategies of its two most visible members Jasiri “X” Smith, and Paradise Gray. It is to their political, creative, and organizational histories that this study will now turn.

Paradise Gray: Brand Architect of Hip-Hop Activism

Paradise Gray, who is the driving force behind the 1Hood coalition, has a long history in both activism and entertainment and the intersections between the two. Since
the 1970s, Gray has operated, at various times, as a hip-hop producer, activist, video
director, writer, photographer, painter, social media connoisseur, scholar, and public
speaker, frequently serving in multiple roles simultaneously. He first gave the coalition
its name and has been both intentional and consistent in his development of 1Hood’s
brand/initiative⁴ as a recognizable organizational entity and eventually a media
production team. As Jasiri “X” Smith explained it, “to me Dise was the 1Hood engine.
Dise would be the dude that would call and everybody and be like we gotta do this”
(Personal Communication, 2012).

1Hood’s agenda, strategy, and relationships have roots in Gray’s personal history.
Since a thorough history of Paradise Gray could easily fill several volumes, I will attempt
to focus on several key dimensions of Gray’s experience.

Gray grew up in the South Bronx in the 1970s and was both a witness and a
participant in the emerging culture of hip-hop. His recreational and professional activities
allowed him to observe and participate in hip-hop culture from a variety of perspectives.
As a teen, he was a member of the “Baby Spades,” the junior organization within the
legendary Black Spades gang. The Black Spades is often mentioned as an important part
of hip-hop history because one of its leaders, Afrika Bambaata, would eventually go on to
become an iconic and pioneering hip-hop DJ, and the founder of the Zulu Nation. Gray
was also one of the earliest photographers and writer for several hip-hop magazines. He
wrote for several pioneering hip-hop publications such as *Hip-Hop Hit list, Strictly Hip-
Hop, Rap Masters*, and *Right On!*; in fact Gray claims to have had the first regular hip-

⁴ The use of term brand to describe 1Hood’s work is partially problematic. But the organization
itself uses this term periodically in their descriptions of their media strategy. For example Gray described
himself at one point as “a brand man” when describing his success building hip-hop groups such as Xclan,
that had a mutually constitutive function with cultural nationalist movements such as Blackwatch.
hop column in *Right On!* In his role as writer and photographer, Gray had access to both open and exclusive hip-hop spaces and events. He was at shows and in the studio sessions with artists such as James Brown, Run DMC, LL Cool J, and many others. This allowed him to develop his craft in the arts of photography and journalism, but it also prompted him to build the habits of an historical archivist, which he continues to use to this day (Personal Communication, June 13th, 2012).

Later Gray would go on to work for the legendary Latin Quarter Club in Manhattan, NY, between 1985 and 1988. The Latin Quarter was a central fixture of hip-hop culture and promotional networking as it was one of the first and few clubs focused on this genre of music. As one of the booking agents for the club, Gray gave several influential hip-hop acts, such as Eric B. and Rakim, their first shows, and he witnessed the early performances of the many acts that performed there.

From the very beginning, Gray was involved in the merging of hip-hop music and activist movements. In its earliest phases, hip-hop itself should be considered one of those movements because it was formed in response to oppressive social conditions. Black Spades “Warlord,” Afrika Bambaata, sought a way to transition the energy of local gangs into less violent and more productive ends. In 1973, Bambaata founded an international collection of artists called the Zulu Nation and Gray was an active member of that movement (Chang, 2007). Gray describes this part of his life as an important part of hip-hop history: “I was a member of the Baby Spades and you know Africa Bambaata was our warlord when he turned the Black Spades into the Zulu nation. You know it is just so much history. You know what I mean?”

5 In 2013 Afrika Bambataa became curator of Cornell Universities hip-hop Archive.
In the late 1980s, Gray would meet and work with Lumumba Carson, the son of African-American nationalist activist Sonny Carson. The elder Carson was a controversial activist who transitioned from being a veteran of the Korean War, to a life of crime, to being the executive director of the Brooklyn branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Gray and the younger Carson would brainstorm about how they could use the cultural tools of hip-hop culture to inspire a new generation of civil rights leaders. They eventually formed a collective of artists and activists called the Blackwatch movement (Chang, 1993). Gray would use his influence and knowledge of the music industry to promote the movement and he would use the energy of the movement to help promote the artists.

In 1990, the Blackwatch movement was promoted to international prominence with the considerable success of the XCLAN’s 1990 release, *To the East Blackwards*. Gray provided musical production and promotion guidance to the group, and operated as a highly recognizable member known as Paradise The Architect. The lead mc in the group, Grand Funkin Lesson Brother J, discussed Gray’s role in an interview with Blackelectorate.com (Solages, 2005):

Architect introduced us to Lumumba Carson, who is Professor X…Paradise the Architect Tractitioner, he was a producer as well as someone who was giving us guidance as far as what this record game was about. He was originally a manager of the Latin Quarters club, one of the biggest Hip Hop clubs in Hip Hop history. This is where a lot of cats got their foundation in New York, in Times Square. Architect was more of a producer.

The unapologetically African cultural-nationalist messages and imagery of XClan contributed to the group’s controversial and critically acclaimed, but not quite mainstream, status. After the deaths of two group members, internal disputes, and
business challenges, the XClan was discontinued, but Gray and other members continued their relationships and music with other projects.

In 1993, Gray moved to Pittsburgh. He quickly became involved in a variety of activist efforts and became a strong advocate for Pittsburgh’s hip-hop community. He worked with Pittsburgh’s Black Political Empowerment Project, the local Nation of Islam, and a wide spectrum of organizations within the African-American, progressive political community. He became involved in cultural and political organizing that ranged from programming in the jails to after-school mentoring programs. He also opened up a recording studio, an art gallery and performance space, and participated in the launching of Pittsburgh's first hip-hop awards. Gray has remained in Pittsburgh since 1993, leaving only for a brief stint in California as a hip-hop consultant for mp3.com.

Gray was offered this position based on his massive hip-hop collections, his influence in the entertainment industry, his influential online presence, and his fluency with both music and social media technologies such as myspace. This experience gave Gray an unusual inside perspective on the challenges, potentials, legal components, and technological possibilities of music and social media. After mp3.com closed, Gray returned to Pittsburgh where, through continuing his activist efforts, he would have a chance to put his knowledge to work as a supporter of another local hip-hop artist and activist, Jasiri “X” Smith.
When reviewing the past and current career development and political strategies of Jasiri “X” Smith, an important theme that stands out is the consistent relationship between critical consciousness, action, creative expression, and self-promotion. Smith’s ability to navigate these realms would become central to the strategies of 1Hood and 1Hood Media. Throughout his development as an artist and an activist, his accomplishments in one realm would allow him to build skills, social capital, and promotional capital that were useful in the other realms. This can be seen clearly by looking at the various phases of his development.

Jasiri Smith was born in Chicago and moved to Pittsburgh during his high-school years. He was born into a family with a history of civil rights struggles, although as a child he was not deeply involved in politics outside of the home. Before becoming Pittsburgh’s Nation of Islam minister, Smith performed for most of his life as either a hip-hop artist, a spoken word artist, or both. In his early years as a hip-hop artist, Smith developed his skills as a hip-hop lyricist and learned the techniques of self-promotion and confrontation that were necessary to stand out in the underground hip-hop scene of the day. As a spoken word artist, Smith learned to rely on storytelling, and less aggressive and competitive forms of creativity. This was reflected in his name change from “Furious Styles” to “Joe Smith.” Spoken word scenes in 1990s African-American communities were inspired by groups such as “The Last Poets,” and individuals, including Amiri Baraka, and they therefore tended to be saturated with a sense of political consciousness and cultural nationalism. This inspired Smith to reconnect with his family roots and
deepen his ability to analyze and speak about political issues as part of his creative expression.

In 2005, Smith became the head minister of Pittsburgh’s Nation of Islam Mosque. The Nation of Islam was well known within the African-American community, due in part to the legacy of Malcolm X. This meant that Smith’s attention was focused on using the mosque as a platform to organize Pittsburgh’s African-American community around local, national, and international issues. In this role, Smith became more visible within Pittsburgh, but he also gained some national recognition as a dynamic leader within the Nation of Islam through the organization’s nationally distributed newspaper, the *Final Call*. In interviews, Smith indicated that he was honored to take leadership of the mosque, and he began to focus less on his creative career, devoting his energies almost exclusively to his new role. However it was in this role that he met Paradise Gray, and the two began to work together, addressing local issues through art and activism.

**Pittsburgh: Most livable City**

The SK campaign focuses its humanitarian efforts on a “billion [or million, depending on the press release] African Children,” who are constructed as being geographically and culturally distant from the campaign’s target audience. These victims who are facing conditions of hunger and disease are mostly separate from what the supporters of the SK movement face on a daily basis. In contrast, 1Hood’s efforts address the specific inequalities of African-American urban life, with its roots and homebase unquestionably in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The demographic, economic, racial,
political, and cultural forces at work in Pittsburgh played clear roles in shaping civil society for marginalized groups such as African-Americans. Namely, the intersection of structural inequalities that African-Americans faced and the internal diversity of the African-American populations in terms of age, gender, occupation, religious affiliation, and political ideology required a spectrum of community-focused organizations. The range of organizations represented in the early composition of 1Hood’s coalition was a reflection of the legacies of these organizations. Secondly, many of the members of 1Hood were themselves products of Pittsburgh’s social conditions, and this affected the stakes and style of their activism.

In both 1985 and 1997, Rand McNally declared Pittsburgh to be America’s most livable city, largely as a result of its transition from a steel and manufacturing-based economy to a new economic base (Boyer & Savageau, 1985; Savageau, 2007). But for African-Americans there was another story to be told. By 1989, the number of African-Americans who lived in poverty in Pittsburgh had risen to 41 percent (Trotter & Day, 2010). In some ways, the story of African-Americans in Pittsburgh bears resemblance to the story of marginalized populations who have lived in many other North American cities that transitioned from manufacturing-based economies to economies founded on financial services and the hi-tech industry. But Pittsburgh is an especially notable example.

After World War II, African-American migration to Pittsburgh grew extensively, reaching its peak in 1970. African-Americans worked in a number of low level occupations, but they eventually fought to gain access to Pittsburgh’s primary industries, such as the manufacturing base in the steel industry (Detrick, 1999). In time, these
workers also struggled to join unions and to be hired to management positions commensurate with their experiences. However, steel plants and other kinds of manufacturing began their exodus from Pittsburgh to find cheap sources of labor and less regulated environments, and this process was mostly complete by the 1980s. In addition to the lost jobs that resulted from the flight of the manufacturing industry, the mergers and centralization of management that formed the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center resulted in the firing of many African-Americans from union-based healthcare positions. The city was left in an overall depression, with African-American workers feeling its worst effects. In response to the depression, politicians began a program of urban renewal that involved investing in a new kind of economy. In 1975, newly elected mayor Richard S. Caliguiri ushered in what was called a “renaissance,” investing in the development of a new kind of economy.

The problem for African-Americans was that they were not positioned to take advantage of the opportunities created in Pittsburgh’s new economies. Many of the new job opportunities stemming from the renaissance-related public/private partnerships, and building were taking place in downtown Pittsburgh, with jobs centering in the financial services industry. Many formerly independent banks were now concentrated under PNC, which eroded the number, nature, and quality of these jobs. Other jobs were in the information technology sector. But work in both of these industries required hard-to-acquire specialized education, and there was evidence of racial discrimination that worked to restrict African-American employment to entry-level positions. These positions were a far cry from the unionized jobs that had been fought for in previous decades. Even with these jobs, unemployment became increasingly widespread,
particularly among young African-American males. Several news reports discussed this problem. Trotter and Day (2010) point to a news report that suggested that in 1989 a black male had a one in four chance of experiencing a “personal recession.” A Pittsburgh resident interviewed for this study discussed the street-level reaction to this in light of Pittsburgh’s public image as one of America’s most livable cities:

So that was a stark contrast for a lot of people who lived here because they were like, wow, the most livable city? Who is it the most livable city for? And you would hear people talk about that quite a bit. (Minekekh Men Aungkh, Personal Communication, June 14, 2012)

These high rates of poverty and unemployment were undoubtedly important factors that contributed to two other destabilizing trends. First there were high rates of gang-related violence and other crimes. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of shootings rose dramatically, and mostly took place in African-American communities, such as Homestead. Secondly, the response by the police department resulted in an uptick in the national and historic problem of disproportionate arrest, harrassment, and shooting of young black males by the city’s police. The growing incidences of shootings of unarmed black men by police prompted a national discussion on this topic within African-American progressive circles. In 1996, Ralph Bangs and Hong began issuing a variety of reports documenting many of these factors (Bangs & Hong, 1996; Hunt, Bangs, & Thompson, 2002).

Between the 1960s and 2005, a dynamic and diverse ecosystem of local organizations and regional branches of national organizations, with deep ties to Pittsburgh’s African-American communities, and deep legacies of civil rights struggle, arose to address these trends. It is to these organizations and their relationships that the
1Hood coalition can trace its roots. There were numerous local churches and church led non-profit organization such as the Urban Youth Action (UYA). UYA was founded in 1966 by Reverend Bernard H. Jones to address issues of job training, and was continued by his son, Reverend Cornel Jones, in 2003. In addition to being a founding member of the 1Hood coalition, Cornel Jones was also a community coordinator for the local NAACP, the Pittsburgh chapter of which had been led for a number of years by Tim Stevens. Stevens went on to form and lead the Black Political Empowerment Project (B-Pep) in 1986. B-Pep focused on voting rights and political representation, and Stevens brought his generation of leadership to 1Hood’s initial gatherings. Former Black Panther, Rashad Byrdsong, founded Community Empowerment Association (CEA), one of Pittsburgh’s largest and most well-funded organizations in 1994. This organization aimed to provide family support, education, housing, economic development, and employment. Byrdsong and several youth leaders that he had employed were also early members of the 1Hood coalition. Another 1Hood member, Darnel Drewery, represented the Center for Victims of Violence and Crime, a non-profit that addressed sexual assault, domestic violence, homicide, and other types of violence and crime.

Recalling those initial meetings, Smith (Jasiri “X”) tries to remember who, specifically, was present:

I don't know if you know these people, Majestic, Knowledge, Lee Davis...I can't think, dude. They all worked with CEA, they worked under Rashad, Darnell Drewery he’s with the league of...he’s with the, um, Citizen’s, what was it called? He was with an organization. Cornell Jones, Khari Mosley...but it was a group of us.
Smith’s inability to remember the specific organizational affiliation of the group members was partially indicative of the fact that their relationships were highly friendship based. Men-Aungkh also remembers the origins of 1Hood this way:

When 1Hood first developed I first heard of it as a loose organization of many different brothers that was kind of leaderless…It was almost, I don't know all the people because their was so many different people affiliated with it. I remember Khari Mosley, I remember… I thought brother Cornel was involved at one point. Chenjerai: Reverend Cornel Jones?
Minekekh: Reverend Cornel Jones, and other than that it was unclear to me, it seemed like some of their friends and affiliates. (Personal Communication, June 14th, 2012)

Other organizations represented the dynamic and active Pittsburgh community of African-American Muslims, some of whom eventually became part of 1Hood. In addition to Pittsburgh’s diverse community of Sunni Muslims, the Nation of Islam, whose presence in Pittsburgh dates back to the 1960s, would eventually produce minister Jasiri “X” Smith, one of 1Hood's most visible members. The Light of Age Mosque and the related Sankore Institute would be led by Luqmon Abdul Salaam. The Pittsburgh legacy of the five percent nation of Islam would produce two other prominent 1Hood members, Majestic Lane and Knowledge Allah, who also worked with CEA.

Paradise recalls that the initial 1Hood meetings came out of a planning meeting for an event that he was organizing called “hip-hop for Katrina.”

Chenjerai: Who was kind of at that meeting?
Paradise: A lot of the stakeholders, a lot of the people who are the black progressive people here in Pittsburgh. You know, people who work for non-profit agencies. People who work for politicians or, like, basically hip-hop political millennials…Cornel, Drewery, Khari Moses. The original members of 1Hood, most of us were in the meeting too. Jasiri was involved. My wife was actually. Chenjerai: What’s her name?
Paradise: Her name at the time her name was Renee Wilson. She had an organization called People Against Police Violence…that was her organization.
Paradise discusses the fact that these early meetings were balanced in terms of male and female participation but attendance waned at subsequent meetings. Smith remembers these early events similarly:

Really, we, it was like we’re all like these young brothers so we called a meeting. We had three meetings and each meeting was about 20 people. 20-25 people, um, but you know, every other first meeting was like maybe like 30 people, then it was like 20 people, then it was like fifteen, it started to fall off. And at this time, you know what, we decided the name should be 1Hood…at the meetings because it was like it was hip-hop you know what I'm saying. 1Hood it was like...you know what I mean?

Organizational affiliations, friendships, creative projects, and political causes therefore connected the young African-American political activists and artists that would eventually initiate 1Hood. But several large national movements and trends in progressive activism also contributed significantly to the momentum that led to 1Hood’s early formation. Of these, the “Millions More Movement,” “The Gathering,” and several conferences representing “hip-hop politics” were the most important catalysts that caused them to form in the way that they did.

The Millions More Movement

One national event/movement that was influential for 1Hood’s development was the “Millions More Movement” (Harris, 2005). Ten years after the October 1995 Million Man March in Washington DC, The Millions More Movement was launched by a coalition of African-American organizations with different traditions of political struggle,

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6 Much of the discourse of hip-hop politics centers on the participation of youth in the generations that grew up with hip-hop music. See Chang, 2007; Kitwana, 2002.
some dating to before and during the civil rights era. The movement called for African-Americans to unify across ideological and political differences to direct their energy at “the reality of the condition of our suffering...that we might use all of our skills, gifts and talents to create a better world for ourselves, our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren” (Farrakhan, 2005).

Both the Million Man March and the Millions More Movement were initiated by the Nation of Islam, but were quickly embraced by an extremely broad coalition of progressive organizations and national political figures. These included the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, represented by Mrs. Coretta Scott King, The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, represented by Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, represented by Dr. Benjamin Chavis (who was also the former director of the NAACP), the National Council of Negro Women, represented by Dorothy Height, the New Black Panther Party, the National Action Network, led by Al Sharpton, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Charles Steele, and many other organizations. In addition to the grass-roots organizing and attendance of political organizations, the presence of several high-profile media and entertainment figures, such as Erykah Badu (a successful and politically oriented R&B singer) and Russell Simmons (a wealthy African-American record label executive who founded Def Jam), played a key role in attracting media attention and public attendance to the event (“Russell Simmons and the Millions More Movement,” 2005). This coalitional and culture-friendly approach

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7 A more complete list can be found at http://www.millionsmoremovement.com/index_noflash.html
to addressing conditions of historic inequalities and intra-community violence would be replicated in the structure of 1Hood.

In addition to the call for unity across ideological and religious divisions, a key goal of the Millions More Movement was for the participants in the event to take the ten principles of the movement\(^8\) back to their communities and find ways to institutionalize and continue them. Pittsburgh sent eight buses to the Millions More event, and after returning, several of the attending Pittsburgh leaders and activists worked towards using the momentum and inspiration to organize a Pittsburgh coalition. It was during these efforts that the aforementioned initial membership, organization and name of 1Hood were loosely formed. Smith explains that recruiting participants for the Millions More Movement was the first time he met Paradise Gray:

Smith: You riding with me! So we riding to the millions more movement listening to XClan and he’s telling us stories about all the songs. And we meet Bambaata cause he knows Bambaata and I meet Ernie Panicioli…legendary photographer. I mean, you know, and I’m like, Damn…and, um, but at that time me and Dise just was organizing so when we came back from the Millions More Movement, that’s how 1Hood starts.

Gray also remembers that the initial Pittsburgh envoy to the Millions More Movement included members from the LGBT community. Gray discusses their participation in the event as part of the reason that he eschews the homophobia that is sometimes a part of black cultural nationalist rhetoric (Personal Communication, 2012).

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\(^8\) http://www.millionsmoremovement.com/about.htm
Here's the thing, though. When we marched for Jordan Miles and the Jena Six and Pamela Lawton and every other person that we’ve ever taken to the streets of Pittsburgh with, members of that LGBT community had marched in solidarity right next to us. You know what I’m saying? When we got our buses to go to the Millions More March, a large group of LGBT students, they got two buses to go from the University of Pittsburgh to go the Millions More March. You know what I'm saying, so we live in these communities. We don’t live in a bubble, and these are our neighbors, and we organize with our neighbors. So we don’t have those hang-ups. You know, what I'm saying?

Initially, the 1Hood membership and the organizational structure bore many marks of its origins. The majority of 1Hood leadership was African-American males and, like the Millions More Movement, it included a broad range of organizational affiliations. Paradise Gray, who named the organization, was a nationally known hip-hop entertainment figure and had become a well-known local activist. Jasiri Smith, the young Minister of the Nation of Islam, had succeeded the former minister Anthony X to represent the next generation of Nation of Islam leadership in Pittsburgh. Other figures included the previously mentioned Luqmon Abdul Salaam of the Sankore institute, and Reverend Cornel Jones of Urban Youth Association, as well as Majestic Lane, Knowledge Allah, Darnel Drewery of the Center for Victims of Violence, Rashaad Byrdsong of CEA, and Khari Mosley, who worked as part of the League of Young Voters and as the Chairman of Pittsburgh’s 22nd Ward.

*The Gathering for Justice*

Another important influence on 1Hood’s beginnings was Harry Belafonte’s Gathering for Justice organization (“Harry Belafonte - Speaking Out For Justice | Link TV,” 2008). In 2005, Belafonte and a multi-generational group of activists and artists
from around the country began meeting several times yearly with the mission of passing the torch to a younger generation of civil rights leaders. Belafonte, who has a rich history of using his resources and celebrity to support a variety of political and civil rights causes, was passionate and explicit about the need for a young generation of political leadership to address contemporary inequalities. Several members of 1Hood were in attendance at the early meetings, and ultimately 1Hood would host a regional Gathering conference in Pittsburgh.

According to several members of 1Hood, these meetings influenced them in several ways. The multi-generational leadership development focus of the conference, with national participation, allowed 1Hood to trade strategic and tactical experiences and ideas with groups who were working to address a wider variety of social justice causes. In addition, they were able to increase their visibility and relationships on a national level. The Gathering also affected the organization’s positioning in the Pittsburgh nonprofit promotional public sphere. 1Hood’s hosting of a regional Gathering conference in 2007 raised the profile of the organization and unintentionally competed with the yearly “Black Family Reunion” event put on by the larger and more well-funded Community Empowerment Association.

Additionally, it is important to note that many of the early members of 1Hood were artists. Smith, Gray, Luqmon, Cornel Jones, Khari Mosley, and Darnel Drewery all boasted various levels of passion and success in careers as hip-hop artists. Belafonte represented a concrete and successful example of an African-American male who was using the social and financial capital of his art and celebrity towards political ends. Belafonte’s activism went beyond the surface level gestures of some celebrity figures.
The singer worked closely with Martin Luther King, launched strong critiques of U.S. foreign policy, and publicly aligned himself with communist critiques of American capitalist power. It was clear that he saw similar potential in a new generation of leaders armed with hip-hop cultural tools. Paradise spoke about his respect for Belafonte and how Belafonte influenced 1Hood:

My elder, Harry Bellefonte, is a unique individual who is extremely multi-talented and he was inspired to be the way he was from Paul Robeson. You see, so what elder Belafonte did, again, was just solidify our connection with our past and pass us a torch from the civil rights movement. So can you imagine what that kind of confidence can do for you, to know that a man who was an artist, he basically confirmed to you that you’re suppose to use your art for the greater good of the community and these are lessons that he learned from Paul Robeson, that he passed down to us in different conversations and different anecdotes that he had to say. Different conversations he taught for hours on end. You know, and in great detail about, you know, what the responsibility of an artist to his community, and how he should use his art to benefit the community, so, you know.

Smith talks about his initial invitation to the meeting and how eventually Gray’s writing about it contributed to the early branding of 1Hood.

So I go to the Millions More Movement. The next thing, Khari is like “yo, I want you to come to this meeting in DC with Harry Belafonte, so the next -
Chenjerai: So what is it like 2006?
Smith: It’s 2005, it’s 2005…So me and Harry Belafonte…this is the first meeting which ended up becoming this Gathering for Justice…when we first went to the thing with Harry Belafonte and I remember Disce writing an article about it and saying 1Hood... and me thinking, like, “Why did he put 1Hood in there? We ain't really…” (chuckles) nahmsaying
Chenjerai: He said it.
Smith: Yeah, but he understood you had to keep saying it even before it was fully formed.
**The National hip-hop Political Convention**

The turn of the millennium saw the formation of a number of organizations that worked towards using the community networks, promotional capital, and shared symbolic power of hip-hop culture to mobilize a new generation of leadership. These movements recognized some of the issues that faced young people in the contemporary area, as well as differences in lines of solidarity, their relationship to electoral politics and organizational structures, the media environment, their aesthetic tastes, and their shared cultural memory. Some of these changes were outlined by Bakari Kitwana in “The hip-hop Generation,” which examined the structural roots of the violence, poverty, and political and intellectual apathy that was becoming a prominent trend in the lives of many urban black youth (Kitwana, 2002). However, Kitwana also remained hopeful about the unprecedented opportunities for transformation that a younger generation of black youth could utilize. And he articulated the unique potential of hip-hop as a culture and a commodity to cross a variety of boundaries toward that end.

In 2004, Ras Baraka, son of Poet Amiri Baraka and Deputy Mayor of Newark, and several others called together the first National Hip-Hop Political Convention (NHHPC), and the convention has continued to meet regionally and nationally several times since that point (Chang, 2004). The organization pulled together a network of delegates who were artists, activists, and community leaders from across the United States, and several 1Hood members attended the first and then subsequent conventions. The League of Young Voters (also an explicitly hip-hop influenced and youth-focused leadership organization) was an important supporter of NHHPC, and 1Hood member
Khari Mosley served as its national chair until 2004 (Johnson, 2008). Smith and Paradise Gray also attended several of these conventions, and in several *Pittsburgh Courier* articles Paradise Gray strategically lists the NHHPC as his primary organizational affiliation. The NHHPC also created a five-point plan that was explicit in articulating the specific issues that would constitute the agenda and lines of solidarity of what Robin D.G. Kelley has called, “The New Civil Rights Movement.” These issues include the prison-industrial complex, juvenile justice, racism, sexism, education, and health/environmental justice.

Like the Gatherings, this organization offered another context to exchange ideas and form new national and international networks. However this convention also focused on specific strategies, such as performance events, protest songs, voter registration drives, political campaigns, marches, and other modes of protest that drew on the promotional power, community networks, and performance events of hip-hop culture.

**Early 1Hood Actions**

As a collective of individuals inspired by the aforementioned movements, 1Hood has been involved in numerous actions, protests, workshops, and other forms of political and proto-political engagement between 2005 and 2013. From those, I have selected a few to provide the background that will be necessary for the forthcoming analysis. These events were chosen because they represent important evolutions in the organization’s development, and because they provide examples of the complicated form of democratic action that were central to their contribution to the communal public sphere ecosystem.
Both members and observers of 1Hood describe the organization as coming together organically, through networks of friendships, art, and other organizational affiliations (some of which were religious), and through protests. All interviewed participants pointed to a series of marches through Pittsburgh’s Homewood district as being the first catalyst for 1Hood’s formation and action as a coalition.

*The Homewood Marches*

These marches began in late 2005, after the Millions More Movement, in response to several incidents of violence in the Homestead community. According to the several sources, the first march was in response to the shootings of a series of six people in one weekend, including the accidental shootings of a 3-year-old boy and 4-year-old girl. But the climate of poverty, crime, and violence in Homewood in 2005 was such that there were reports of violence—often drug related—on a weekly basis. The victims of these crimes were inevitably African-American residents.

Exacerbating these problems was the extreme and militaristic response of the Pittsburgh Police, who often used the increasing murder rate to intensify racial profiling, the enforcement of discriminatory drug laws, violations of privacy, and intimidating spectacles of force and occupation. During one period, the Pittsburgh police began to patrol Homewood with “the BEAR,” an 11-foot tall, 9-foot wide, 25-foot long, 25-ton armored vehicle that could transport up to fourteen officers in full tactical gear. In addition to a front bumper for “extra ramming power,” the armor-plated vehicle was equipped with four gun ports on each side. A Pittsburgh City Paper report almost seemed
to advertise the Lenton company’s BEAR vehicle, explaining that it would soon be “coming to a neighborhood near you.” (Deitch, 2007).

The marches that 1Hood initiated in response to these events aimed at reclaiming the physical spaces of the neighborhood by displaying a presence of African-American community members who would not accept the climate of violence. A large and rapidly growing group of men from various organizations, including the aforementioned 1Hood members and men from local churches, mosques, and political and neighborhood organizations began to walk peacefully but intentionally through the streets of Homewood in the early evening. Many of them were dressed in suits. The hope was that their presence would be a deterring force to those involved in these kinds of shootings. But the marches were also intended to suggest to the police and other onlookers that Homewood residents were protective of their own communities, and that these incidents did not give the police free reign. Smith describes these aspects of the March emphasizing a particular performance of black masculine solidarity as an important element:

A shooting took place. Six people shot in a 21-hour period in Homewood. And a three and four year old was last the two people that was shot. They was shot in they hands. So of course the national reaction from these community leaders was, like, we’re going to call a press conference. We was like “no. We’re going to the street.” So we took about 40 brothers and we walked the streets of Homewood. And we were walking in the middle of the streets, we was like “we're here and we not gonna allow our babies to get killed.” Because what the police had done, the police sent the BEAR through Homewood and had snipers on it. That was there, so we was like, we’re going to come as men. And the people was like, what is this? And we would tell them what it was. Women was like “go down there and walk with them dudes.” And I remember one thing, we had suits. Most of us. So these little…these children was like, what, ya'll going to funeral? They was like, “wow.” So we saw that we had to…so we saw we kept doing that. I'm talking about to this day people in Homewood still refer to that.
Gray describes the marches similarly, emphasizing the peaceful nature of the marches and their ability to communicate a reclaiming of safe, communal relationships and accountability:

We basically, we had been out of town, but when we came back we heard about this little boy and this little girl who were brother and sister who was sitting at their dinner table and had AK47 bullets come through the window and shot them both in their hands at the dinner table. I mean, how, I mean, if you’re eating and you’re a small person, I mean from your hand to your head is not a far place. Those kids could have been murdered. Straight up. So we were really angry about that and we just called on all black men in Pittsburgh. You know, show up. Let’s walk through this community. Let’s make a presence known so that it’ll do two things: It will deter people who are doing things in the community that is bad for the community, and at the same time we wanted to give hope to the children and hope to the elders that there is somebody that cares about them enough to put their selves out there; and like, we weren’t like, we’re coming to your rescue, but we were like, you know, we understand their fear and the frustration that you’re going through. And we’re going to try to come and give you some relief. So we all came together and we started walking the streets and you know, we wasn’t walking the streets and rolling up on young boys like we was pissed at them and mad at them and stuff. We was open arms with them. Letting them know that we loved them, you know what I mean, but we don’t like what they. You know, that what they’re doing was unacceptable.

The initial marches were not advertised and popular media were not central to the recruitment strategies, but the word spread. Pittsburgh resident and community educational worker Minekekh Men Aungkh also describes these marches. Like Gray, he describes them as an effort to reestablish rapport with Homewood’s disenfranchised, and consequently violent, youth.

I think it was just in response to trying to establish a rapport and presence with the brothers there. And a group of men who wanted to take it upon themselves just to literally walk through the streets and engage the youth. To stop being so afraid of the youth and to stop having kind of an armchair mentality about talking about what the youth are doing and what the youth are not doing, and particularly what the brothers are doing or not doing, and not really interfacing with them. So I think it was a group of men who were trying to have a more assertive approach to a really getting on the ground, walking through the neighborhood, and having a community presence.
Eventually, these marches would receive significant coverage in the weekly African-American newspaper, the New Pittsburgh Courier and on local websites like brotherashproductions.com and soulpitt.com (Woodson, 2007), and eventually in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the largest circulating newspaper in the city (O’Neill, 2007). The low-tech forms of communication, and the communal bonds that constituted the Homewood marches and are constituted by them are noteworthy in this study because questions can be raised as to whether 1Hood’s focus on social media began to erode the frequency of these kinds of events.

**Pamela Lawton**

On the evening of August 26, 2006, Pamela Lawton was driving to a children’s sporting event with four children in the car. Officer Eric Tatsuko stopped her for a potential inspection violation. For reasons that remain unclear, Officer Tatsuko drew his gun and aimed into the car. He did this from the passenger side window, where Lawton’s 7-year-old daughter, Josalyn, was sitting. Tatsuko kept the gun drawn on Lawton and the children until other officers arrived and told him to put the gun down. Lawton was charged with several automobile related violations, and with addressing the officer in a threatening manner (Todd, 2006a).

After reading about this incident in the New Pittsburgh Courier, Smith and Reverend Cornel Jones joined the community activists who were mobilizing in response to this incident. 1Hood contributed to a community effort to ensure that during Lawton’s arraignment and preliminary hearings, she was accompanied by a sympathetic crowd who
was displeased with the police. Her supporters also ensured that she brought her case to a local independent agency called the Citizens Police Review Board, that might conduct a more objective review of Tatsuko’s performance than the internal affairs unit would.

Ultimately, the combination of community support, the work of Lawton’s lawyer, and 1Hood’s efforts, helped propel the Lawton case to trial. She was found not guilty of the worst charges, but did face some fines, including driving without inspection and without insurance. The trial did not require legal consequences for Tatsuko, and an internal affairs unit cleared him. The Citizens Police Review Board initially heard the case but ultimately dismissed it due to Lawton’s refusal to testify, which was allegedly on the advice of her lawyer.

Both 1Hood members and other sources in the Pittsburgh community cite the Lawton event as a pivotal one for a variety of reasons. It was the first effort of 1Hood to directly engage the police and the political system as a coalition. The Homewood marches were focused on building community solidarity and intra-community focused. This event used the diverse social and political capital that the coalition could draw on to bring pressure on the police department. This included meetings with local politicians, tense meetings with the police, and the active soliciting of wide-media attention.

This was also 1Hood’s first media heavy event. There was virtually no media coverage of the initial Homewood marches, but a variety of news outlets mentioned the Lawton case. The black press, in the form of the New Pittsburgh Courier, was the first to devote significant and detailed coverage to the organization’s efforts. The front page story in the New Pittsburgh Courier, headlined “One Hood Challenges System,” featured six 1Hood members after a meeting with Councilman William Peduto, in whose district
the event had occurred (Todd, 2006b). The coverage of the event, particularly that of the 

*New Pittsburgh* was a defining moment that impacted the young coalition in a variety of ways. Paradise Gray describes the event:

> That’s when Pamela Lawton had the incident where the police officer pulled the gun on her 7 year-old daughter. You know, so we stepped up for that black woman and child and we was like “no. We don't care who you are: police, crook, thug, drug dealer, whatever. You're not going to be pulling guns on little baby girls in our community without us having something to say about it.” You know what I'm saying? Once the Courier got a hold of that, that really propelled us, you know, past a lot of the established grassroots organizations and people.

In particular, a large part of Gray and Jasiri Smith’s success was their use of entertainment connections to get the story in national hip-hop media, which then spread into some national news outlets. Gray comments that, “we went national first on the Lawton event because the local mainstream media wouldn't pay attention.” This would become an important component of 1Hood’s strategy in future actions.

**Jasiri X Musical Career**

Subsequent to the Pamela Lawton incident and in the midst of ongoing initiatives by the 1Hood coalition between the years of 2007 and 2008, Paradise and Jasiri Smith created 1Hood Media—a separate entity devoted to for profit media productions. Many of 1Hood Media’s productions focused on Smith, who, with Paradise’s support as manager and video director, began to transition into a full-time career in hip-hop activism. This transition required him to adapt more consistent and strategic habits of music production, and to adjust to expanded visibility. Amidst the numerous songs that Jasiri Smith made during this time, three productions were particularly influential in his
emergence on the national stage as a hip-hop activist. The first was his song, *Free the Jena 6*, which was released following the arrest and charging of Mychal Bell, in relation to the Jena Six controversy (Jasiri X, 2007). Nationally syndicated radio personality and media mogul, Michael Baisden, took notice of the song and, in addition to giving the song some national airplay in his coverage of the Jena Six incident, he also took Smith on tour. Realizing that there was a national audience for the political messages that he was addressing, Smith looked out for the next opportunity to comment on a national event.

This moment came roughly six months later, with the Sean Bell verdict in April 2008. The 23-year-old father was shot on a train ride home on January 1, 2006, and two and a half years later Justice Arthur J. Cooperman found the police officers involved in the case not guilty. The verdict made national headlines as it rekindled and intensified the sense of outrage and deep injustice that many African-Americans had felt two years earlier upon learning about the initial event. Jasiri Smith responded with the song, *Enough’s Enough*, which launched a clever and incisive critique of the verdict and a call for action (Jasiri X, 2008). Many of the national media blogs, internet radio stations, and media personalities that had picked up on *Free the Jena Six* also played or discussed *Enough’s Enough*. In addition to introducing hip-hop audiences to the details and politics of the Sean Bell case, and serving as one of several hip-hop anthems rallying for prosecution, the song helped Smith maintain the momentum of his career.

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9 The Jena Six refers to six African-American teenagers in Jena, Louisiana that were accused of aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated battery for the beating of Justin Barker, a white high school student. A variety of onlookers argued that the beating must be understood in the context of a variety of racially charged previous incidents, such as the hanging of nooses from a tree in the school’s courtyard. In this context, Jena Six protesters argued that white youth in Jena had been given more lenient legal treatment. A large civil rights protest ensued that involved over 15,000 protestors and national news coverage.
The Jena Six and Sean Bell songs reinforced to Smith the strategic and promotional power of responding with a catchy and provocative song immediately after widely covered events took place. This enabled his music to become part of the media buzz around current events. In an effort to put this insight to work and build even further on his momentum, Smith started the online YouTube series *This Week with Jasiri X* in September 2008. Each week, Smith would release a song that offered critical commentary on a range of political affairs. In addition, each installment featured a collage of news clips from the week’s event, with intermittent shots of Smith and the 1Hood logo. Influential hip-hop blogs, such as Allhiphop.com, picked up the series, and Smith released a new song and video weekly for 18 episodes (Webb, 2011). Smith would repeat this tactic numerous times throughout the rest of his career, addressing social issues, including the Jordan Miles and Trayvon Martin cases and the Occupy Protests in 2011.10

*Justice for Jordan Miles*

On January 12, 2010, three off-duty police officers, Michael Salutte, David Sisak, and Richard Ewing, profiled, chased down, and brutally assaulted Jordan Miles, an 18-year old, unarmed, African-American male and Homestead resident. Miles, a stellar and dynamic student at Kappa high-school with no criminal record, was walking to his grandmother’s home in Homestead when three white males in plain clothes exited a car and accused him of being in possession of a gun, drugs, and money. Following a verbal

exchange, Miles ran and the officers pursued him and beat him to the point that his face was unrecognizable. Miles was then handcuffed, arrested, and charged with a variety of crimes including loitering, “prowling,” attempting to escape, resisting arrest, and aggravated assault. Miles spent time in jail before being released to his mother with wounds so extensive that she allegedly did not at first recognize her son (Plushnick-Masti, 2010).

In the subsequent steps of the legal process, the officers attempted to defend their response by saying that they had confused a Mountain Dew bottle in Miles’s pocket for a gun. They also claimed that they had received a call from a neighbor who had reported Miles as a prowler. However, they were unable to support these claims, when there was no bottle found or entered into evidence, and the alleged neighbor denied making the call. After an initial investigation, the District Attorney announced that the city would not be prosecuting the officers. This prompted outrage from a variety of organizations, including 1Hood, which had been following the case from its early stages.

Under the leadership of Paradise Gray, 1Hood became involved with the Miles case, initiating and supporting a number of different strategies aimed at the goal of holding the officers accountable and getting Miles’s charges dismissed. While this project focuses on the media and cultural components of these strategies, it is important to situate those in the context of the larger Justice for Jordan Miles movement that emerged. In fact, it is the relationship between the promotional strategies and other types of advocacy work that is the subject of this analysis. In addition to forming a relationship of trust and council with the family of Jordan Miles, 1Hood nurtured and supported the development of the Alliance for Police Accountability. Led by Brandi Fisher, this organization worked
with Nigel Parry and other local activists to set up the Justice For Jordan Miles website (Parry, 2010). As with the Lawton Case, 1Hood used its influence through its coalition members to bring the attention of a variety of organizations to Jordan Miles’s cause. Working with the Alliance for Police Accountability, 1Hood led and supported a number of public events, including rallies at the Police Station and County offices, and marches through Homewood that brought supporters to the scene of the crime.

Both Gray and Smith used their growing influence in national hip-hop and political media to bring national attention to the case. This included relentlessly posting on Facebook, Twitter, and national news and entertainment websites. Finally, Smith and Gray uploaded a song and video to YouTube on July 4, 2011, which currently has over 44,000 hits. The song, *Jordan Miles*, which will be analyzed in depth in future chapters, offered a narrative of the case, identified the three officers involved, and called for community action. Smith kept the attention on Jordan Miles’s case by performing the song consistently at his speaking engagements, workshops, and entertainment gigs through 2012 and 2013. But Paradise stresses the importance of physical presence to these efforts.

And then about two weeks went by, and I heard it again. So when I heard it again, I called my man, Tim Stevens, and of course I called Jasiri, and we organized an event down at the mayor’s office in the city council. And we organized with the students from Jordan Miles’ school, Kappa, and their principal, and the students—about 30 or 40 students—walked out of the school and walked over to the city council building.

Chenjerai: Now how did you organize that? Traditional ways? Was you using Facebook?
Gray: No. Traditional phone calls, emails, and person visits. You know, so we don’t just rely on online stuff. That’s ludicrous because the vast majority of black people are not even online and those of us that are online, or with the phone or something, can’t really have full access to the gist of the multimedia that way. So we organized that. Went down to the city county building and appeared before the
civilian police review board and we packed that thing. So after that we did a rally and a march, and the kids spoke and it was real good, you know, a bunch of people spoke. Then I got to meet Jordan and his mom and you know.

However, Smith describes how the role of social media and hip-hop culture became more important as the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign proceeded.

My role was really about bloggin about it, raising awareness about it, Twitter and Facebook, um, and kinda doing that. When we came to do the song, at first the family was kinda like they wanted to wait until the federal government decided whether or not they were gonna be a part of the investigat-, at the time the federal government’s investigating. So you know, so then I’m going to the rallies and stuff. Um, and um, but once the federal government decided not to investigate, then they was like “ya’ll do ya’ll thing.” So that’s when we do the video and put Zimpala’s name on there and shut down Zimpala’s phone line. We shut Zimpala’s phone line down when we put the video out, literally.

Based in part on the leverage earned by public scrutiny of the case, Miles was able to sue and settle with the city for $75,000, on the condition that the city would pay all damages awarded in a civil trial if the officers were found guilty. A civil trial was held in the summer of 2012 in which all three officers were found not guilty of maliciously prosecuting Miles, and the jury deadlocked on the counts of excessive force and false arrest. With the support of the aforementioned coalition behind him, Miles pursued and was granted a new civil trial. This new trial is currently scheduled to begin in December of 2013 (Lord, 2013).

Conclusion

SK and 1Hood are guided by very different understandings of social justice. Chris Clarke and Curtis Jackson envision a world in which poverty doesn’t go away as a structural reality, but celebrities and multi-national corporations facilitate a new status
quo of institutionalized poverty relief. 1Hood envisions urban communities whose revolutionary pursuit of structural transformation, democratic accountability, increased political participation, communal bonds, and creative expression are enriched rather than hindered by geographic regions, or organizational affiliation. This chapter has explored the different political, industrial, and personal factors that are behind these different understandings.

Despite these differences, both organizations have arrived at the strategies of brand building as an important way to advance their agendas amidst the pressures of the promotional public sphere. Who are the key actors/stakeholders/shareholders in the brand building process, and what are the tensions between them? How can we assess questions of meaning and value for each organization? What does the term “brand” mean in the context of each organization’s initiative? What are the boundaries, possibilities, and contradictions of meaning that each organizational brand must work through? What are the specific branding strategies that each organization employs to further its vision of social justice? The following chapter turns to these questions.
Chapter 4

Branding the Cause: Social Justice and the Logic of Brand Commodification

This chapter examines elements of and changes to the media-strategies of SK, the 1Hood coalition, and 1Hood Media as processes of commodification related to the development of a specific kind of commodity: the brand-commodity. In that sense, the broadest argument this chapter aims to make is that the concept of commodification provides one of the most comprehensive perspectives for making sense of the dynamic scope and activity of brands.

Because the business of SK revolves around the marketing of a product, the logics of brand-equity and commodification are somewhat explicit in this case, and are discussed quite frankly in some contexts by SK spokespersons. Jackson frequently mentions the concept of building brand-equity when discussing his business strategies in interviews with the Huffington post and the Wall Street Journal. But the concepts of branding and commodification have different implications in the case of 1Hood. While Smith and Gray use the language of the brand when discussing certain elements of organizational strategy, 1Hood didn’t start as a profit generating entity, and many of its original members continue to describe it as primarily an activist organization. Likewise, Jasiri Smith is forthright about his intention to make a living from his hip-hop career and increase the reach of his musical products, but he also sees himself as an activist first. Discussing his movement in between these roles, Smith explained this in an interview:

I would say I’m an activist first because… I mean, yeah, I have album that hasn’t dropped yet.
Chenjerai: Because you have to say that or people are going to look at you as inauthentic?
Smith: Nah, nah, nah, well, if you look at the hip-hop that I making, it’s coming out of activist..like stances. (Personal communication, June 12, 2012)

In light of this conflict, it is necessary to clarify that by examining media strategies as processes of commodification and branding, this study seeks to understand the extent to which specific tensions can be clarified by applying such a perspective in areas where it seems to be a less obvious choice.

The logic of the brand-commodity is, in part, a response to the promotional public sphere. Earlier, we discussed the promotional public sphere as a context of discourse in which the generalization of exchange into a wide variety of contexts of human interaction means that communicative acts are privileged according to their potential to generate profit for certain gatekeepers. Brands translate the pre-existing, but unruly eco-systems of goods, services, creative production, aesthetics, human relationships, human affection, and various forms of governance into much more manageable forms, symbols, contexts, processes, and promotional capital that bring quantifiable value to key shareholders.

In chapter 2, I explored concepts that attempt to articulate with more specificity how processes of commodification work. The primary concepts here were abstraction, equivalence, and reification. These concepts will be put to work in the analysis of branding processes and brand-related tensions in each case. In each case, brand logic furthered the abstraction of labor, creativity, organizational relationships, conceptions of poverty, etc., from their living manifestations in the material world. In this process, the abstracted phenomena became flexible signifiers that brand strategists worked to
associate with brand-related meanings. But as we will see, this process also exposed the internal contradictions of brand narratives.

The SK campaign involves efforts to brand an energy drink supplement, to rebrand Curtis Jackon’s career, and, to a lesser extent, to promote the WFP. Therefore, from the beginning, SK understood the building of brand-equity as its goal and the resulting processes of commodification structured its engagement with philanthropy, and its relationship to its audience and other organizational partners. The problem was to articulate how the brand could function as a rebranding effort for 50 Cent’s musical career, constructing him as “the ultimate street king,” while also constructing the audience as mini-street kings in order to maximize the power of the audience-commodity by using the discourse and digital technologies of interactivity. The connotations of hierarchy clashed with the discourse of individual empowerment. Did empowerment lie in the users “energy” or with 50 Cent, and how could these be connected?

In the case of 1Hood, the central tension resulted from the way that the 1Hood coalition and the 1Hood Media brand have begun to eclipse the identities of its constituent organizations and individuals, and the less than efficient processes of its “public sphere ecosystem.” As a coalition, 1Hood is trying to satisfy a variety of needs. These include the need to unify organizations with different ideologies in the service of certain social justice causes, to hold powerful institutions accountable for their injustices, and to develop sustainable creative careers and lifestyles. However, these tasks are easier said than done when the targets of accountability also exercise disproportionate influence in the public sphere. What implication does the trope of unity or oneness present for the
“many hoods” whose labors and interests 1Hood represents? These challenges are explored in the context of the media strategies of the organization.

In each case, the processes of reification can be seen as each brand comes to have its own identity, specifically in mass-mediated products. The common practice of describing complex social relations by using brand names, involves a variety of implications for organizational members and for our own understanding. In such a context, messages that gain widespread support will tend to be connected to commodities that are perceived as profitable. This means that the rules of profitable communication will often take on an ideological appearance as simply “rules” of successful communication. This reality incentivizes coalitions like 1Hood to learn the related boundaries and patterns of public utterance, and structure their own cultural production accordingly. This chapter zooms in on specific examples of this in each case, focusing on how different reified articulations of the brand-commodity are related to the emerging promotional capital of institutional and individual actors in each case.

Exploring the ways that the logic of the brand-commodity structures each case, also offers evidence about the nature of promotional capital, another concept that was explored in chapter 2. Promotional capital is one form of value that is generated by the processes of commodification. The concept of promotional capital builds on and exceeds the usefulness of the audience-commodity concept when trying to understand phenomena such as the exchanges between SK’s parent company, Pure Growth Partners, and the WFP. It also helps to elucidate 1Hood’s connection to the Occupy movement and the value of its media products. Throughout this chapter, a look at the specific strategies that each case uses to optimize the brand’s positioning reveals the forms that promotional
capital takes during various phases of its circulation. It is important to note that while some of these phases involve the conversion of promotional capital into economic capital, promotional capital also circulates and is exchanged in a variety of other forms.

This chapter will now turn to examples of how this process unfolds in each of the cases under analysis. In the case of SK, processes of branding and commodification align with and intensify the campaign’s corporate and aristocratic logic of humanitarian action and hierarchical organizational structure. In contrast, 1Hood’s branding efforts were a site of tensions related to the coalition’s efforts to increase and facilitate democratic participation in local issues, while also extracting the benefits of having some control of the media narratives that operated in this process. After exploring the connotations of SK as a brand name, I then explore the “Are You a Street King?” user-generated video campaign, the SK Energy rewards program, the WFP’s social media efforts, and some strategic considerations surrounding Jackson’s rebranding. The next section, on 1Hood, explores the connotations of 1Hood as a brand name, and then goes on to discuss the strategic elements of the emergence of 1Hood Media as brand. Following this, the chapter discusses how the brand was leveraged into a variety of political and income-generating opportunities.

The Connotations of Street King

In each of the organizations under analysis, different connotations of the brand name offer clues to contradictions in the branding strategy. The brand name “Street King” is an example of this. The term “Street King” has specific resonance in hip-hop. Its
significance is illustrated by the fairly high usage of the terms in different types of hip-hop texts. For example, on the most popular website for hip-hop mix-tapes, Datpiff.com, there are 71 distinct mix-tapes that include the terms “street king,” “street kings,” or “street kingz” in the title. Although the term clearly predates 2008, it gained prominence with the 2008 feature-length film “Street Kings,” a dark, gritty narrative about the drug trade and rule-bending police officers in the LAPD (Ayer, 2008). The film includes acting from two prominent hip-hop stars, Common and The Game. And, in fact, the aforementioned mix-tapes were released after the film, illustrating the film’s importance in establishing the cultural coinage of the term.

There are a variety of connotations at work in these uses of the term. Some of these differences in meaning are the result of the implied relationship of the term “king” to the term “street.” One frequent use of term is to describe an individual who has “conquered the streets.” When hip-hop artists use the term this way, they are often referring to their authority or influence over resources in a particular location or among a certain class of people, specifically those “who are from the streets” or may be living “the street life.” Often this includes alternative mechanisms of success and self-promotion, which may include, but are not limited, to those of crime. But when used to mean “king of the streets,” the term street king might also mean the streets of a particular area. In the discursive context of New York hip-hop culture (of which Curtis Jackson is a part), the term street king seems to bear some relationship to the term “king of New York.”

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11 When used in this context, the term also references the film “King of NY” (1990). This film also focuses on the illegal drug trade. Because the drug trade operates as a central metaphor in hip-hop culture, the concept of unifying various neighborhoods is often understood in an imperialistic sense, wherein an individual achieves the level of king by expanding one’s influence and power to include a wide variety of
Debates over “King of New York” status became common among hip-hop artists, fans, and media, in the early 1990s as a way to discuss the relative influence of New York-based hip-hop artists. In a 2009 BET special, journalist Harry Allen referenced this tradition when he asked Jackson, “Why is Jay-Z widely considered the king of New York and not you?” (G-Unit Promotions, 2009). In this context, the term, SK, can also be read as related to the term “King of Pop,” that has been given to singers ranging from Frank Sinatra to Michael Jackson to Justin Bieber in media and marketing discourses. In either case, kingship is being used to suggest a dominant competitive status or to connote top-down influence over others.

Walker (1977) argues that the tradition of aristocratic-titleing in African-American popular music genres combines the competitive connotations of these titles with the effort of these artists to claim a sense of public respect that was mostly unavailable elsewhere in a white supremacist society, and that the names of figures such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, or King Solomon Burke, should be understood in this sense. The usage of the term “king” in the brand name “Street King” is an example of this. The Red Bull beverage company—a partner of SK—drew on several of these connotations when it recently named its 2010 New Orleans brass band competition/showcase, “Red Bull Street Kings” (“Red Bull Street Kings,” 2010).

Another connotation uses the term as a metaphor for socioeconomic mobility. In this sense, the street king is not king of the street but king from the Streets. Hip-Hop entrepreneurs who have come from poor backgrounds and/or lower middle class origins neighborhoods, blocks, etc. Rapper Biggie Smalls, one of the first rappers to be crowned with this title, took on the nickname “Frank White,” which is the name of the film’s main character.
frequently activate this meaning to indicate the idea that they have achieved financial success, fame, and influence that is on par with other celebrities or other members of a more privileged class. The term “street,” in this context, refers to a particular socioeconomic location and its related habitus for negotiating the field of cultural production. When used like this, the idea of kingship refers more to a status of wealth and influence as features of class, rather than power over regions or individuals. Notions of benevolence or conspicuous displays of generosity are consistent with both the king from the streets and the king of the streets usages.

Finally, the term street king might be used to mean a “king in the streets.” In this usage, the term suggests that despite one’s socio-economic location in the “streets,” an individual can still access a feeling of control or nobility within one’s life and current circle of influence. This usage activates an understanding of kingship that is partially about class, but more so about control or agency with respect to one’s immediate circumstances or environment. Again, in this context, the terms “king” or “queen” recall the efforts of some scholars and cultural leaders to counter the ideological effects of white supremacy by pointing to the existence of ancient African kingdoms of Egypt, Nubia, Mali, Nigeria, and others, and encouraging African-Americans to identify with this vision of their ancestry. The names of hip-hop artists such as “King Sun,” “Queen Mother Rage,” “Queen Latifah,” and “King Tee” are reflective of this trend (S. S. Walker, 1977).

I have separated these connotations out here into something like distinct categories to aid us in seeing the implications of each connotation and the possible conflicts between them. However in reality, the connotations overlap heavily and are
often simultaneously at work. These layers of meaning, semiotic tensions, and overlap can be an advantage in art, where the ambiguity can add to the aesthetic power. But as we will see, in the world of integrated-marketing and branding, conflicting messages can present a challenge.

**Branding Street King**

The integrated marketing campaign for SK was focused on selling the beverage, but also on building broader forms of brand-equity. The possibility of exchange, that is to say that possibility of eventually selling shares in the brand-commodity to public or private investors, was an ever-present structuring incentive and guiding logic. The company worked toward these ends by combining carefully managed, integrated marketing strategies with other promotional strategies that are used more frequently within the hip-hop genre. Several online platforms delivered highly scripted, produced, and edited video and audio content, while the campaign used interactive affordances to promote and harness the activity of fans. As will be shown, messages of hierarchy, aristocracy, and traditional philanthropic discourses would be preserved and reinforced throughout all of these communications, and it was in the mix of these different kinds of strategies that a struggle for the meaning of the street king would be fought.

Early in the campaign, an article in a beverage industry trade publication announced that Chris Clarke, Curtis Jackson, the WFP, and several executives from beverage companies such as Texas Big Red and Red Bull, would work together to launch the SK brand (Zegler, 2011). Quoting Clarke, the article stated that the initial marketing
budget was approximately $50 million, and that social media would form the center of its marketing efforts for the first eight months. This strategy would build on the 20 million weekly viewers of Jackson’s website, “Thisis50.com,” as well as his 17 million Facebook fans and 4.8 million Twitter followers. The company hoped to subsequently coordinate television, radio, and print ads with the release of Jackson’s forthcoming album.

In line with the social media strategy, the campaign began an aggressive and active Twitter campaign. On August 8, 2011, a message was posted on the 50cent Twitter account that was quickly retweeted by the newly formed SKenergshots Twitter account:

SKEnergyShots #SK RT @50cent I want to impact ppls lives. I created a new goal for myself, I want to feed a billion people in africa over the next 5 yrs.

Among other things, this tweet indicates the early privileging of individuality and hierarchy, rather than collectivity and democracy, in the branding of the campaign’s philanthropic aspect. The pronoun “I” is used three times in a 27-word statement. In addition, the statement indicates that the goal was created “for myself.” One way to grasp the implications of this would be to consider what would have been different if the tweet was phrased like this:

RT @50cent Let’s impact ppls lives. Can we challenge ourselves with a new goal? Let’s feed a billion people in Africa over the next 5 yrs.

The point here is not to suggest that this phrasing should have been used, but to demonstrate that this phrasing would have decentered Jackson somewhat, and emphasized the campaign as collective action. In contrast, the first, actual phrasing invites the reader to understand the campaign as an expression of Jackson’s personal identity and benevolence. This tendency permeated the early social media of the campaign, which itself became a central site of brand building.
The SKEnergyShots Twitter account posted over 1,700 tweets between August 8, 2011 and January 29, 2013. These included original tweets as well as retweets of the user accounts that responded. 50 Cent’s Twitter account began including the Hashtag #SK on a large portion of its Tweets, mentioning the campaign in tweets, and retweeting the numerous fan mentions. Between September 29, 2011 and Jan 29, 2013, about 770 tweets out of roughly 2,430 total tweets mentioned the campaign and included the SK hashtag. The campaign was also advertised on the associated “G-unit family” Twitter account. On August 29, 2011, the SKEnergyShots Twitter account included a link to the recently launched SK Energy Shots website, and encouraged followers to register there.

The center of the website’s first page was a high definition slide show of ostensibly hungry African children, atop an all-black background, with gold and white lettering that matched the color of the first version of the SK packaging (see Figure 4-1). Surrounding these photos were images of the SK logo, Jackson, and bottles of the beverage (See Appendix B). The website also included descriptions of the humanitarian campaign, promotional videos, information about the ingredients of the products, information about how to become a distributor, embedded television and radio commercials, and various press releases and news updates about the campaign. In this regard, the website seemed to function as a home base both for fans of the product and brand, but also for current and future distributors and promoters to be able to access the information and media that they might want to use. As the campaign progressed, the website strategically removed or included certain elements. The early commercials were removed, and later versions of the website featured tabs that linked viewers to the rewards program and the SK inner circle.
On August 22, 2011, the Street King YouTube account was created, and then, on September 14, 2011, the campaign launch video was uploaded to YouTube. Between this date and January 2013, the account would upload a total of 16 videos, although only eight of them were featured on the main page of the site by 2013 (the videos here would eventually coincide with the videos that were available on the website).

The SK Energy Shots Facebook page was also launched in August 2011, and began posting promotions for the drink with a combination of invitations to register on the website, various energy related quotes, and status updates. 50 Cent’s Facebook page also began posting about the campaign around this same time. A Facebook account for “The SK Inner Circle” was opened in August 2011. Roughly one year after its launch, the
account closed and moved to a different blog-based platform on September 21, 2012 (Shakur, 2012). The page had amassed 506 members by that time.

All of the buildup to the official launch on September 14, 2011 included discursive appeals to fans that mandated support of Jackson’s efforts via consumption of the drink and the inclusion of #SK in the hashtag, and established these actions as “joining the movement.” For example on Sept 8, 2011, the SKEnergyShots account posted this tweet:

SKEnergyShots Put #SK in your tweets if you support @50Cent’s plan to feed 1 billion people in Africa over 5 years.

In other examples, the SKEnergyShots account selectively retweeted messages from other user accounts:

**HNR CEO**
@50cent__News Im down with the movement, I just joined the streetkings.com website, ima order me a couple cases #SK
6:43 PM Sep 15th, 2011 from web retweeted by SKEnergyShots

As we shall see in the forthcoming analysis these appeals would include the idea that anyone who supports the campaign and uses their energy in certain ways could be a Street King. The first official launch event, however, was unequivocal about who the real king was. On September 14, 2011 Jackson arrived in Times Square atop a double decker SK tour bus, surrounded by female models in tight fitting SK skirts, for the official launch of the brand. As the bus drove through crowds, Jackson’s staff tossed shirts and other promotional items off the bus at the fans (sometimes forcefully) (*50 Cent Launches Street King in Times Square | 50 Cent Music*, 2011). The video indicates that, occasionally, Jackson left the bus for photo opportunities with fans, but mostly he remained on the second level of the bus, close to the models. From this vantage point, he
addressed a video camera that was recording the events for a promotional spot. Some footage showed Jackson grabbing the rear end of one of the models while he and the models looked over the balcony of the bus. The model responded by returning the favor. The choice to include this shot in the promotional video that was uploaded to YouTube was noteworthy as it was indicative of the efforts to associate it, the brand, the product, and Jackson with dominant conceptions of masculinity. Jackson’s wealth, sexual dominance, and benevolence were on display for all to witness (see Figure 3-2).
Between the launch of the campaign in August 2011 and May 2012, the campaign made a transition from referring to itself as “Street King” to either “SK” or “SK Energy” interchangeably. The energy supplement was now called SK Energy Shots. The website would change its name to skeneryshots.com, and the Twitter account and Facebook page were both titled SK Energy Shots. There were no public announcements about this at the time, but it is clear that this rebranding served several purposes. Because the term “SK” was now being used in a variety of contexts related to Jackson’s other business entities, the term SK Energy worked to differentiate the beverage from the album or other products that might eventually be included within the SK brand, while still signaling brand coherence. Secondly, by featuring the term “energy” more prominently among the specific connotations that SK’s parent company, Pure Growth Partners, had worked to highlight in the branding process, the campaign could more clearly articulate the brand as a lifestyle and attitude that was available to the average citizen. This removed the potentially confusing and challenging requirement of “being a king” from the immediately conscious brand association. Instead, SK Energy now simply served as a reminder of the “energy” that one might need to accomplish their own life goals, and the product that could assist them in this process. The Twitter account began posting “inspirational” energy-related quotes in accordance with this ideology. Furthermore, it offered the audience a cause to direct their “energy” to, a number of concrete actions that they could take in service of the campaign. Energy—which often seemed to stand in for fan/consumer labor—became an important language of the campaign, and several ads and social media appeals reminded fans that 50 Cent “needs your energy.”
The choice to make Street King’s first branded product an energy supplement revealed interesting contradictions in the flexible or “empty” status of Street King’s commodity sign. The small, plastic bottle of the drink weighs more than its contents; when held, the bottle’s 2.5 fluid ounces feels empty. Additionally, the product is linked closely to the idea of hunger through packaging features, such as an image of Curtis Jackson and a written promise that he will donate a meal for each bottle sold. And while purchasing the beverage links the consumer to the discourse of hunger relief, the substance itself is nutritionally empty—devoid of any nourishing ingredients beyond a stimulant blend. This blend consists of malic acid, glucoronolactone, N-acetyl-L-tyrosine, citric acid, green tea extract, acai fruit extract, and citicoline. The latter three ingredients function more to signify the beverage as “natural and healthy” than legitimate nutritional ingredients given their microscopic amounts (indicated by the order of placement). The primary ingredients are “filtered” water, natural flavors, sucralose (an artificial sweetener of dubious safety in high doses), acesulfame potassium (another sweetener), and sodium citrate (an emulsifier which holds the ingredients together). The only other ingredients in the supplement are a variety of preservatives, potassium sorbate, sodium benzoate, and EDTA, to ensure the continued “freshness” of the arcane concoction.

*Are You a Street King?*

At the conclusion of 2011, The SK campaign launched the “Are You a Street King?” YouTube video contest (*Are You a Street King?*, 2011). This contest invited users
to upload user-generated videos that showed how they “used their energy” in their communities.

On December 28, 2011 a video was uploaded to the SK YouTube account that featured Jackson in an SK-logoed hat, sitting at table, with a bottle of the energy shots prominently featured. Jackson says in the video:

What’s up it’s your boy 50 Cent. For those of you who are aware of my Street King Movement, if you feel like you have what it takes to be a street king, I need you to send me a video. Send me a video that shows what you been doing with your energy, it could be with your family, it could be with friends, it could be at work, it could be what you doing out in the world. Just send me, showing me what you do with your energy, it could be comedy, it could bewhatever, I don’t want to give any restraints to your creativity, but send it and show me if you are actually a street king. It’s your boy 50 Cent. SK.

The video then showed a screen revealing that the prizes of the contest may include $10,000 “for yourself,” a VIP trip to meet 50 Cent, or 10,000 meals donated “in your name.” These were followed by the question “Are you a street king?” above the url address to the SK Facebook page.

The contest rhetoric constructed fans as potential kings in the street. Taken on the surface, it promised to reward acts of public expression and participation in one’s community or social sphere of influence. The refusal of Jackson to “to give any restraints to your creativity” can be understood as openness, or even encouragement, of artistic and creative diversity, but it should also be understood as a key point through which the brand began to “take in” the creative labor of its emerging young fan base. Duffy (2010) describes similar rhetoric in a Dove user-generated campaign, noting how its participants reconciled the discourse of creativity implied in the campaigns appeals with the constraints of the contest requirements. In both cases, the call for creative expression
lubricated the process of exploitation. To its credit, the SK promotion doesn’t define kingship as power over other individuals. The requirements of street kings in this context involved how fans used their energy in their family, community, or “out in the world.”

But within this same offer, an aristocratic model of social action is maintained. This can be seen most clearly in the description of the rewards for the campaign, which highlights personal recognition and gain. The contest appeals to the user’s desire to make money ("for yourself"), meet a celebrity (as a Very Important Person), and be given credit for the donation of food ("in your name"). The appeal therefore strongly focuses on celebrating the individual. The individual is asked to illustrate contributions to others, but in the end, invitations to perform and the rewards highlight the individual, as the use of the second person “you” and the singular “king” indicates. (Despite this, many fans appeared in their videos as groups). In this sense, the rhetoric of the contest is more similar to advertising appeals that promote individual consumption, than to collective action and organizing. Additionally, while it is clear that YouTube can be accessed as a public forum for the sharing of content, the video also suggests that these videos are to be sent to the ultimate king, Jackson, who as a singular force retains the noble right of pronouncing the winner based on criteria that are only vaguely specified. But the appeals also strongly tie to the larger brand construction. The phrases, “are you a ‘street king,’” and “how you use your energy,” create clear thematic connections to SK Energy, and position the brand in a favorable and empowering light in their videos—an instruction that most of the videos picked up on and implemented in their entries.

Some submissions picked up on themes in SK’s online advertisements that featured the beverage as both an energy booster and an aphrodisiac. One such entry,
uploaded by Adeola Alao, featured a young African male jumping over cars and other obstacles while running home at superhuman speeds to meet a female sexual prospect. When he opens the door to greet her (just in the nick of time), his guest drops her trenchcoat to reveal her nude body—before even entering the home (“Street King” Energy Drink Commercial, 2012).

Other videos translate the command to present the brand in “an empowering light” in more unorthodox and controversial ways. One of the most popular submissions, with over 900,000 views, was “I am a street King,” uploaded by “Spoken Reasons” (@SpokenReasons #SK, 2011). This video features a man who is tied up and tortured for choosing 5-hour energy over SK Energy Shots. His captors admonish him (humorously), but then force him to drink a bottle of SK, “You don’t believe in supporting SK?! You don’t believe in Supporting SK!? You don’t believe in feeding a billion people in Africa? Open your face! ...I kept your momma awake with this all night last night, boy!” But the force-fed SK supplement empowers the prisoner to overtake his captors. The video ends with scenes of his escape and his captors tied up. In addition to a disturbing rape-like connotation, the line “I kept your momma awake,” also attributes aphrodisiac powers to the product.

Other submissions discuss the “Street King way of life” as an inspirational ideology of conscious capitalist empowerment. In “Are you a Street King?” (Are you a Street King? [50cent commercial ad], 2012) uploaded by “moneystacksceo,” moneystacks explains that “Street King also provides a sense of morality; it’s a foundation behind it. Each day I use Street King I know I’m part of that foundation and I’m proud of it. My motto? Live well while helping others.”
In a less popular video, uploaded by Pedro “Bizzy” JuanJulio (*FBS Presents*, 2012), Bizzy explains that he is a street king because he is a director at a community center, a reading and math tutor, an artist, and a participant in his family’s holiday rituals. With no specifics, he also explains that he has changed his earlier lifestyle, in which he used to “take advantage of people.” Bizzy’s video doesn’t feature any images of the product or even mention it. Instead it shows footage of him tutoring and working out with children in his community, and of him engaging with other aspects of his life. The video ends with a shot of the SK Logo and Bizzy’s voice asking, “If that ain’t a Street King, I don’t know what a Street King is.” This video had earned 1,597 likes as of May 4, 2013.

Although Bizzy’s 1,597 YouTube views are meager in comparison to the 900,000 views for the torture video, it is ultimately unclear why the SK community didn’t find his form of participation to be an especially view-worthy articulation of what a SK is. What is clear is that his straightforward and non-product centric account of community involvement was less effective in generating promotional capital in this forum.

The “Are you a Street King?” contest can be seen as an example of the ways that the campaign attempted to produce a sense of user-empowerment, using the discourse of interactivity and the technology of user-generated content. In most of the campaign’s marketing materials it was clear that Curtis Jackson is the only Street King. But the use of social media assisted the campaign in creating an inclusive and interactive “king in your streets” feeling around what was essentially a top-down marketing campaign.

Also important, are the ways that the contest solicited user-generated content to save money on advertising and create documentable online activity centered on the brand. The campaign effectively generated hundreds of commercials that would be
played repeatedly by the users themselves, but also by friends and other YouTube users. These videos would act as ground level promotions—viral marketing (Rayport & Sviokla, 1996)—to spread the word about the product. Simultaneously, through website use statistics and “long click,” click-through measures (Turow, 2012), the videos created a large amount of branded online activity that could be measured, captured, and become part of a valuation of the SK brand as a demonstration of its salience within key demographics. Uploaded videos also allowed the campaign access to some of the valuable personal data that could be used by the SK Energy and/or sold to other interested parties. Best of all, this only required a small outlay of cash, given that the creation of texts was crowdsourced to unpaid fans and contest hopefuls. So, while the campaign offered a vague invitation for an expression of public creativity or service, it also is clear that it was only under these exploitative and unremunerated conditions that such activity was valued by the key decision-makers.

**Twisting Crowd Labor and Rewarding the Movement**

Several authors have written about the ways that the internet and social media enhance the ability of brand managers to shape audience activities in ways that deliver increased brand equity. Many critical scholars position themselves in relation to Dallas Smythe’s (1981) theories of audience labor when discussing this topic. Smythe’s work challenged conceptions of television programming as being free for its audience. Alternatively, he theorized the central role of the audience in exchanges between media networks and advertisers. In this sense, audience’s attention and the “work” of watching
advertisements was sold to advertisers who paid networks for specific audience demographics. One debate that has surfaced in subsequent discussions is the degree to which Smythe’s ideas have been challenged or reinforced by the funding structures and technological affordances of digital labor (Fuchs, 2012). Additionally, McGuinan (2012) joins with several others in highlighting the role of consumer “touchpoints” in tracking consumers across an “ubiquitous marketplace” of digital platforms (Mcguinan, 2012, p. 295).

In addition to offering a thorough account of the debate on the relevance of Marxist political economy of communication as articulated by Smyth and others, Fuchs (2012) offers a complex theoretical analysis of how commodification works on social media platforms. Toward this end, he develops and explicates a model of accumulated/expanded reproduction of capital in which “the users’ click-and-buy process is the surplus value realization process of the advertising company” (709). However, both Fuchs and Mcguinan focus on consumer as commodity, in relation to televisual texts and online paratexts. Both authors are mainly focused on the ways that surplus value is created when internet platforms sell specific kinds of audience data to advertisers.

My analysis builds on both of these ideas, but differs from them in my focus on how brand equity (Powell, 2013) is built by being able to measure and establish the social relevance of the brand through activity. The aforementioned studies may miss the ways that this process does not require the sale of data to advertisers. Alternatively, it involves the documentation of various parameters of audience activity that can be used to generate the investment of venture capital in a brand, or the selling of brand stock values.
In early 2012, SK started a dynamic and cutting edge rewards program, and it is one of the most important elements of their integrated marketing campaign. The campaign is a primary mechanism through which Pure Growth Partners recruits supporters and converts the social activities and affective investments of the supporters of the brand into brand equity. It is through the different kinds of relationships, affective involvements, incentives, appeals, and on and offline activities that the reward program makes available, that the company acquires the feeling and language of a grassroots movement. This reward campaign is administered by a fascinating, third-party company, CrowdTwist. CrowdTwist's promotional materials are a crucial text for decoding how SK views the activity of its movement. In this context, the company is explicit about how it understands the brand value that it offers to clients. If you are a consumer who registers with SK Energy rewards, the campaign offers you a variety of modalities of self display, competition, media consumption and production, incentives, information, and ways to learn about, interact with, and compete with other rewards members.

CrowdTwist also offers its clients three major services. First, members of the SK movement are also constantly under surveillance, as CrowdTwist allows clients to monitor the various aspects of member engagement through the rewards community. In addition to offering the personal and aggregated demographic information and social profiles of registered, and some non-registered, members, the CrowdTwist client interface is cloud-based and available in online and mobile formats. This allows the various divisions of management that administer the campaign to access detailed information simultaneously from a variety of locations. The interface also allows clients to post announcements and changes to the site. If a new promotional item becomes
available, Pure Growth Partners is able to upload it to the site from a variety of locations. Finally, CrowdTwist offers analysis, metrics, and recommendations based on the information that it gathers. The research questions associated with these metrics reveal the concerns of the company. Some of the questions that it promises to answer are: “What channels and content are driving the highest conversions to sales?” “Which customers are pulling away from your brand?” And, “What should your cadence of communication be to keep them engaged while maintaining their loyalty?” In short, CrowdTwist offers the tools to translate the use-values of client pleasures, and sharing, into exchange-values related to brand and audience-commodity equity, i.e. Promotional Capital. The increased brand-equity then becomes an important factor in determining the exchange value of the SK brand-commodity.

CrowdTwist also offers a dynamic platform that integrates into SK’s native website, connects to users, and tracks their movement across a broad range of internet activity. This includes but is not limited to their activities on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Google (Gmail, and Google +), and other sites. Users get a homepage that allows them to view parameters related to their activity. A primary incentive within this platform is prominent self-display. Once a person’s site is created, improving one’s “rank” is accomplished through the acquisition of rewards points that users get from actions such as spending time on the home site, sharing SK online brand content on their own social networks, redeeming bottles of the energy drink that they have purchased, interacting with other members, and other related behaviors (see Figure 4-3). The platform also allows users to browse high definition photos displaying
constantly changing “rewards” that are available at any one time (see Figure 4-4). The site also makes it easy for users to survey other member’s profiles and activity.

Figure 4-3: SK Energy Rewards user profile page
As a builder of brand commodity equity, the CrowdTwist rewards program seeks to structure the social worlds of fandom according to the logic of profit. That is to say, it assists brands like SK in the process of “taking in” the social, consumptive habits of citizens. This leads the company to privilege those social habits, people, and relationships that can be monetized through increased brand equity, and it seeks to de-incentivize any non-measurable, non-profit generating activity from the social spheres that it mediates. The structure of the campaign’s interactive platforms reveals that the rewards strategy incentivizes participants to act on a set of values that are precisely the opposite of those that contribute to a democratic, socio-political community.

One question that might be asked in evaluating this claim is what kinds of social action are considered valuable in the context of the SK Energy rewards program? The
CrowdTwist website offers some clues to this. It is replete with promises that its platform and analytics will focus exclusively on those behaviors and audience-commodity characteristics that build brand equity. The analytics page asks, “What customer behaviors are indicative of higher spend levels?” “What channels and content are driving the highest conversions to sales?” Reminding potential clients that “All clicks, visits, posts, or purchases are not created equal,” CrowdTwist’s “Reward Impact” page reassures them that their metrics assess “the value of every single brand action and assigns points to each. Points are assessed based on a number of factors, ranging from client priorities to the value each action represents to the brand and the monetary value of the rewards being offered.” The reader will recall that in Jackson’s invitation to upload YouTube videos he stated that he did not “want to restrict the creativity of participants in any anyway.” The rhetoric of the campaign, then, speaks to users in a voice that privileges a discourse of creative expression. However, returning to the site, CrowdTwist is explicit about constraining participants by advising clients that “Nothing is more detrimental to building relationships and brand loyalty than rewarding people who are not your true brand advocates.” It is therefore not surprising that when surveying the comments from users on various sites related to the campaign, and especially on the SK Energy Rewards page, there is a notable lack of conversation about the causes of hunger or questions about the strategy for addressing it. So instead of comments that might prompt fans to deepen their understanding of extreme poverty or the variety of democratic structures that are required to address it, like: “Getting to the roots of hunger! #SK,” or “Empowering African farmers to fight Monsanto! #SK,” the SK campaign distributes and retweets messages such as:
As if saving kids wasn’t enough, #SK gives you REWARDS too! Check ‘em out http://t.co/nAQoUyaJ shout out to @streetking.

Like the YouTube campaign, it is a commodified promotional sphere that consists almost exclusively of cheerleaders for 50 Cent consumption and corporate ideology.

**Branding The Throne**

G.W.: You have the new album coming out and the coolest headphones on the market—also named Street King—as well as the 5-Hour Energy Drink with the same name. The Street King album, headphones, energy drink all launching at once; one senses an obvious whiff of commercialism here.

50 CENT: I had to tie it all in with me, the “Street King.” That is the message. (Wayne, 2013)

While Pure Growth Partners was working to brand the energy drink product, Curtis Jackson, his managers, and his record label partners were trying to figure out how to rebrand and reinvigorate Jackson’s career as a musical personality. The SK concept played into these efforts as well, and there seemed to be some effort to coordinate the beverage with Jackson’s musical releases. Riggs Morales discussed how this process unfolded:

It’s funny, because if you look at it and you start thinking “wow.” You can’t help but [say], aight let me put the music out along with the drink. You wondering who benefits from what? But the drink lasted longer than the music. So it’s almost just like a promo item. And I think if anything, that’s what it was—a promo item to bring attention to that drink and also to keep him out there. But then what happened is that the drink lasted longer, so I know more about Street King the drink than I do about some project he put out with the same name on it. And trust me, had it been as good we would have liked it to have been, we would have been talking about it in that sense. But no, we’re talking about Street King the drink. (Personal Communication, Riggs Morales, September 22, 2012)
When looked at from this angle, the foregrounding of Jackson and the persona of 50 Cent in SK’s marketing can be seen in terms of their benefits to Jackson’s career, rather than simply as an effort to draw on his fan base. The marketing campaign of SK had stated from the outset that it was counting on Jackson to connect the launch of the energy drink to the launch of Jackson’s forthcoming album. In July 2011, Jackson announced that the title of his new album would be *Street King Immortal* (DelaCuesta, 2012). The initial album release date was in the winter of 2011, but as of February 2013 the album had not been released. Instead, during this time Jackson has released three separate musical projects. The first was a promotional mix-tape, branded as the *SK Energy Shots* mix-tape, the second was *5 (Murder By Numbers)*, a studio album which became a free mix-tape, and the final one was also a free mix-tape release, called *The Lost Tape* (Horowitz, 2012). Each of these products served to keep Jackson’s music relevant during the gap between Interscope-approved and distributed studio album releases.

The cross-promotion of the music products and the energy drink campaign meant that at the same time as some facets of the Pure Growth Partners were trying to build the message that anybody can be a Street King, workers at Shady/Interscope and G-Unit records were working equally as hard to project exactly the opposite message. To be clear, both the record labels pushing Jackson’s fifth major studio release and the branding strategists pushing the energy drink were trying to use interactivity to replace the completely top-down, hierarchical flow of agency with a more grass roots feeling. But those promoting the energy drink worked to construct a space of agency for fans through their participation as consumer-philanthropists within a larger aristocratic ideology. In the
context of the pre-promotion for the album, the marketers of *Street King Immortal* aimed at highlighting, rather than downplaying, hierarchy, and amplifying Jackson’s clear position as dominant, lone actor within the hierarchy.

It was necessary to constitute 50 Cent as both King of the Street and King from the Street for several reasons. Jackson, and the label-based marketing teams at Shady and G-Unit, worked to reconstruct Jackson as King from the Streets in order to reassert his relevance and influence in popular music. By Jackson’s third studio release, “Curtis,” in 2007, there was already evidence that Jackson’s gritty New York and Gangster-centric version of hip-hop was becoming less popular than other kinds of hip-hop, that allowed for different kinds of subjectivity and regional affiliation. A year into the campaign, discussions appeared on Thisis50.com asking, “What can save 50 Cent’s career musically?” (Youngslim, 2012). In the time since his fourth release, artists such as Drake, Lil Wayne, Kanye West, Lil B, and Big Sean had gained ascendency, exuding a wider (albeit still limited and hegemonic) range of masculinities. R&B and hip-hop artist Frank Ocean had “come out,” acknowledging his bi-sexual orientation to much public admiration in 2012. Among artists who still exuded the gangster persona, rapper Rick Ross, the public nemesis of 50 Cent, and Ross’s label, MMG, had also become extremely popular and influential (Frere-Jones, 2012). By 2012, even in Jackson’s home territory of New York, his popularity among young hip-hop fans had been eclipsed by that of younger rappers such as French Montana and ASAP Rocky. All of the aforementioned artists had released album-length projects in the time since Jackson’s last release. Finally, the influence of electronic dance music, such as dubstep and other subgenres, was increasingly present in mainstream hip-hop and R&B. Jackson was so aware of this trend
that he recorded a dance album, called *Black Magic*, and briefly publicized it before deciding that he needed to shelve it (“Fiddy confirms *Black Magic* is his last LP with Interscope - RapBullet.com,” n.d.):

“Going into this album I feel like I can do anything,” 50 told VIBE. “Just think about the time I first came out with [*Get Rich or Die Tryin’*]. Ja Rule was out. He had the love songs and was singing in the rain with Mary J. Blige. Nelly was super hot with a lot of melody. But it didn’t have the same aggression and danger that I had because that’s where I was at. But I’m in a secure place right now. People who come from similar environment respect me. I’ve never changed

Jackson stated in several interviews that after reviewing his entire body of work, he decided that he needed to return to the “aggressiveness” of his first album, “Get Rich or Die Trying.”

But Jackson also needed to be framed as a King *from* the Streets in order to help frame the class mobility associated with his financial success. In addition to decreasing relevance amidst a new crop of dynamic younger artists, what made it difficult to sell Jackson as King *of* the streets, also, was the fact that he had achieved very visible class mobility in the past decade. Like the lyrics of many mainstream hip-hop artists, perhaps as much as half of Jackson’s musical content and all of his visual content was dedicated to reminding listeners of this fact. Songs like “Window Shopper” bragged that Jackson could easily buy the luxury items that others could only window shop for or dream about. Of course, exaggeration is part of the dozens of folkloric traditions that inform hip-hop culture, so even hip-hop artists with meager means play this game. Lyrics that celebrate extremes of conspicuous consumption can be read as a game of competitive imagination.

But the widespread publicity regarding Jackson’s vitamin water deal, and his Hollywood
profile related to several large, blockbuster film appearances, made it clear that he was now far removed from the hardships of life in the inner city.

In fact, his launching of the SK campaign invited comparisons to a decidedly non-“street” social strata: it bore a strong resemblance to the celebrity philanthropy of figures like George Clooney, Sean Penn, Angelina Jolie, and Drew Barrymore who had actively taken up the WFP’s cause. Jackson’s manager, Chris Lighty, was quoted saying that he hoped to turn Jackson into “the hip-hop Bono.” His subsequent appearances on ABC’s Nightline, and the related photos taken during his trip to East Africa almost seemed to highlight material inequalities. Glossy and richly colored, high definition photos displaying Jackson, with his diamond-encrusted SK medallion and fully clothed in expensive urban fashions, were juxtaposed with barely clad young African refugees in the slums of Somalia and Kenya. These images and the gaze that they invite might be called “development porn,” and they are interchangeable with the images from the philanthropic work of the aforementioned celebrities. Likewise, Jackson’s subsequent emotional display on The Oprah Winfrey Show, a show that speaks to a largely white, middle-class, female demographic, further confirmed his ascension to a new plateau of celebrity (50 Cent’s Hidden Talent, 2012). In these ways, Jackson faced his own crisis of brand relevance.

In response to these concerns, Jackson’s musical products worked to re-establish him at top of the hip-hop food chain. The choice to change the title of his forthcoming major studio release from Black’s Magic to Street King Immortal can be read as an effort to construct Jackson’s status as a legendary and permanent hip-hop genre. In this context the term “immmortal” operates on at least two levels of connotation. First, it plays on the
legend of Jackson’s physical and career recovery following a near fatal shooting in 2000. But it also can be seen as a statement of his career endurance. In this narrative, Jackson has become “immortal” by consistently avoiding the career “deaths” that seem inevitable for all but a few hip-hop artists. There is also evidence in his other musical products of a similar theme.

The first song on the aforementioned *5 (Murder by Numbers)* mixtape, which was originally intended to be a major label, is titled “My Crown” (2012). The chorus to the song features a sample from Sizzla’s 2001 release “Solid as a Rock” (Kalonji, 2001):

They can’t keep a good man down
Always keep a smile when they want me to frown
Keep the vibes and I stood my ground
They will never ever take my crown

The meaning of the original song should be understood in relation to the context of Sizzla’s Rastafarianism. In this context, “never ever take my crown” is a spiritual commitment to adhere to pious values while in the face of structural oppression. The rest of the song develops this theme. In contrast to this, Jackson repositions the lyrics, “never ever take my crown,” as a declaration of his intention to remain on the top of the music hierarchy. Rather than spiritual nobility or piety, Jackson’s crown is a metaphor for capitalist cultural dominance. This theme is developed through a celebration of gangsterism that directly contradicts the values expressed by the original song. Indeed, they also bear little resemblance to Jackson’s current lifestyle.

The effort to construct Jackson as king of the streets and king from the streets could also be seen in the packaging of the initial SK Energy mix-tape. Of course, it constructs a cultural hierarchy with Jackson at the top.
mixtape, released on Datpiff.com, featured the words “Street King Energy 2011” in bright gold, metallic lettering under a towering image of Jackson. The words “street king” are emphasized by sitting atop the smaller words “Energy 2011.” Above these words, Jackson stares confidently with bulging arms folded in front of an urban skyline, with mountains in the background. Jackson is large, even giant in relation to the image of the urban skyline, which he has his back to. His posture and stance with the city situates it as his background and frame. The size of Jackson in relation to this image connotes his larger than life relationship to urban culture and his dominance and influence in it. Given the aforementioned interactive aspects of the campaign, it is also worthy to note what is absent from this image. Despite the fact that the cover includes a representation of an urban area, Jackson is the only human depicted. There are no images of the many fans of the energy drink, no images of the WFP workers delivering meals, and no images of the 500 or so members of the SK inner circle. Indeed, if images of the inhabitants of the city were included in the image they would be indistinguishable, if visible it all, because the city itself is so small, in comparison to Jackson.

But in addition to the energy drink company and the various shareholders in Curtis Jackson’s musical career, there was a third party that aimed to use the SK brand as currency in the promotional public sphere. The United Nations was also looking to extend its brand reach and raise money for its humanitarian efforts.
WFP as Brand Commodity

The WFP supported the branding of the SK campaign in a variety of ways. Most importantly, the WFP publicly authenticated the terms of the partnership, whereby meals would be distributed based on the donations that SK gave to them. This was discussed in Jackson’s “celebrity ambassador” page on the WFP website, and in related press releases published on the website. In 2011, a Forbes article quotes Bettina Luescher, a public relations spokesperson for the WFP:

“We are absolutely delighted about this partnership, it really can change the world,” says Bettina Luescher of the WFP, which provides regular meals for some 90 million people every year. “The U.N. can’t do it alone. This can be a role model of how one can do philanthropy in a different way … he’s a lovely man.”

In addition, a WFP spokesperson that was interviewed for this project discussed this agreement openly as part of the story of the campaign. The WFP then flew Jackson, Clarke, a photographer for SK, and a crew from ABC News to a refugee camp in Somalia and a slum in Kenya, to see, and be seen seeing, the effects of hunger first hand. The photos and videos that were produced during this time have become central images in the campaign since its launch. They were also featured on both the SK and WFP websites.

Additionally, the WFP featured several other aspects of the campaign on its website. Jackson became a WFP celebrity ambassador, joining a large list of celebrities ranging from Sean Connery to Christina Aguilera. Jackson’s primary WFP ambassador page featured his picture, a brief bio, and a description of Jackson’s involvement in the campaign: “After seeing the 2011 drought and famine in the Horn of Africa, 50 Cent made a public commitment to raise enough money to pay for one billion meals for hungry children over the next five years. In order to achieve this important goal, he
launched SK. For every purchase of the energy shot one meal is donated to the WFP to feed a hungry child” (“Music Artist 50 Cent ‘Inspired’ by Trip to Horn of Africa | World Food Program USA,” 2012). And, as we will see, SK’s promotional messaging is integrated into the WFP’s website in other ways; like boiling down Jackson’s involvement as being caused by his “seeing…hunger and drought,” and other descriptions that simplify complex relationships. In addition to Jackson’s central role in the branding of the campaign on WFP’s platforms, it is also important to note that the connection to the product is reinforced in the WFP’s communications. In fact, the tactical acumen of SK’s “one meal for every beverage sold” talking point is that it presents a succinct description of the effort that imports a connection to the drink, and an invitation to consumption, into any channel that picks up on this message.

The scale and nature of media coverage are essential metrics in the WFP’s ability to construct itself as a desirable brand-commodity. Likewise, its ability to construct itself as a brand-commodity is what constitutes its value as currency in the promotional public sphere. According to the sources at the United Nations WFP that were interviewed for this project, an important part of the agency’s decision to associate itself with the SK project was the desire to raise the funds necessary to do its work, and to increase its media coverage and visibility. One question that might be asked about this is, why does the WFP need widespread media coverage and visibility? The most obvious answer is that the company needs this to attract the investment of more human and financial resources. But this answer triggers another question, which is, how does scale of media coverage of the WFP affect the scale of corporate investment? An intuitive answer might be that the more that corporations are aware of the WFPs work, the more likely they are
to invest. This is not fully true. While corporations have strong reasons to consider its
level of visibility when making a decision to invest, the nature of how the WFP is
perceived is equally important. When combined with poor or controversial perceptions, it
is unlikely that high visibility will lead to increased investment.

In its commodity-form, the WFP is not primarily intended to be exchanged in
financial markets as a stand-alone entity, but it is nevertheless a site of market-influenced
social value. Other entities can make investments in the WFP in order to add to the
brand-equity of their brands. This reality pressures the WFP to interpret, construct,
translate, and present itself in terms that are attractive to potential investors. For example,
corporate partners such as Cargill, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Exxon, and others may decide that
money donated to the WFP is a short-term investment that offers a profitable return. But
such a determination is arrived at quantitatively, using financial analysis that attempts to
predict the effects of the investment. They may, and often will, decide that they will only
invest the amount of money that can be written off as a tax deduction. But they will also
attempt to quantify other parameters of investment, such as how an improved ethical
perception of their brand-commodities will affect consumer spending habits, or the stock-
market price. Likewise, they will try to evaluate the degree to which such an investment
may create a positive ethical perception of the brand, or offset a negative ethical
perception.

But in what ways does this structure the “use values” of the WFP and SK
campaign? One way to approach this question is by thinking about how an agency like
the WFP would operate under less commodified circumstances. In lieu of a thorough
discussion of this question that could fill up many volumes, I will offer two basic
suggestions. First, any agency that aims to address world hunger should participate in and publicly advocate an ongoing exploration of the root causes of hunger and poverty. Secondly, such an organization should participate in and advocate sustainable strategies to help regions strengthen the capacities to reduce hunger and address the structural causes of poverty. Hopefully, these two basic requirements might also wind up working towards a third goal, which is to reduce simplistic, ahistorical conceptions of hunger and extreme poverty that obfuscate, rather than deepen, the public’s ability to understand the roots of and solutions to extreme poverty.

Interestingly, the WFP’s agenda addresses the first two of these goals, although not ideally. The “Hunger” section on their website asks a variety of questions about hunger, starting with basic questions such as “What is Hunger?, What causes Hunger?, and Who are the Hungry?” The first answer the website proposes for the causes of hunger, “Nature,” previews a set of answers that are painfully simple, and woefully bereft of a structural and material analysis of hunger and poverty. But this section of the website does offer some entry into these larger questions. Likewise, the WFP’s 2013 Strategic Report includes a preventive approach to “strengthening the capacities of countries to reduce hunger,” the importance of “local ownership and long term sustainability,” and remaining “mindful of the powerful link between gender and hunger” (WFP, 2013). Both the website and the report go on to discuss examples of the nascent programming that has arisen from these priorities. The fact that these elements are already included in the planning of WFP means that the organization is in a powerful position to transform the dialogue about poverty as part of its wider efforts. With this possibility in mind, we can
ask how these types of questions factor into the increased brand awareness generated by the SK collaboration.

A natural place to start is by looking at the “SK Energy Quiz” that was featured on WFP website. The quiz was advertised on the WFP’s Twitter account, and is a likely entry point for some fans of 50 Cent to encounter the WFP (“Take this short hunger quiz --and you’ll feed a child!,” n.d.). For many, the quiz will be their only encounter with the WFP website, and it is therefore important to consider what they might take away from it. The title of the quiz draws in potential quiz takers with its headline: “One More Weekend to take 50 Cent’s SKenergy Quiz! Win a Signed Hat and Fight Hunger!” Each page of the quiz features a single question with multiple-choice answers. For example, the first question asks, “What specific problem is 50 Cent trying to eradicate through partnership with the WFP?” The possible answers are “A. piracy, B. terrorism, C. malnutrition and hunger, or D. drought.” Although it is 50 Cent-centric, this question makes sense and it at least begins to introduce the quiz taker to other social problems. Having done that, it is now free to use this teachable moment to stimulate more curiosity about the deeper aspects of hunger and poverty, or to influence how the quiz taker understands poverty. Unfortunately, the next question doesn’t seem to focus on these goals, “How many meals does 50 Cent want to provide with his energy shot?” Understandably, this question focuses on 50 Cent again; but even here, the question does not discuss why hunger is so prevalent, how these meals will be provided, or how local communities in the developing world are working to try to feed themselves. It specifically focuses on the attributes of a branded campaign, and explicitly links it to the product. The third question doesn’t engage these deeper questions either. Instead it asks, “In Which Two Countries did 50
Cent visit the WFP Operations?” The answers, which list eight African countries, do at least recognize that Africa includes many countries rather than being a country itself. But it also focuses on knowledge about the campaign, rather than knowledge about the problem and its causes. It rewards expertise about branding, in essence. But, with the last two questions, perhaps the quiz will go on to illustrate the different challenges that are faced by different countries, and the programs for long-term sustainability that the WFP is implementing. No, instead the fourth question follows suit, “How many meals have 50 Cent and Street king provided so far?” The fifth and final question offers one last possibility for more depth by asking “Apart from making an impact on hunger, what else does 50 Cent hope to accomplish with this mission?” But again, the answers trap the quiz taker in the simplistic framework: “A. To be an example for other celebrities, B. To be an example for other companies, C. To help consumers do good, D. All of the above.”

Upon analysis of the quiz, it is clear that the narrative, marketing needs, and values of the SK campaign have structured this text on the WFP’s website. In this sense, the page operates in a way that is identical to an advertisement paid for by Street King. This means that viewers who come to the website looking to understand the problem of hunger, or strategies for hunger-relief, may encounter this type of presentation instead. The “SK Energy Quiz” is literally about SK and the specific campaign, not about hunger in any broad sense.

What is problematic about WFP’s SK Energy “awareness materials” is not the WFP’s lack of insight or ideological alignment with more structurally focused methods of addressing extreme poverty and hunger. On the contrary, a robust public sphere should include a variety of actors, with different philosophies and approaches. What is
problematic is when an organization such as the WFP, that views itself as “shifting” to more systemically focused forms of “food assistance,” is pressured to actively spread a distorted, simplistic, narrative about the solutions to world hunger. Its brand-commodity form requires it to suppress its most transformative elements in favor of market-friendly heuristics. In the SK-WFP university, you do not gain knowledge to solve world problems, you learn about branded campaigns to win merchandise.

The shareholders in SK understood the company as a brand-commodity from the beginning. They then sought out sites of social productivity to fetishize and promote the brand’s products and services, and build brand equity through fan loyalty, purchases, audience commodification, and linkages to admirable social causes that spark publicity and feed back into other forms of exchange value.

The branding of 1Hood allows us to see the process of brand-commodification from a different perspective. The stakeholders in 1Hood arrived at the coalition form through the use-values of a progressive public sphere ecosystem. Even the name, 1Hood, served internal processes of organizational understanding that preceded commodification. But like all actors in the promotional public-sphere, the coalition was pressured to embrace its brand-commodity form as currency that would assist its projects.

**Branding 1Hood and 1Hood Media**

The remainder of this chapter explores this process by looking at the early tensions that attuned the coalition to the importance of clarifying its internal agenda and managing its public perception accordingly. Then it goes on to discuss the emergence of
1Hood Media as a response to these tensions, and the related forms of brand-commodity value generated by this media production offshoot of the original coalition.

Another purpose of this chapter is to juxtapose the primary branding names of 1Hood and SK so that we might be able to more clearly identify the different ways that these concepts inform the ideology, messages, and forms of participation related to each brand. These differences are far from being in name only. As we have seen in the aforementioned example, kingship is deeply wrapped up with ideas of hierarchy, aristocracy, class mobility, power, and influence over others. The concept of being SK can offer a path to agency or creative expression, but only to the extent that it builds on a fundamentally capitalist context of the aforementioned ideas. 1Hood is, in most respects, a different kind of brand. Its creators aim to develop it as a call for a collective unity, across ideological and identity-based barriers, to launch a radically transformative project of democratic participation and accountability. This project is suffused with tensions that are distinct from those of Street King, but not less consequential.

**Connotations of 1Hood**

Like “Street King,” the term “1Hood” is also polysemic and complex. Its multiple connotations offer clues to the brand-related challenges that the coalition would face. The tensions surrounding this concept revolve around the potential tyranny by the majority, or by highly influential sub-groups, that lurk behind populist calls for unity. In the broadest sense, 1Hood can be translated as “we are all one neighborhood,” or “we should operate as one neighborhood in the advancement of democratic goals.” The “we” in my
translation refers to a variety of stakeholders that may shift according to the issue or context of usage. The concept of the “hood” operates as a sign of belonging and having a stake in one’s community or the communities that one belongs to (Forman, 2002). The oneness of “hoods” can be seen as an effort to push beyond identity or even class politics, while seeking to illustrate common stakes and a common sense of belonging. The term “1Hood” invites the occupants of any hood, or “communities of social condition,” to conceptually expand the Hood until it becomes boundless.

But as he enacts the term, Paradise Gray draws on “the Hood” as it is used in hip-hop culture. Here the Hood represents a specific socioeconomic and racial location in modern society. “Hood” imports many of the connotations of racialized poverty, unemployment, crime, vulnerability to disproportionate targeting and corruption by police, unstable families, psychological issues, and substance abuse that terms like “Ghetto” connote. But Hood adds a sense of personalized ownership, belonging, and even pride. My Hood is my specific location within the socioeconomic and cultural reality, and it connotes ways of “seeing and being,” interpreting and inhabiting that reality.

When invoked in this sense, the 1Hood concept is more of a mobilizing call for class unity. It suggests that those who are mutually oppressed by social conditions, such as the aforementioned, should put aside differences in ideology and stand together against those invested in reproducing those inequalities. But it might also be interpreted as a reminder to those who occupy positions of power that their fate is inextricably bound to the fate of the least fortunate: “Like it or not we are all one hood.”
The challenge of any such call for unity is that any coalition is made of several constituent organizations, just as any organization is made of many individuals. The call to become one is an acknowledgement that there will be one, or at least a leading set of priorities, that will be selected as most important from the multiple agendas and methods that are present. So, 1Hood connotes shared interests, but also forecasts tensions, as stakeholders work to keep their individual agendas on the table. Likewise, those members of the organization who are invested psychologically in their “hood,” might find themselves competing with 1Hood for resources, publicity, and membership.

**The Whole Hood is Watching**

As the individuals and organizations that comprised 1Hood began to organize, Paradise Gray knew from previous experiences that building a recognizable brand would help the coalition navigate the promotional public sphere. Describing himself as “a brand man,” Gray talks about his past experiences with branded, entertainment related social movements:

I’m a brand-man. You know what I’m saying? I build brands.

Chenjera: Right.

Paradise: You know? So, you know, I built the brand of Black Watch—the Black Watch movement. I built the X-Clan brand. Created and built a lot of brands before. So it’s nothing but something to do. You know, it’s just a you know. Like right now, we’re not just doing 1Hood but we’re also doing Occupy the Hood…so that’s another important brand that we’re building right now at this point, nation wide.

Internally, 1Hood was a reminder of the principle of unity as realized through the coaltional politics that were inspired by the Millions More Movement. It operated as a focal point that reminded the founders why they were coming together. If you had looked
around the rooms during the early 1Hood gatherings, it might not necessarily have been clear if this was a Nation of Islam meeting, a hip-hop for Katrina meeting, an Urban Youth Association meeting, or another kind of gathering. Placing the proper emphasis on the name of the coalition was helpful, because it differentiated the coalition from its constituent groups and individuals. As a coalitional name and concept, 1Hood enabled the groups to mobilize the media influence, symbolic power, political experience, and political influence of its members without having to be slowed down by the politics and bureaucracy, ideological differences, and other struggles that sometimes plague broad-based groupings of different kinds of organizations and community leaders. So, as a concept, 1Hood was a reminder of the potential political power of this group, but also a reminder of the problems of “the hood” that necessitated coalitional politics.

As discussed earlier, the term “hood” had also come into youth parlance, based on its usage within the hip-hop genre. It is a way of referring to the communities and conditions that were geographic, racial, and socioeconomic. So the 1Hood concept also functioned as the organizing principle of a coalitional infrastructure with particular effectiveness at dealing with specific kinds of issues. While the coalition didn’t formally rule in or rule out the kinds of politics that it would address, it built a reputation for responding to black on black violence in Homewood, issues of police brutality and murder, media literacy, and economic justice. While it wasn’t formally conceived of in precisely these terms, the brand profile of the organization grew in association with particular types of political problems.

But the potentials of the 1Hood brand-commodity also created contradictions and conflicts internally. Pittsburgh’s African-American progressive community was a small
community that was often competing for the same audiences and financial resources. The more successfully 1Hood was branded as an effective entity to address these conflicts, the more it held the potential to compete with its constituent organizations for funding, media attention, and publicity. The coalition had been formed to resolve and transcend inter-organizational tensions, but the potential for the coalitional entity to receive funding worked to intensify some of these tensions. The tensions around funding often played out as a battle between different generations of organizational leadership. As some younger members put it, “other organizations felt that 1Hood was coming for their funding” (Personal communication, January 2nd 2013). According to several 1Hood members, an elder member of the coalition, who was also the leader of a large organization in Pittsburgh, forbade the younger members to meet with Harry Belafonte without his presence and mediation, in order to prevent the coalition from competing with his other organization for the financial support and other benefits from this relationship.

Forces that were external to the organization contributed to these tensions. One example of this was the efforts of the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime (PIRC) project, to establish a relationship with 1Hood. The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police started the PIRC project in 2007, in an effort to find more innovative ways of reducing gang/group related homicides (City of Pittsburgh Department of Public Safety Bureau of Police, 2011). The model was based on the ceasefire model developed by David Kennedy at John Jay College of Criminal justice. The PIRC had funded organizations with deep connections to street life and gang culture in Pittsburgh, such as One Vision, One Life. One Vision, One Life’s tax returns showed that the organization received close to $1 million in funding between 2007 and 2009 (Kerlick, 2012). Although the organization’s
founder, Richard Garland, felt that his organization had been successful in stopping a significant amount of violence, he acknowledges his failure to properly document his actions and develop future leadership. In fact, the PIRC was ultimately dissatisfied with the results of the One Vision, One Life collaboration, and felt that the lack of accountability had allowed the organization to use the funds inefficiently. The PIRC subsequently looked to other organizations with connections and social capital in Pittsburgh’s urban areas, and 1Hood stood out as an attractive candidate.

The bureau of police hoped to use the 1Hood coalition as currency in their public relations and investigative efforts in Pittsburgh. The PIRC suggested a program in which 1Hood would facilitate a better relationship between the police and the urban community. As an important part of this, they would assist the police in gaining information about gang organizations and members, and even encourage black youth to “sign up” with the initiative. By trying to use the social capital of the 1Hood brand in their own efforts to increase efficiency, and offering to fund 1Hood for their work, the PIRC constructed the 1Hood coalition as a brand-commodity, and encouraged its members to share in this perception.

Ultimately, 1Hood declined funding from the PIRC. In the opinion of the coalition members, the PIRC had been vague on what the commitment of the Police Bureau to Pittsburgh’s African-American youth population would be going forward. The coalition was not interested in participating in what they perceived as a delivery of information to the state apparatus without a mutual agreement of accountability. In Pittsburgh’s urban communities, the program began to be seen as a thinly veiled attempt to recruit informants, and it was widely referred to as “the snitch program.” This was
particularly important given the tense history between Pittsburgh’s African-American population and the police. Additionally, urban non-profit organizations now had the example of One vision, One life, who had undergone something of a public shaming following the termination of their PIRC relationship. Consequently, the decision to decline was based both on concerns about police accountability, and related concerns about possible detrimental effects on the perception of the 1Hood brand.

In either case, the PIRC situation demonstrated the potential of 1Hood to attract funding, but here, a stark difference between SK and 1Hood is illustrated. SK is fundamentally about exchange-value generation. However, as the case of PIRC illustrates, with 1Hood, there were questions about whether the purpose of the organization was to generate funds and how the funding would be used. Although Gray and Smith had ideas about how such funding might be used, Gray explains he had originally never intended for 1Hood to receive funding itself. If funding were to be involved, the coalition would serve as a conduit to deliver funds to its constituent organizations. But other members of the coalition were not as clear on this plan, and the prospect of funding caused intra-group tensions, and a mixed commitment to privilege the interests of the 1Hood’s brand over previously held organizational affiliations.

Local media also had reasons to construct 1Hood as a brand in their coverage of local politics. Most of the early coverage of 1Hood was done by local papers, such as the *New Pittsburgh Courier* or the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. These media institutions needed narratives that could simplify their presentation of local events. In this way, local media used 1Hood and other organizational brands as narrative concepts that helped them build value. Unfortunately, the need of the local press to simplify their coverage of events
contributed to intra- and inter-organizational tensions for 1Hood. Todd Gitlin (1980) discussed similar dynamics in the media coverage of the Anti-War movement and the Students for Democratic Society. Gitlin points out, “from the media point of view, news consists of events that can be recognized and interpreted as drama” (146).

The media coverage of Pamela Lawton’s first meeting with the Citizen Police Review board was one example of this. As a result of the word of mouth and local news coverage of the Pamela Lawton harassment incident, a large group of around 70 community supporters and four lawyers accompanied Lawton to her first hearing with the Citizen’s Police Review board. Members of 1Hood appeared both as representatives of their individual organizational affiliations, such as the Nation of Islam or the Sankore Institute, and as representatives of the 1Hood coalition. Jasiri Smith appeared as both the head minister of the Nation of Islam, and as a prominent 1Hood member. The need to translate the presence of multiple organizations into a coherent and compelling narrative led to disparate coverage of the event by the local media. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* described the members of 1Hood who were present as members of the Nation of Islam (Ayad, 2006). The description read as follows: “Minister Jasiri X, of Muhammad Mosque 22 of Wilkinsburg, accompanied Mrs. Lawton to the lectern before she testified. He was flanked by 15 other members of the Nation of Islam mosque who came in support of Mrs. Lawton.” At stake were two key factors. One was whether the effort to seek justice for Lawton would be documented as having had broad community support, or whether it would be seen as the spectacle of one or two organizations. The issue of 1Hood’s organizational credit and publicity was also at stake.
Therefore, in addition to not being fully accurate by describing it as an Islamic-defined group, this coverage created an awkward situation for Jasiri Smith. It created the impression that he was behind the idea to have the Nation of Islam take credit for an event with community-wide support. Other 1Hood members weren’t necessarily looking for 1Hood’s brand to be recognized, but the incident carried the subtle connotation that the Nation of Islam minister was deceptive in bringing organizations to the event under the 1Hood banner.

The coverage frustrated some 1Hood members, because many of them knew the journalist and felt that the coverage was intentionally divisive. Some felt this coverage was due to the fact that the journalist, Moustafa Aymad, was himself a Muslim with ties to the Nation of Islam. But given that Jasiri Smith was a high profile figure at the event, it is also possible that Ayad’s coverage was based on the understandable perception that he had indeed assembled the 1Hood members. It was also obvious that the journalist was under pressure to deliver a clear narrative of a complex situation.

The *Pittsburgh City Paper*’s November 2, 2006, coverage of the same event was entirely different (Meinzer, 2006). This article highlighted the diversity of organizations as an example of increased non-partisan community participation in a local institution, and in support of a community member. The article featured quotes from 1Hood members who explicitly framed the event as an instance of diverse community support, rather individual organization influence. Cornel Jones, who was described as being a member of 1Hood and Urban Youth Action, was quoted as saying, “This is not about any organizations or anything like that—this is to honor our sister.” Similarly, Gray, who was described as a hip-hop activist and community activist, was quoted as saying that the
event was bridging gaps. “Christians, Muslims, Jews, young, old, men, women, white, black. I’d like to see those kinds of bridges continually built.”

But even articles that highlighted the coalitional aspects of 1Hood’s emerging media brand created problems for the organization. The media tended to gravitate toward certain representatives of the coalition, and some representatives were more aggressive and more effective with respect to the public relations of the group. The New Pittsburgh Courier’s coverage of 1Hood’s meeting with Bill Peduto over the Pamela Lawton incident, was an important instance of this. Several 1Hood members cite that article as a turning point in the coalition’s understanding of itself as a brand, and of its media strategies.

The front cover of the October 4, 2006 issue of the New Pittsburgh Courier featured the headline “One Hood Challenges System” (Todd, 2006b). Above this headline was a large image of six 1Hood members, Jasiri Smith, Paradise Gray, Darnell Drewery, Khari Mosley, Luqmon Abdul Salaam, and Cornel Jones (see Figure 4-5). What was at stake in this coverage was what the face of the 1Hood brand would be. In retrospect, Smith said that he wishes he had used 1Hood’s logo rather than a photo. This was because photos required choices about which members of 1Hood would be included and which ones were to be left out. Some of the members of 1Hood felt that as an important branding moment for the coalition, this photo fed into the problematic tendency of the media to characterize organizations by focusing on charismatic personalities. Again Gitlin’s (1980, pp. 86, 162, 146) analysis of the SDS is relevant here, discussing how nascent political “leadership is converted into celebrity.” For 1Hood, as for the SDS, “Media attention was a resource for the movement as a whole but the sum of
it was limited and therefore individuals were thrown into competition for something intrinsically scarce.” But as Gitlin notes, “for the most part news is made by individuals who are fundamentally newsworthy.”

As a result of these experiences, IHood realized that the external branding of the organization gave media the power to define the organization in ways that had some unwanted consequences. Part of what the coalition members learned was that their brand had to perform some unforeseen functions as part of their participation in the promotional public-sphere. A variety of actors were pressured to use their brand in specific ways. Even news organizations that were sympathetic to the causes still felt they had to frame
events in ways that would appeal to their audience and be competitive with other papers. In this way, the coalition’s existence as a brand was not a decision that was up to them. It was almost a parallel universe, that existed and flourished with or without their consent. Whether they had wanted to or not, they were thus faced with the need to try to take control of their media strategies more consciously from that point onward.

1Hood’s choice to work with or respond to journalism as a primary communications strategy can be compared to SK’s use of professional brand specialists and public relations techniques. Using news outlets in the way that 1Hood did required less (if any) financial investment, and worked through a more traditionally democratic process in which the coalition was vulnerable to the scrutiny of local news outlets. However, this choice also meant that there was less control of the message. SK’s messaging was carefully planned and consistent from the beginning, but its use of social media made it vulnerable, and it therefore had to be managed tightly. Both cases reveal the value of third party labor and third party credibility to the building of brand-equity.

1Hood began to control the outlets, such as the Final Call, as well as various websites and blogs, such as Soulpitt.com and Brotha Ash Productions.com. Paradise Gray covered the Citizens Review Board event on his own blog (P. Gray, 2006). Other methods to control the message included regularly rotating which members spoke to the press, in order to prevent too much focus on certain individuals, such as Jasiri, Paradise, or Khari Mosley. On some occasions, 1Hood members reached out to individual reporters to question, discuss, or protest the press coverage. Finally, the organization chose to “black out the media” at certain times. The media would still have to write a story, but
because 1Hood wouldn’t talk to media outlets, they wouldn’t appear complicit or self-interested in whatever narrative the coverage constructed.

**From 1Hood to 1Hood Media**

Eventually, 1Hood’s efforts to control their own media narrative led to the development of a related brand: 1Hood Media. Paradise Gray and Smith were the most aggressive, and high profile members of 1Hood when it came to handling the media. Both men had spent years developing their ability to speak publicly in both political and entertainment contexts. Both men also had expertise in various facets of musical production. Since 2007, the pair had slowly improved their video production skills to the point that they could now record, edit, and distribute more professional looking videos. They now began to operate as an official, for profit, media production company. This would also greatly assist their efforts to make a sustainable livelihood of activism and art that did not rely on others. Gray hadn’t held a 9-5 job since his brief stint at mp3.com from 1998-2002. Instead, he had supported himself through a variety of activism and art-related revenue streams. Smith had recently quit his full-time job with the school district and become a full time hip-hop artist. The success of his videos and artistic activism between 2007 and 2009, had put Smith and Gray in the national underground hip-hop scene, and increased their opportunities to perform and connect with national artists and activists. Gray and Smith did not intend for the 1Hood Media brand to replace the 1Hood coalition, but rather to augment it as a for-profit entity.
They felt that such an entity was necessary to capitalize on the media opportunities that they were generating, while also fulfilling other aspects of their activist vision. Gray and Smith felt that they could become a model of economic empowerment and financial self-sufficiency. But it was necessary to differentiate the for-profit entity from the work of the broader 1Hood coalition. Gray described the organizing that was done by the broader 1Hood coalition as “God's work.” He and Smith felt that there were ethical problems with using 1Hood as a business entity that could support their livelihoods. They also felt that the independent, self-sufficient production of media was an important weapon in the war against the ideologies of white supremacy. Gray described media products as a site where a war for the minds of African-American children was being fought. In light of this, it was necessary to teach children to “be the media.”

As a for-profit entity, 1Hood Media began to move towards operating as a brand-commodity that took in the social power and services of the 1Hood coalition in order to build its brand value. Because of the 1Hood coalition, Smith and Gray had both received a variety of grants, and they would continue to seek out grants for their work. Their eventual goal was to become a model for African-American entrepreneurship. But if they found work that matched with their activist values, then they would be open to securing business from the private sector as well.

Gray clarified this point, discussing what kinds of funding opportunities 1Hood would accept,

We don't work with that many funders in the first place. You know. So can’t nobody stop us by cutting our funding, cause we do most everything without
anybody’s funds anyway. You know, so now that we’re creating media we have created media for the SCIU.
Chenjerai: Right.
Gray: You know what I’m saying, we have created media for Rebuild the Dream.
Chenjerai: um hum.
Gray: You know what I’m saying? But all of these things is like stuff that we do anyway that fits what we’re doing anyway. We’ll work with people who want to fund something that we’re already doing, or like, if we’re working with children and somebody wants to fund something for the children we’re with that.

Later Gray explains that while he wouldn’t work with projects that directly contradicted his values, 1Hood Media would be open to produce media content for certain projects that were perhaps less related to 1Hood’s political concerns:

But in the same way as, like, somebody come to us and ask us to make a Doritos commercial, you know what I’m saying?
Chenjerai: Right.
Paradise: Our name ain’t going to be all over it. It’s going to be a Doritos commercial...That’s work then. You know, it’s work for pay, it’s not no non-profit thing. It’s like, ok. That’s going to cost you $1,500. That’s going to cost you $500. At times I've done music videos for artists who wanted me to do the video for them. Like, I really want you to do it. Like, once upon a time, I'd film any kind of video. Now, if it doesn’t fit my moral standards, I’m not going to be involved.

What is crucial to note here is Gray’s deliberate separation of 1Hood’s value as a political brand and its productive capacity as a media production company. Although 1Hood Media didn’t feel that certain corporate endowments, such as the Heinz endowment, threatened their political brand, cooperation with some funders was not worth the potential damage to the brand.

*The Networks of Promotional Capital*

The efforts of Smith and Paradise to translate these activities into the development of 1Hood Media as a brand-commodity operated in a number of ways. One level of this
commodification was straightforward. 1Hood Media operated as a for-profit entity. As such it would earn money for its consultancy and production. Those funds would fund further programming, as well as the livelihood of Gray and Smith. But the processes of commodification and the types of commodities that were produced also worked on more complex levels that require exploration to identify and grasp. These layers of commodification are visible in the flow of financial and promotional capital behind the production of two 1Hood videos, *Justice for Jordan Miles* and *Occupy (We the 99!)*.

Smith and Gray produced *Justice for Jordan Miles* by working with youth who were participating in the 1Hood new media academy, a program funded by the Heinz endowment. In 2007, the Heinz endowment founded the African-American Men and Boys Initiative, to improve a variety of life outcomes for African-American young males in Pittsburgh. As part of this, the initiative funded two studies of the portrayal of African-American young men and boys, both of which concluded that media outlets in Pittsburgh “reflect an incomplete and imbalanced view of African-American men and boys” ([portrayal-and-perception: Two Audits of News Media Reporting on African American Men and Boys, 2011](#)). In response to this, the endowment began looking for innovative approaches to improving the media representation and increasing media-literacy among this population (Taylor, 2011).

By the time the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign began, Smith and Gray had begun to operate as 1Hood Media. By this time, the two had developed a visible online presence for the 1Hood brand, and the coalition had developed deep community roots through its actions and programming since 2006 (Taylor, 2011). As a result, the coalition was able to attract a $40,000 Heinz grant to launch the 1Hood Media academy. This was
a series of media literacy and media production workshops for African-American male youth. Because Paradise Gray was currently working on the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign, he and Smith felt it would be valuable for the youth to help produce it. Smith wrote the song and appeared as the sole rapper in the video, which offered the public a narrative of the events, named the officers involved, and posted a phone number that Pittsburgh residents could use to demand a trial.

Right away, the video served a number of functions. At the most basic level, it served as a compelling and instructive piece of advocate media for the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign that ultimately helped bring national scrutiny to the case. But it also served as another important component of the growing momentum of Smith’s musical career as a leading hip-hop activist. Simultaneously, it helped promote 1Hood Media as both a media company and a media literacy institution. Finally, it was something that the youth involved could use to document their own success as media producers. But another member of the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign, Nigel Parry, would deploy the video for yet another purpose.

Parry had met Gray and Smith during the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign, and was now working remotely as a producer for the Global Revolution Occupy Wall Street Livestream. This was an online broadcast that filmed the events at Zucotti Park, and eventually other Occupy encampments. Users could tune in online and watch live broadcasts from several cameras. From his livestream account, Parry was able to affect the presentation of the broadcasts from the livestream cameras at Zucotti Park. He could choose which cameras were broadcasting, move between different shots, and insert other video content into the shot. Because of the popularity and momentum of the initial
Occupy Wall Street broadcasts, there were between 4,000-8,000 viewers every day. This was an extremely large audience for a livestream of a political event, and Parry was eager to find content that maintained this interest. It was at this time that he thought of playing some of Jasiri “X” Smith’s 1Hood Media produced material. Parry starting playing the Jordan Miles video on a regular basis. He also played *The only color that matters is Green*, a video shot at Pittsburgh’s G20 Protests, with police blockades in the background (Jasiri X, 2009). The song discussed issues of economic justice, while the images of the G20 events brought back specific memories of Pittsburgh, and older memories of the battle in Seattle, that resonated strongly with the Occupy supporters (Carpenter, Personal communication, August 22, 2012).

Eventually, Smith noticed that his viewership was going up and he was receiving comments from viewers who had seen his videos on the Occupy livestream. Parry sent a text to Smith, explaining that he had been playing the Jordan Miles and G20 song videos for thousands of viewers 3-4 times a day. In fact, Parry told him to log on to livestream right then, letting Smith know that “I’m playing your video for over 4,000 people right now” (Parry, Personal Communication, August 22, 2012). Grasping the promotional value of this moment, Smith immediately went to work to create a song specifically for the Occupy movement.

Smith quickly completed a song and video that championed the Occupy Movement. *We the 99* lamented conditions of economic inequality and included a warning “We Gon Occupy.” Smith and Paradise went up to Zucotti Park to shoot the video. Smith recalls being surprised and gratified that people knew his material. Like Smith’s other recent videos, *We the 99* served as a promotional vehicle for both Jasiri
Smith and 1Hood Media. But it also allowed Smith and 1Hood to incorporate the aura of Occupy as part of the 1Hood brand-commodity.

There are several overlapping processes of exchange value creation at work in this example, but among them there are a couple of important things to note. Indeed some of these processes involve the increasing potential for 1Hood Media to participate in the financial exchange of its products and services. During the filming of *Occupy (We the 99)*, Jasiri formed a relationship with the host of a University of Connecticut radio program, and eventually booked a paid show at the University of Connecticut. Earlier, the formation of 1Hood Media into an effective media production branch of the original coalition, had allowed its members to secure a $40,000 grant for the first 1Hood new media academy in 2010, and eventually a $180,000 grant for an expanded session of the academy in 2013. The increased attention that 1Hood received as a result of both of these productions, led to a variety of other paid performances, speaking, and workshop opportunities. In short, the formation of 1Hood Media had contributed to Jasiri Smith and Paradise Gray’s ability to convert promotional capital into economic capital and operate as full-time artist/activists. Less media savvy or media focused members of 1Hood had not sought the same degree of autonomy, were less high profile, or were less successful.

But these micro-instances of financial exchange only tell part of the story. Upon arriving at UConn for his performance, Smith received a contract, stating that he would not be paid if he performed *We The 99*. In a consideration that was born of both ethics and brand-building strategy, Smith decided to perform the song anyway, and draw media attention to the University’s attempt to censor him. Smith started off the performance by saying:
So a gangster said to me, “You could come to UConn, man, and we’ll give you a little bit of money, but it’s under the [deal] that you don’t do *Occupy (We the 99)*...” So if I don’t get my check Monday—keep your check! You don’t have enough money to tell me when I get behind a microphone what I can and cannot say. (*Hip-Hop artist Jasiri X defends Occupy Movement and Freedom of Speech, 2011*)

Smith then framed the UConn concert as an attempt at censorship on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and several hip-hop and progressive media blogs. Other media outlets, such as the Huffington Post, then picked up on this frame, which extended the political relevance of the text and the political reach of the 1Hood Media brand (H. Miller, 2011).

Ultimately, Smith was compensated for the performance. Explaining the contract, Student Government president Sam Tracy said that “there was fear among members of the student government that it would be an inappropriate use of student fees to bring someone in to talk about a certain political view, no matter what that view was.” He went on to confess, “in all honesty, we are students who are not very familiar with state law, and it seems like we wrongly assumed that we were not allowed to sponsor an event that included the promotion of a political view” (H. Miller, 2011). Smith’s handling of this incident reveals a commitment to both aesthetic and political ideas in resistance to the constraints of financial compensation, but also a grasp of the exchange value of the trope of authenticity as brand-currency in the promotional public-sphere.

The Jordan Miles video also included complex layers of value, some of which require a thorough textual parsing in future chapters. But it is clear that one of the most important roles that the video served was its ability to keep the Miles story in the public attention span long enough for other momentum to be built around the case. Online
sharing of the video and Smith’s performance of it served to help invite national attention to the case as well, and the resulting scrutiny was clearly a factor in the city’s eventual decision to reopen what had been a closed case.

But what I would like to argue here is that it is not simply judicial outcomes, but the ability of the Jordan Miles video and the larger campaign to bring citizens, community, and national groups together in processes of democracy, and the reclamation of power that was equally important. The text of the Jordan Miles video played an important role to be sure. But the ability of 1Hood Media to involve members of an economically, legally, and socially marginalized community, African-American males, in the production of a piece of media that advocated for the political rights of a victim of police brutality, was an equally important outcome. A project that works toward developing media producers doesn’t replace pressure on regulating institutions to resist corporate concentration, but it resonates with calls for a more diverse range of critically literate landscapes of voices in the public sphere. It can be seen as a beginning that should be replicated by those at the intersection of a variety of other oppressive forces, such as patriarchy and its related systems of heteronormativity, systems that define and privilege conceptions of normal bodies, and other forces that work to reproduce difference and inequality.

Likewise, the *Occupy (We the 99)* video featured an important textual message, but it also brought 1Hood Media physically to Zucotti Park at a time when the racial diversity of the Occupy movement was in question (Robbins, 2011; Sen, 2011). Malik Rahsaan, a key spokesperson and founder of Occupy the Hood, formed a strong and mutually supportive relationship with Gray and Smith. As 1Hood became more effective,
they didn’t abandon these processes. But they did begin to be more strategic about including considerations related to visibility and promotion.

Just as Occupy Wall Street was pressured to increasingly understand itself in terms of livestream and YouTube views, 1Hood Media began to place an increasing emphasis on the effectiveness and reach of its media products. An important language that 1Hood Media used in discussing the success of their projects was YouTube views. But phenomena such as YouTube views and Facebook likes represent the generalization of the logic of ratings as forms of textual and exchange value. As a result, they are increasingly important strategic factors in the promotional public sphere.

In his analysis of how ratings are situated in the political economy of media, Mosco discusses the ways that media products create “immanent commodities” that in turn generate new economies of information and capital (2009, pp. 141–3). The importance of YouTube views and all YouTube content is intimately bound up with Google’s monetization of the platform through advertising funds. Advertising funded, big data generating platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and others, are the central distribution mechanisms for 1Hood’s media products. While Occupy’s livestream broadcast is ad-free, it is integrated with these platforms. Additionally, the livestreams become a driver of YouTube views, especially when livestream producers choose to broadcast YouTube content. However, both messages and processes of the media texts of 1Hood Media and Occupy serve important purposes. So how, if at all, do the commercial entanglements of these platforms matter?

I would argue that there are two main effects. First, the corporate advertisers which increasingly appear below YouTube videos, and in the margins of Facebook and
Twitter, have monetized the political content being discussed. This means that as the production of these texts works to educate and mobilize citizens, it simultaneously redeploy the very same work, as accumulated capital, in various forms of the digital labor commodity and the activist brand commodity. This capital, in turn, does the work of increasing the influence and centrality of these platforms. Secondly, as activist organizations orient themselves toward developing the type of media content that will constitute effective currency in the promotional public sphere, there is increased pressure to understand and construct themselves as brands with certain properties, that is to say, brand-commodities. As brand-commodities, there will be increased focus on efficient and measurable processes rather than relatively more sloppy and unpredictable but inclusive democratic processes. There may also be pressure to “scale up,” by devoting more attention to issues that will resonate with larger audiences. In short, the platforms and pressures of the promotional public sphere have a structuring effect on how organizations understand themselves and perform their work.

1Hood offers a less hierarchical and more radical brand than Street King. But 1Hood still had to overcome a fundamental tension at its core. This tension deals with the fact that any call for unity recognizes that there is a diversity that must be overcome, which in turn forecasts processes of prioritizing the interests of certain stakeholders above others. 1Hood attempted to forge unity by looking at shared interests, but also by ultimately developing a for-profit wing that was free to represent the coalition’s two most active and visible members, and free to operate as a promotional and profit generating entity.
Conclusion

A main conclusion of this chapter is that in both of the aforementioned cases, the processes of brand-equity building commodification heightened tensions that were already present in the respective organizational structures and missions. In hierarchical organizational structures, led by charismatic individuals, it is common to find tensions between the agenda of the leadership to further its own aims and the claim of the leadership to represent the best interests of its subjects, and larger goals in the public interest. But in the context of SK’s integrated and social media fueled marketing campaign, this basic tension took on an intensified character. The need for a cost effective launch, mixed with the need to demonstrate the online activity that the brand was generating, led to new dimensions of surveillance and exploitation of the audience-commodity. The brand abstracted the concepts of humanitarian development work and creative expression and relocated them in the branded context of Street King. In this new context, “supporting the movement” was equivalent to purchasing energy drinks and redistributing marketing messages in pursuit of branded merchandise. The dual function that the concept of “Street King” played in the rebranding of Curtis Jackson’s hip-hop artist persona has only amplified the celebrity culture surrounding the SK movement, ensuring that it reinforces its hierarchical aspects. SK’s movement ethos was one in which individual actors, starting with Jackson himself, participated in “conscious” market relations. When working with actors such as the WFP, the campaign translated the platforms for education and “awareness-raising” into sites for advertising and more data collection. Given that the campaign ultimately provided $0.10–$0.25 of the profits from a
$3 dollar energy supplement to the United Nations, it seems that the “political movement” of the SK brand commodity is the movement of influence, promotional capital, money, and affection, upwards from SK’s fan base to the brand managers at Pure Growth Partners.

1Hood’s basic organizational tension is common to populist movements. The historical record progressive of progressive movements is replete with examples wherein a cult of unity forged early on winds up fueling the transformation of movement leadership into an exclusionary force serving the vision of a smaller set of representatives. Although 1Hood’s leaders were highly conscious of these possibilities, and fairly progressive in their approach to them, they were still vulnerable. The coalition was motivated to become more active in its use of branding strategies by several factors.

First the organization had to negotiate external forces that wanted to capitalize on 1Hood’s brand aura of street credibility, grassroots authenticity, and civic engagement. While larger, more established organizations solicited 1Hood with funding opportunities, the media used the organization’s efforts as dramatic narrative elements. This created intra-organizational competition for financial resources and media attention. Navigating these internal and external pressures required the organization to develop a new level of brand consciousness. Ultimately, the development of a separate and for-profit entity, 1Hood Media, didn’t solve this problem for all of 1Hood’s former members, but it resulted from an understandable attempt to control their own narratives and support their creative lives.

The formation of 1Hood Media as a separate for-profit entity also enhanced the brand as a site for the accumulation of promotional capital. Jasiri Smith and Paradise
Gray were now able to leverage 1Hood’s image to generate financial income for progressive projects, such as a media literacy camp for black males, and performances for Jasiri Smith. Additionally, they were able to lend an aura of racial diversity to the Occupy Pittsburgh and Occupy Wall Street movements in exchange for promotional capital in the form of new online and offline supporters for their political and entertainment projects.

For both 1Hood and Street King, the brand-commodity structured aspects of their practice but also aspects of their brand narrative. Both philanthropy and democratic political action become reified according to the priorities of brand shareholders and the standards of mass communication in the promotional public sphere. The next chapter examines how various organizational actors, individuals, citizens, and social problems are positioned in those narratives.
Chapter 5

The Constitutive Rhetoric of Branded Hip-Hop Activism

The texts and “paratexts”—the latter including accompanying materials such as reviews, promotion, and user discourse (Genette & Maclean, 1991; J. A. Gray, 2010)—through which we encounter the activism of artists are representations of civic engagement, humanitarian action and/or radical social protest. These representations are determinants in ongoing fights for social justice and equitable distribution of rights, representation, and resources. The importance of these texts stems from several of their qualities and functions. First, they educate us about the nature of social problems. News reports, online campaign videos, and political music frequently introduce us to social injustices and inequalities. They suggest where sites of conflict are, who key actors are, and they offer narratives about how these actors are connected. Second, these texts inform the public imagination and conceptions of what civic engagement looks like and what forms of engagement might be most effective in addressing injustice. Media texts that cover celebrity activism may show us how certain types of philanthropy address poverty, or they may show us how certain strategies put pressure on public or private institutions. In short, the texts of celebrity/artist activism educate, inform public imagination, and spread awareness about different types of social action. However, if this is the case, then what forms of education, imagination, and access do these types of activist media offer us? More specifically, how do brand related incentives influence the forms of meaning and agency in the texts of hip-hop activist campaigns? How can we
better understand the relationship between the phenomena that these brands “take in,” and the textual characters and positions that the brand-commodity produces? In what specific ways does the brand-commodity structure these narratives?

The following chapter explores these questions as they play out within and across key texts produced by SK and 1Hood Media. After a review of basic theoretical and methodological concepts, including that of textual analysis and constitutive rhetoric, the chapter offers a description of the basic narrative of each organization. The study then moves into a more in depth exploration of how each narrative is articulated in a variety of texts. The primary focus of the analysis is the ways that the audience is constituted as both collective and individual subjects who are part of the narrative. To this end, the study looks at a variety of ways that the audience is implied, paying special attention to how they are positioned with respect to character archetypes and social actors as they are constructed in the world of the narrative.

Ultimately, I argue that the texts of both organizations can be understood by looking at how audiences and other social actors are constituted in familiar narrative arcs that involve heroes, villains, and victims, but that this is articulated very differently in each brand. In SK’s narrative, celebrities and corporate entrepreneurs are the heroes, African-others are the victims, and the villain (though less focused on in this study) is a vague conception of hunger. The only role for the audience is, therefore, to participate in the hero aura by “supporting Jackson,” which means consuming the SK Enery Shots supplement and SK’s media products.

1Hood Media’s narrative also involves heroes, villains, and victims, but the mapping of these archetypes onto social actors is more blurred. 1Hood Media’s texts
focus on a diverse range of victims of injustice who suffer at the hands of police brutality and murder, and other forms of systemic oppression. The villains in these narratives (again, less focused on in this study) are inevitably institutional forces, such as racist police forces, or corrupt wall-street banks. The audience is constituted as witness/citizen/advocate heroes, who share rights with these victims of injustice. Rather than consuming products, as SK’s “consumer heroes” must do, these citizens must engage in various forms of democratic protest to hold these institutions accountable. Paradise and Smith appear as the heroes, narrators, and truth-tellers who speak back to power on behalf of both the explicit victims and the witness/citizen/advocate. Ultimately, the two brand narratives create very different visions of revolutionary social action and the roles of the audience in such action. But in order to better articulate my approach to narrative and discourse analysis that will be employed, the chapter will now turn to a brief discussion of some of its key theoretical concepts.

**Key Concepts**

This chapter’s pivotal concepts and approaches to textual analysis are informed by elements of Norman Fairclough’s (2003) critical approach to discourse analysis, as well as Kenneth Burke’s (1969) discussion of constitutive rhetoric as articulated in the work of authors such as Maurice Charland (1987) and Sarah Stein (2002). Specific concepts within these literatures were useful to this study’s own agenda in two general ways. First, they provided a language for description of the textual phenomena that is produced in the process of observation and interpretation. Secondly, they helped me to
envision how different genres and types of texts might be related to one another in the production of broader discourses. This was useful because my arguments about narrative structure draw on a wide variety of texts from each case. Finally they helped to situate the texts under analysis, and aided the process of connecting them to larger social structures, ideologies, and processes.

Fairclough’s (2003) work recognizes texts as “elements of social events” that have a causal role in the production of short- and long-term ideological and material effects. This role includes the production of values, beliefs, attitudes, and the information that guides social action. In the context of the campaigns under analysis, this means that brand-related songs, music videos, interviews, news reports, websites, and social media content are deeply implicated in the shape and distribution of ideas, priorities, and resources. This perspective also undergirds Fairclough’s call for scholars and citizens to ask specific questions of texts. Scholars, therefore, should operate beyond the constraints of the technocratic priorities that hide in the methodological languages of objectivity to ask questions about the “social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects” of texts.

In each of these promotional campaigns, several texts were engaged to distill the primary narrative elements that connect them. Specific brand narratives and plot structures are the glue that binds together advertisements, interviews, songs, music videos, and other texts connected to the brand-commodity. As Charland points out, narratives “render the sites of action and experience stable,” and in so doing they “offer a world in which human agency is possible and acts can be meaningful” (1987, p. 139). These campaigns connect their audiences through representations of distant and familiar
events, people, institutions, conditions, and locations. In their presentation of phenomena, brand narratives organize perception, and imagination by providing raw symbolic materials and reference points that potential subjects use for comprehension.

From Burke (1969), and the work of authors such as Charland (1987), who engage with Burke’s ideas, this chapter borrows insights regarding the crucial role that narratives play in rhetorical appeals and the idea that audiences are constructed by texts. For these authors, narratives—political and otherwise—inevitably use processes of identification that address and position readers as “implied auditors” with ethical, temporal, spatial, legal, and economic relationships to other textual reference points. In fact, human beings cannot access and interpret their own relation to historical, contemporary, and future events without narrative structures that allow them to select specific phenomena as particularly important. It is in this way that texts can be said to constitute audiences as already interpolated subjects, positioning them through linguistic and semiotic rhetoric in particular social locations within hierarchies of social power. With this in mind, various authors explore how specific texts elicit identification, and the roles that specific narratives play in that process. Burke argues that a primary task of rhetoric is to transcend individuality by forming transcendental unities and “consubstantial” identities. Quoting Watson, Burke points out that “in identification lies the source of dedications and enslavements, in fact of cooperation” (1992, p. 24).

In addition to positioning the audience within the narrative, the process of constituting the audience can also be viewed as a process of creating a “transcendental unity” among audience members that supersedes their sense of individual identities.

12 Burke quotes James Watson using the pseudonym that he sometimes went under “W.C. Blum.”
Following Burke (1969), Charland (1987) applies the concept of constitutive rhetoric by positing several stages of identification in state discourses related to the Movement Sovereainete’ Association (MSA), a movement trying to achieve political sovereignty for Quebec. The first stage that Charland identifies is the rhetorical constitution of the collective subject. In Charland’s Quebecian example, the forms of individuality that needed to be overcome were class interests, religious interests, differences of circumstance, loyalty, and a broad range of potential divisions that might cause the citizens being addressed to see themselves as French, Canadian, or other subject positions that were less unified in service of the sovereignty project (Charland, 1987). The rhetorical mechanism worked to transcend these differences by the positing of “a people,” the “Quebecois.” In the context of the branding and commodification in the cases under analysis, this process appears to be quite similar to the process of abstraction that separates individual identity from one set of orienting reference points and resituates them in reference to branded entities. In this project, rhetorical motives involve brand loyalty (in the case of SK) and social issue-based solidarity (in the case of 1Hood Media) rather than political sovereignty, but different sources of division must be overcome in the process of constituting the collective subject here, as well.

Fairclough (2003) also recognizes that problems of “I” and “we,” and that individuality and collectivity are central to the process of eliciting identification. But in his exploration of these “external relations of texts,” he reveals another important dimension of identification in its function as a major aspect of textual meaning. He discusses a relational view of the process of identification, which emphasizes its dialectal relationship to action and representation. Fairclough argues that identities are constructed
“necessarily in relation to others” because “who one is a matter of how one relates to the world and other people” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 166). He then goes on to offer examples of how both characters within texts and audiences/readers are constructed as “identities in relation” within business management and political media. This idea can be applied to certain features of Charland’s Canadian example; the citizens who would be newly constructed as “Quebecois” are defined “in relation to” and in opposition to other Canadian citizens (Charland, 1987). However, for Charland, the rhetorical appeal relies more on positioning the collective subject in relation to their own ancestry, within a historical narrative that they must now complete.

Narratives center around specific kinds of character-archetypes, such as hero and victim, that are positioned in arcs of conflict resolution. Building on Leiblich, Tuval-Maschiac, and Zilber’s (1998) approach to holistic content reading, Meyers’s (2004) analysis of the narrative in a 1998 newspaper series on “crack mothers” describes five character types that “carry out” the series’ main plot and themes: the victim, the addict, the hero, the villain, and the foot soldier. In the resulting storyline, noble and hardworking white middle-class heroes facilitate the redemption of black female crack addicted victims, despite the failures of politicians and child protective services (the villains). The way the intended white middle class audience is constituted in this narrative is indicative of the important role that the consuming subject plays in media narratives.

Holt (2004) discusses brand narratives as myths and icons that address societal contradictions. Building on Holt, Carah (Carah, 2010) discusses the social narratives of brands as “tools for identity construction.” He highlights the fact that such narratives are not stable stories dictated from brand designers to fans; rather they are evolving platforms
that require the affective investments and creative participation of young consumers. A
such, Carah highlights the capacity of brands to “enable” and “empower” consumers in
ways that lead the brand narrative to evolve in particular directions (Arvidsson, 2006).

However, Stein’s (2002) article on the 1984 Macintosh ad examines how the
constitution of subjects is connected to various nodes of identification in the process of
shaping the cultural discourse surrounding particular brands and technologies. Her
analysis discusses the way that the ad’s cinematographic approach situates the audience
within a culturally salient brand narrative. This narrative positions the Macintosh branded
product as a liberatory force in opposition to the then hegemonic reign of IBM, which the
ad semiotically connects to conceptions of a centralized, rigidly controlled, exploitative,
technocratic dystopia. In this way, Stein’s study suggests that through “a reworking of
cultural icons” the ad symbolized several definitional nodes of identification, including
anxieties about technology, corporate rationalization, exploitation, and panopticism
within its narratives. Apple consumers were thus constituted as “rebels” who were
positioned against both “Big Brother” IBM and its conformist consumers. This narrative
strategy was an essential component of its rhetorical constitution of the identity of its
subjects, and of the resonance of its message in the broader culture. As Stein argues,
promotional discourse does not just constitute the brand, but also the consumer. In short,
both brands and the consumer can be constructed as heroes in the promotional public
sphere.

Building on these insights, the current study analyzes how each of the campaigns
works to elicit identification by rhetorically constituting the audience as subjects. We
primarily explore how the audience is constituted through the archetypical narratives of
heroism and victimization, with a particular focus on how agency is represented. In addition, the audience is constituted “in relation to” other actors, such as artist-celebrities or victims of injustice, meaning that some discussion of the representation of these phenomena is also warranted.

The Basic Narratives

Before exploring the details of specific rhetorical work from both the SK brand campaign and the 1Hood Media brand, it will be helpful to provide an overview of each case’s brand narrative. The plot features that I identify arise from the totality of texts that comprise each campaign. These include newspaper articles, televised commercials, news reports, interviews, music videos, web pages, customized pages and posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, or Twitter, and other texts. Throughout the chapter, I illustrate the elements of each brand’s narrative by analyzing specific texts, highlighting the common patterns of representation that reflect an underlying ideology.

SK’s Central Narrative

The basic narrative framework of the SK brand is fairly simple. Often, individually, and certainly in aggregate, the texts of the campaign tell the story of a self-serving street hustler who is transformed into a hero by the experience of injustice. This hero then starts a redemptive and revolutionary fight against an enemy (the injustice) that was previously thought to be insurmountable. The hero in this case is 50 Cent, who was
shocked and disturbed by his witnessing of the injustice of extreme and widespread poverty in Africa. Seeing the plight of starving children, and recognizing that almost all Africans are children, 50 Cent was transformed and had to act. After all he “grew up without money but he didn’t grow up hungry.” Now, instead of solely focusing on how to make more income for himself, the hero would use his “street” savvy, hip-hop entrepreneurial powers and the “energy” of his fans to defeat the formidable villain, “hunger,” by “feeding a billion hungry people.” The 51-second campaign launch video released on the SK Energy website and on YouTube includes most of these elements.

Jackson’s face emerges from a black screen wearing a SK cap. Grimacing with conviction, Jackson describes the situation:

Guy this is crazy, I grew up without money but I didn’t grow up hungry. What’s going on in this world is outta control. I mean, it’s so many people suffering from hunger, I mean dying from hunger every day. I went to Africa and the devastation I witnessed changed me forever. I mean, to see people who don’t when they are going receive their next meal or if they are going to receive their next meal… it’s crazy. I want to feed a billion hungry people. And I need your help to do that. This is our world, these are our streets. I need your energy. Let’s do this! SK.

But how would he do it? As the SK Energy Ehots website (the campaign’s central site) explains: “50 and his trusted manager, Chris Lighty,” constructed here as a trusty sidekick, “immediately sought out Chris Clarke, the entrepreneur behind Pure Growth Partners.” With Clarke’s help, 50 Cent created SK, an energy drink, and a business model that could out-fundraise other humanitarian strategies. One starving and helpless African child would receive one meal for each energy drink that is sold. The hero, 50 Cent, and Chris Clarke, contacted the WFP, who agreed to fight with them. It would be kind of like Tom Shoes’ purchase-triggered donation model, but better because, as Jackson explained
in a Huffington post interview, “people can’t eat shoes.” It was now up to 50 Cent’s fans to “join the movement.”

Obviously, the key character in this narrative is its hero, 50 Cent; however the audience is allowed to also become mini-heroes through their support of the “movement.” The villain is the poorly defined concept of “hunger” (rather than any person, or mode of production, that caused hunger). And the Africans, who are delivered from hunger by 50 Cent and his followers, are the victims, presented as infantilized and gendered as “damsels in distress.” Other celebrities and institutional actors, such as the WFP, function purely as sidekicks who have lent their celebrity to the campaign. Each of these other characters can only experience their agency vicariously through 50 Cent’s example, leadership, or resources. Clarke, founder of Pure Growth Partners, is rarely discussed as a driving force of the brand. Instead, he is variously positioned as a “loyal sidekick,” or enlightened sage. In either case, he is a vehicle that the hero uses to fight the villain of hunger.

The central weakness of this narrative is that it fails to ask one fairly obvious question. What causes hunger? The reason for this is simple. SK’s brand relies on heroism not villainy as its emphasis. That is to say, the SK brand extends outward from a pre-existing entrepreneurial impulse (a profit generating business model), and figures out how this product could address a humanitarian problem. But this weakness creates several corollary weaknesses. Because the narrative is wholly unconcerned with the causes of hunger, it fails to consider (or acknowledge) the role of wealth accumulation and its constituent mode of production, corporate capitalism, in the production of extreme poverty, weak agricultural markets, and hunger. Any discussion of the roles of other WFP
partners, such as Monsanto, Coca-Cola, and Pepsico, in weakening the agricultural markets of third world countries is non-existent. The role of Coca-Cola or its subsidiaries, such as Vitamin Water, in hunger-related processes like water privatization is also not discussed. These problematic actors and factors are not characters or elements in the story. But the complete lack of coverage of these issues in the rhetoric of the campaign weakens the campaign’s claims that it “spreads awareness.” The failure of the SK campaign to elucidate systemic processes that not only contribute to, but rely on large populations of human beings functioning in states of extreme poverty, bears some relation to Žižek’s description of subjective violence versus systemic violence. In Žižek’s formulation, subjective violence is a more readily observable form of violence, which interrupts a supposed state of peace. Žižek challenges the assumption of this state of peace that is interrupted by violence by illustrating various parameters of the “objective” violence that sustains the mundane functioning of society, and thus is always and already at work (Žižek, 2009).

Such a conception might also be usefully applied to hunger. Rather than participating in an alarmist discourse of “subjective famine,” in which the hunger of individuals and poverty-stricken regions is an anomalous crisis that interrupts a society in which most individuals experience access to food products, food production, and food sovereignty, we might postulate “objective hunger” or “systemic hunger.” Systemic hunger would recognize that the interrelated systems of food production, related goods and services, food market speculations, and other central features of economies in the global north currently need to preserve, leverage, and intensify the hunger of various populations in the global south in service to a variety of accumulative ends. These ends
include, but are not limited to, the expansion of markets and the establishments of supranational mechanisms for the control of sovereign governments in potential markets.

From a discursive point of view, this tendency nominalizes the complex processes involved with concepts like “hunger” and is characteristic of the SK campaign and common within philanthropic rhetoric. As Fairclough (2003) points out, such nominalization involves suppression, where social actors involved in the forms of malnutrition that might be identified as hunger are not at all mentioned in texts. In other cases, social actors are linguistically subject to various techniques of “backgrounding” (Fairclough, 2003, p.145), in which actors are mentioned at some point in the text but have to be inferred elsewhere.

In place of these questions, the SK narrative positions corporate capitalism symbolized by conspicuous wealth accumulation and consumer consumption as the solution to world hunger, and corporations are positioned as “the heroes” of the development. As Chris Clarke mentioned in a speech at Deepak Chopra’s 2012 Sages and Scientists conference (mentioned in the introduction), SK’s mission is partially to convince other businesses that:

It is an obligation and a privilege in business to drive this agenda and give. Cause the world needs its heroes and as [inaudible] was talking about superheroes, and I am certainly not saying that business people are superheroes, but we have an obligation to behave in a different way. (Sages and Scientists Conference, 2012)

Themes of redemption and private-sector bootstrap self-transformation that are not uncommon in superhero narratives are therefore important themes in the brand narrative. Jackson’s movement from criminal to self-focused entertainer to humanitarian and pioneering social entrepreneur becomes a model of meritocratic capitalist empowerment
for his supporters to follow (Hassler-Forest, 2012). His involvement in SK and SMS audio is constructed as ethical growth. In turn, brand interactions are a site of redemption that his supporters can access through their ideological alignment with the campaign and through their purchase of the drink. Jackson’s growth is also a model of redemption for corporations who free themselves of the accusations of Occupy Wall Street through their submission to the brand-led “just (give back) one (percent of your annual profits)” philosophy.

But at an even more basic level, Clarke’s use of the term “we” as a description of corporations that the Just One movement hopes to influence, presents a variety of corporate actors as a close knit and homogeneous community that can change its direction easily with the proper incentive. Such a description can be effective as a rhetorical strategy, but it lacks congruence as a representation of complex governance and incentive structures.

Two important consequences of SK’s narrative are its limited conception of social action as consumption, and its constitution of the audience as “consumers-activists-mini-heroes.” Many analyses of the problem of hunger suggest its roots in the complex interaction between a variety of factors, including predatory trade policies, U.S. farm subsidies, regional political unrest, the resulting decline of domestic food production infrastructures, and climate change. A few of these factors are included in the WFP reports. However, many analyses also identify food aid to the Global South as playing a key role in the decline of local agricultural markets. As evidence, such analyses cite the inability of regional farmers to competitively market their products when there is a free source of food available. These studies suggest a variety of possible roles for audiences
of humanitarian campaigns, including further research on the causes of hunger, protest of
domestic and foreign economic policies that have proven detrimental to food economies
in the Global South, participation in and advocacy for agricultural infrastructure projects,
research on the relationship of climate change and food availability, protest of food-
related environmental damage, etc. However, SK’s narrative abstracts hunger concerns
from any comprehensive logic of causation.

Instead, the purchase of an energy supplement that donates $0.10-$0.25 per bottle
to the WFP is rendered equivalent to solving the hunger problems of a child. In this way,
the audience is not only constituted as consumers, but also as students of philanthro-
capitalist pedagogy. Wealth accumulation is celebrated as a profound moral principle.
Jackson’s heroic struggle functions as an example of and vehicle for the audience’s own
salvific, market-based redemption project.

**1Hood’s Central Narrative**

Hip-Hop artist/celebrities, institutional actors, and individual citizens are also key
characters in 1Hood’s narrative. However, 1Hood’s texts position these characters in a
very different story of social change. The plots of 1Hood’s media productions unfold
according to familiar, populist narrative tropes. Often, the video introduces a problematic
violation of rights that requires a response from the collective public. 1Hood Media
appears to expose the injustice, recruit followers, and threaten the powers that be with the
prospect of their imminent demise. Some versions of the narrative invite the viewer into
the story, as populist protest has already begun. In other versions, Jasiri “X” Smith
rhetorically constructs the events in ways that lead the audience to the inevitable conclusion that action is now required. In both cases, the narrative predicts an uprising in which citizens obtain justice through collective political action.

In this sense, 1Hood’s texts, like SK’s texts, constitute the artist-celebrity and the imagined audience as heroes. But the heroic action of SK’s audience is essentially consumption, whereas 1Hood’s narrative provides a more multi-faceted and efficacious view of heroic action. The audience-heroes, male and female, come from a diverse range of ethnicities and are constituted as having literacy with the constitution, economic policies, and systems of oppression. In response, they speak courageously and articulately about the nature of the injustices that they witness and experience. Finally, they are able to act in collective protest and endure violent repression in the service of their cause. Smith, and to a lesser extent Paradise Gray, are heroes in 1Hood’s narratives. But in contrast to SK’s reliance on Jackson, 1Hood Media’s brand narrative relies less on Smith’s history as a driving component. This may be partially due to the fact that the complex interplay between 1Hood’s history as an organizational coalition and the artist/activist careers of both Smith and Gray don’t lend themselves to a quickly relatable heroic “backstory.” Additionally, the lifestyle of Smith or Gray is almost never a topic of 1Hood’s productions. Rather than being the primary vehicle for social change, Smith’s role in this narrative fluctuates between narrator, journalist, and “prophet of rage,” as he addresses specific events and constructs them as injustices.

Due to the focus on violations of justice, almost all of 1Hood Media’s songs or videos feature the victim or victims as much more prominent characters than SK’s narratives. In the narrative structure, the victims of villainous action are usually described
as rights-bearing American citizens, with whom the imagined audience is seen to share certain key similarities. This contrasts with the victims (the recipients of aid) in SK’s media, who are generally depicted as foreign and desperate “others,” and whose only salvation is compassionate institutional actors such as 50 Cent, corporations, or the WFP. Conversely, while the institutional actors in 1Hood Media’s narrative are occasionally privately governed systems, such as the G20, or investment banks, they are more frequently state apparatuses, such as the police, or the state itself in the form of the White House, or members of Congress. Rather than acting on behalf of citizens, these institutions are depicted as systems of oppression and are the perpetrators of injustices.

While 1Hood’s narrative offers a more complex and less aristocratic vision of social change than SK’s narrative, it also struggles with its own contradictions. The lyrics in songs such as *Occupy (We the 99)*, include references to the constitution or patriotic rhetoric that appears to aim at two goals. This rhetoric illustrates the failure of U.S. domestic law enforcement and economic policies to live up to the ideals that are espoused by its politicians and cherished by many citizens. Citing violations or unequal enforcement of civil rights also carries the potential benefit of attracting the support of audiences who are sympathetic to patriotic views. This type of appeal has often been used in populist movements to delegitimize the state, and inspire protest by highlighting a pattern of hypocrisy in the rhetoric or application of laws. But its appeals to civil rights inevitably carry the risk of legitimizing the state as a source of moral authority and practical justice.

1Hood’s narrative also straddles the mixed blessings that result from the political and promotional strategy of responding to high profile and controversial incidents or
events. The overarching narrative of 1Hood’s overall body of work positions citizens in a proactive, ongoing participation in democratic practices through the naming and challenging of systems of oppression. The sub-narratives of individual pieces of media that are related to specific initiatives or campaigns may carry the unintended message that the primary political energy of citizens should be geared toward reacting to specific instances of injustice, as a corrective measure to systems that are fundamentally sound. This risks overly personalizing the “characters,” especially victims and villains. The narrative logic of individual stories can therefore take over from a more historical or institutional understanding of social injustice.

The texts selected offer particularly clear examples of thematic patterns that are present in some form throughout the media produced by each brand. In each case, I analyzed at least one music video, one interview, and a documentary or longer news segment. SK’s brand narrative is explored through an analysis of the United Nations music video, ABC’s Nightline documentary, “50cent: Hip-Hop Humanitarian,” a Huffpost Live interview with Marc Lamont Hill (50 Cent Discusses How We Can Prevent Hunger In America, 2012), and Pure Growth Partners founder Chris Clarke’s Just Capitalism speech at the 2012 Deepak Chopra, Sages and Scientists conference.

1Hood Media’s brand narrative is analyzed most closely in the Jordan Miles video (“Jordan Miles” - Jasiri X, 2011), the Occupy (We the 99) video (Occupy (We the 99) - Jasiri X, 2011), an RT interview with Jasiri Smith (Hip-Hop artist Jasiri X defends Occupy Movement and Freedom of Speech, 2011), and the Gamechangers documentary on 1Hood Media (Game Changers, 2013).
Having offered this overview, the chapter will now turn to an analysis of the aforementioned themes and how these themes are articulated in specific texts. First, I explore how the victims of injustice are represented in each case and how the audience is constituted in relation to these victims. The focus on victims sets up the necessary conflict that creates the context for heroic action. I then assess the representation of heroic action, focusing on the role of the audience and the nature of agency that is represented.

“African Kids” and Western Saviors: Victims and The Audience in SK’s Narrative

The narrative framework of SK constructs its audience as consumer activist heroes that come to the rescue of helpless victims through their purchase of the SK product. These victims—almost exclusively conceptualized as Africans—are suffering at the hands of a formidable (if abstract) villain—hunger. The consequent representations of Africans as victims and as a stand in for “hungry people” everywhere replicate patterns consistent with the assumption of the “absolute and unchanging essence” among non-white races that justified “white man’s burden” (Said, 1993, p. 151).

In a 2012 HuffPost Live interview, Jackson relays a version of the campaign’s dominant narrative:

It’s really based on my traveling and interactions with people from different ethnicities and walks of life. I was in Africa and I experienced something that’s more extreme than low income housing in America, and after witnessing famine when I got back I wanted to do something that would actually impact it.

These descriptions of the campaign’s mission elicit the viewer’s obligation to act by promoting orientalizing frames that highlight the desperate otherness of the recipients of
philanthropy. The discussion of traveling and interacting with people of different ethnicities suggests that the victims are distant, and foreign from the life of the audience. The word “different” is used to describe the ethnicities of the victims, but it is not clarified whose ethnicity these people are different from. Instead, it is assumed that the host and audience understand that Jackson means different from “us” (himself, and different from Americans). The usage of the word “famine” also provides clear examples of the nominalization described by Fairclough (2003). To understand this, it is important to contrast the concept of witnessing the abstract noun “famine” with witnessing human beings who are suffering from various forms of poverty and malnutrition. The use of the term famine appears to situate these more concrete observations within a larger processual framework, but it does so without identifying actors or social processes in which capitalism itself may become implicated. The location of Jackson’s transformative moment—Africa—and the use of the terms “famine” and “devastation,” are clearly meant to position African poverty as “more extreme” than any context of Western poverty. This comparison reminds the target demographic, who may or may not see themselves as privileged, that they should be able to find the sympathy and money to help rescue those less fortunate than themselves.

Similarly, in the aforementioned 51-second campaign launch video, Jackson explains the purpose of the campaign’s philanthropic component and how supporters can fit into it saying, “I want to feed a billion hungry people, and I need your help to do that.” Again, this text from early in the campaign constructs the beneficiaries of SK’s aid as Africans, in fact, specifically African “people,” broadly construed. This is also the case in
several of the campaign’s early tweets on both the 50cent account and the SKEnergy account:

SKEnergyShots #SK RT @50cent I want to impact ppls lives. I created a new goal for myself, I want to feed a billion people in Africa over the next 5 yrs. 3:32 PM Aug 8th, 2011 from web.

However, over time, the goal of feeding a billion African people changes to feeding a billion African children in the discourse of the campaign, which intensifies the orientalizing patterns of representation by echoing the discourses of infantilizing slogans and images from other campaigns, such as the Christian Children’s Fund public service announcements. On the “give back” tab of the primary website of the campaign, its philanthropic component is described: “Every energy shot sold provides a meal to a hungry child through the WFP.” The focus on children is also echoed in the promotional events. A video of the initial launch event features promotional consultant, Bryan Sharpe, who stands next to Jackson atop the SK bus and shouts promotional slogans to passersby: “Street King! SK! Feeding one billion children in Africa!” (50 Cent Launches Street King in Times Square | 50 Cent Music, 2011). Even the campaign Twitter accounts sometimes posted messages referring to the recipients of meals as “kids in Africa”:

SKEnergyShots #SK RT @50cent Support me on my goal to feed a billion kids in Africa over the next 5 year register now http://t.co/3Vn73zl 9:57 PM Aug 24th, 2011 from web.

This trend is amplified as the moderator of the SK Energy Shot account retweets posts from other Twitter accounts. In these posts, the recipients of meals are referred to as kids:

MsCoCoDominguez G’ Morning ♥! Everyone register to help my friend Fif @50cent help feed a billion kids in Africa! ITS FREE TO DO! http://t.co/Z3UUgRQ #SK 2:37 PM Sep 12, 2011 from web, retweeted by SKEnergyShots
MidtownRow Props to @50cent for promoting an energy drink with a truly noble purpose - to feed a billion kids. Check it out: http://t.co/umiU26l. #sk 4:35 PM Sep 12, 2011 from Crowdbooster, retweeted by SKEnergyShots

These retweets offer an interesting social media-rendered vision of audience constitution in action. By retweeting messages that are ostensibly from users, the moderator of the SK Energy Shots Twitter account communicates the idea that fans are joining the SK “movement,” and invites others them to do the same. Without full access to the campaign’s Twitter account, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which users used the language of “African people” or the language of “African kids” more frequently, but what is clear is that certain Tweets were chosen by the moderator of the SK Energy account to be retweeted. This choice should therefore be understood as an editorial decision about what kinds of messages the campaign intended to amplify.

In the imagery of the campaign, any ambivalence about whether the philanthropy will help hungry people in general, or children in particular, completely disappears. Photographs that were used generously throughout the SK Energy website during the first year of the campaign feature an endless variety of hungry looking African children. The front page of the SK Energy website features a shot of three extremely skinny, serious, and red-eyed African children. The words: “For Those Who Care for a Just World” are displayed prominently across the top of the site. Links to four similar photo panels are numbered across the bottom of the screen. In an interview with CNBC’s Fast Money, CEO Chris Clarke explains one reason why he feels that the campaign has successfully attracted a variety of celebrities (Chris Clarke on CNBC’s Fast Money, 2012):

And the nice thing is celebrities have either got on board because they believe in our cause around feeding a child with every one we sell, and they also like the
energy hit because it’s more natural and it clearly works...and I think it gets back to when you’ve got a platform that’s about feeding kids in need, you know, that’s working for us really well.

As Clarke offers this commentary, he is positioned in a split screen. The other half of the screen plays an image of him ostensibly sitting in East Africa, squarely in the middle of ten African children in school uniforms. The children smile and playfully rub Clarke’s hair. In the context of the broadcast, the aura of humanitarianism and playful innocence is used to ward off criticisms of the energy drink as being unsafe and therefore unethical. But Clarke is also explicitly positioned as a western savior of African others who are uniformly juvenile and not part of the audience’s self-identity.

Clarke’s rhetoric also offers another example of a key linguistic move within the rhetoric of the campaign. Clarke describes “our cause” as “feeding a child with every one we sell.” This description refers to ways that resources are distributed within the humanitarian dimension of the SK business model. The WFP has revealed that a meal costs either 10 cents or 25 cents. This “meal,” then, is a metaphor that the WFP uses to simplify and rationalize the donation process for potential and current donors. In turn, this enables “a meal” to replace the idea of a 25 cent donation. The discourse of purchase “triggered” donation discursively presents the consuming subject as “triggering” donation by the consumption of a bottle of drink. The language of the campaign invites an image in which each purchase of a drink “triggers” a message to be sent to a development worker in Africa who then provides a meal to a child.

The depiction of the African recipients of aid as desperate children who were previously outside of the awareness of modern subjects sets up the viewer as a savior/advocate who must speak them into existence by allowing other western actors to see
their plight, and speak for them by spreading awareness about hunger. The vast majority of the promotional interviews about the campaign feature Curtis Jackson, Chris Clarke, or other western actors. Similarly, the SK Inner Circle members and the YouTube users who submitted video were uniformly from the United States or Europe.

But ironically, the process of speaking for Africans reaches new orientalist extremes in the campaign’s first major encounter with the recipients of aid. In this Nightline segment, news journalist Dan Harris speaks for both Curtis Jackson and the East African recipients of aid (Nightline, ABC – 50 Cent, 2012). Despite the fact that this was one of the few direct engagements between Jackson, as the face of the campaign, and the recipients of aid, Harris speaks throughout the documentary with only a small interruption from Jackson, and almost no commentary from the Somalian and Kenyan people shown on camera.

The descriptions and representations of Somalian poverty that emerge are stunning. “We landed and were quickly loaded into a convoy led by a truck filled with armed men! Somalia is a land of Al Qaeda, piracy, and famine.” Harris’s voice accompanies video footage of dry red earth, rocks, and sparsely populated sections of the Somalian landscape. This footage is shot outside of the car window, placing the viewer in the position of voyeur of the spectacle of extreme poverty. As Harris says the words “piracy and famine,” the camera cuts to a close-up shot of the face of a Somalian toddler being carried on the back of a woman. The woman is mostly out of the frame, which positions the child and ragged tents that they are walking past as the subjects of the shot’s composition.
In the absence of any discussion of causal factors or parties responsible for this situation, the phrase “Al Qaeda, piracy, and famine,” operates as the villain in the narrative of this text. In the narrative logic, these three undefined concepts are what make Somalia such a harsh environment. The statement also positions Al Qaeda, piracy, and famine in relation to each other, inviting the viewer to associate each as related to the other in that they are all “bad things.” The statement “Somalia is a land of Al Qaeda, piracy, and famine,” is therefore not merely a description of Somalia but a normative statement. It might be translated as, “Somalia is a land of bad and dangerous things.”

What is problematic about these statements is the lack of context that is given. In the language of the segment, Somalia is “a land of Al Qaeda” rather than a country in which Al Qaeda is one of many groups fighting battles over resources. Somalia is a land of piracy, rather than a region in which piracy has only recently become a mode of challenging the hegemony of western-owned oil resources. And finally, Somalia is a land of famine, rather than a country whose agricultural markets have been negatively affected by trade policies, development programs, and global warming. These questions must not be asked because they complicate the simpler narrative frame that works for both ABC and for the SK campaign. But in case this reductionist representational account was too subtle for the viewer, there is a quick cut to a shot of Harris, who interprets from his position inside the vehicle: “All you need is 30 seconds on the ground here to see how inhospitable this terrain is to any sort of life.” This statement seems intended to communicate the challenges of living in such a terrain, but also indicates that those who live there have become less human and indeed less alive. In other examples, Harris continues to highlight the spectacle of poverty, explaining that he “watched 50 Cent peer
into a makeshift hut and interact with schoolchildren who only get one meal a day,” or that 50 Cent “watched frail arms measured to see the extent of their malnourishment.” Collectively, these representations construct the viewer as a privileged observer who should be shocked that poor Africans must live in these conditions. Africans do not speak in these scenes. Instead, the segment invites the viewer to be amazed at the images of extreme hunger, with a particular focus on the spectacle of “frail arms” and “makeshift huts.” The choice to travel to Somalia and yet not to hear from Africans reinforces the idea that Africans cannot speak and have little of interest to say about their own situation. Alternatively, it is up to people like “us” (Harris) and celebrities (Jackson) to speak on their behalf, performing our own horror at their desperate circumstances.

Now The Whole Community Wants Justice: Victims and the Audience in 1Hood Media’s Texts

The first key to 1Hood Media’s rhetorical constitution of its audience is the term “1Hood” itself. As discussed in previous chapters, the term 1Hood is an assertion of consubstantiality and can be understood as short hand for the phrase “we are one community,” or “we should operate as one neighborhood and community.” In this usage, the term invokes the trope of unity and tries to reposition the usage of the term “hood” in urban vernacular. The term “hood” denotes a specific geographic location and connotes a set of belongings, affective bonds, and obligations linked specifically, and often exclusively, to that geographic location. In the view of Paradise Gray, these kinds of bonds can become linked to “hoodism,” a partisan, restrictive mode of citizenship that can have violent consequences. In Gray’s view, the “hoodism” in the African-American
community is a microcosm of a partisan and/or nationalist hoodism in American politics. The term 1Hood attempts to reclaim the term “hood” by repositioning it as a sociopolitical rather than geographic location. The coalition would have the members of its collectivity transcend the narrow and divisive interests of its many hoods by unifying into 1Hood, based on common sets of economic, cultural, political, and ethical interests.

While SK positions the audience and beneficiaries of aid in a hero to helpless victim relationship, 1Hood’s texts offer a more populist, but much more complex formulation. 1Hood’s texts position the audience as simultaneously hero, victim, and witness. Whereas, the victims in SK’s narratives are uniformly African, the victims in 1Hood’s narratives are comparatively diverse in racial and ethnic identity. 1Hood’s texts suggest that what the “implied auditors” (the audience) shares with these victims is a witnessing of instances of oppression. In this framework, 1Hood’s texts frequently address their audiences as rights-bearing citizens, and reference the democratic ideals of the United States to point out the contrasts between the American promise of justice and equality inherent in such ideals, and the real-life deployment of laws by the state apparatus. In this sense, their texts connote that the audience is close enough to witness inequality, unlike the far away, othered Africa depicted by SK’s texts. Smith and Gray appear most often as hosts, narrators, or enablers, offering the audience the rhetorical evidence that rights have been violated, and the technological and rhetorical tools to fight back.

Many of 1Hood’s texts advocate on behalf of young, black males. This focus is partially related to the fact that the problems of racialized police brutality and stereotypical images of African-American men in the media hit home with Smith, Gray,
and other 1Hood founders who are African-American male residents of Pittsburgh’s urban areas. This issue of white supremacist law enforcement practices also gained increasing currency in the national media during the years of 1Hood’s founding and development. For instance, in 2012, the Malcolm X Grassroots movement produced and publicized a report “on the Extrajudicial Killings of Black People by police security guards, or self appointed law enforcers” (2013). The study found that in the first half of 2012, 120 African-Americans were killed in this manner, 96% of whom were male, and 69% of whom were between the ages of 13-31. Also noteworthy, is the finding that 46% of the victims were unarmed, and in another 36% of the cases the initial claims by law enforcement that the victim was armed were disputed by witnesses or future investigation. Enough’s Enough (2008), Free the Jena Six (2007), Trayvon (2012), I am Troy Davis (2011), Jordan Miles (2011), and Game Changers (2013) are all 1Hood Media videos that construct the audience as witnesses to the victimization of African-American males.

The music video for Jordan Miles offers an example of how 1Hood Media’s texts construct the victims of injustice, and by processes of identification, the audience. The audience is invited to witness a case of racial profiling and police brutality. Jasiri “X” Smith functions as journalist, detective, attorney, advocate, and lead actor, as he takes the viewer through a particular visual and lyrical narrative of the facts of the case.

The instrumental track for the Jordan Miles video is borrowed from the Beastie Boys 1985 hit “Paul Revere,” and it signifies through a complex chain of intertextuality. In addition to providing a sparse but catchy musical bed that highlights any lyrics being sung over it, this instrumental functions as coded semiotic cue to hip-hop fans. For fans
that recognize it, the aural cue of the “Paul Revere beat” alerts fans that a story will be
told and that the story will likely include a call to defense. The choice of this instrumental
constitutes an audience that will recognize the song as a remix. The first lines of the song,
“Now here’s a little story I got to tell,” are also the first lines of the Beastie Boys song.

The video starts with an especially prominent branding technique that consists of
a large yellow 1Hood logo against a black screen. Punctuated with the sound of a cymbal
played backward, this screen then switches to Smith’s logo (an X with an eye at its
center). The next shot features Jasiri “X” Smith descending the front steps of a house
lipsyncing the song’s opening lyrics:

Now here’s a little story I got to tell
about 3 officers you don’t know so well
It started way back last January
with officers Ewing, Sisak, and Salbutte
They ran into boy named Jordan Miles
a real good kid who for sure was mild
but he was found guilty before a trial
cause he’s a young black man in the wrong part of town

Shots of Smith performing these lyrics are juxtaposed with black and white
footage of the officers and Miles from the arraignment. The footage features each officer
holding up his judicially required name card. The chronological and step-by-step
presentation of the events rhetorically constructs the audience as juror. Smith’s lyrics
editorialize, but also reason with the collective viewer/jury. The dramatic reenactments
and court footage appear as objective confirmation of Smith’s claims.

The primary problematic that the viewer is asked to assess is that Jordan Miles, a
high school-aged, rights-bearing, model African-American male citizen was chased,
brutally beaten, and arrested by Pittsburgh police, and yet he was innocent. Smith’s lyrics
articulate both of these claims. While 1Hood has decried the unlawful beatings and killings of a variety of citizens, Miles is constructed as an especially undeserving candidate for criminal profiling:

Jordan is a kid that gets good grades
not a thug bragging that he’s hood raised
He takes care of his grandmother cause she’s older
went to performance arts school and plays the viola
He never did a crime one day in his life
His favorite TV show is CSI
when he graduated he wanted to learn
how to catch a criminal like Lawrence Fishburne

This representation of Jordan as studious, nurturing, respectful, and creative appeals to a viewer who would appreciate these traits. It gives the viewer the necessary materials to experience pathos, when the graphic details of the beating are relayed. Standing at the scene of the beating, in Pittsburgh’s Homewood district, Smith narrates a version of the sequence of events in which plain-clothes officers emerged from an unmarked vehicle and accused Miles of possessing drugs and guns. The discussion of Jordan’s desire to be a forensic officer enhances the sense of injustice in the narrative by creating a sense of irony for the viewer. Not only was Miles a law-abiding citizen and a good student, but he also actually dreamed of working in law enforcement. The irony in turn works to construct both Miles, and the outraged audience-witness as morally superior to the police officers who, according to the narrative, fail to uphold the law.

Although Ewing, Sisak, and Salrutt are identified early on in the video, to bring them into the light as named, tangible actors that can be realistically brought to justice, they are also strategically “depersonalized” with terms like “the cops.” As a representation of social actors, phrases such as “the officers” and “the cops” invite the
audience to think about the actions of these individuals through their roles as part of the state apparatus. As cops, rather than as named individuals, they are part of the larger force of police and more easily connectable to historical trends of racial profiling, abuse, and murder:

He didn’t get far before the cops catch em
Now that they got em they gotta teach him a lesson
Because he ran that means they gotta wreck him
they slam him on his neck and start to chin check him
Blow after blow till his face was swollen
He thinks they’re gonna stop but they just keep going
he calls on God whispering the lords prayer
they grab him by his locks just to rip out his hair
beaten and bloody they finally hand cuff him
but then when they search they don’t find nothing

Smith lies on the ground during his performance of these lines, taking the position of Miles during the beating. Smith raises his hands protectively across his face, and at one point he performs with a photograph of Miles’s swollen, post-beating mug shot covering his face (see Figure 5-2). The camera maintains its position, looking down onto Smith’s depiction of the events, but the lines “He thinks they’re gonna stop but they just keep going” invite the viewer to enter into and identify with Miles’s perspective during the moment of the beating. As such, the appeal to identification is one that invites the viewers to imagine themselves as Miles and to form their own empathic outrage at the wrongness of his treatment by police, and the legal system that refused to put them on trial.
While there are a variety of meanings at work in the Jordan Miles video, the narrative is essentially an account of a model citizen suffering multiple rights violations at the hands of a racially biased, and ineffective legal process. Like many other 1Hood texts, this text does not appeal to viewers who favor extra-legal justice actions. Instead, this appeal asks viewers to understand restorative justice as beginning with the legal investigation and the accountability of the officers in question.

Following Burke, the transcendental identity of the audience-subject that Jordan Miles constructs is that of a citizen who is outraged at the violation of rights. Smith indicates this by placing his own body at the site of the incident. Laying down and acting out Miles’s victimization, Smith constructs himself, and by implication other citizens, as

Figure 5-1: Smith performs with image of Miles’s beaten face over his own.
consubstantial with Miles. In this case, the vulnerability to rights violation is a key mechanism of violation.

Examining Jordan Miles as a textual knowledge exchange, Fairclough would call attention to the particular modality that is used. Fairclough defines modality as “what one commits to when they make statements or ask questions, or make demands or offers” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 165). In his view, modality is one discursive parameter that produces meaning by structuring the relationship between texts, action, representation, and identification. Smith constructs himself as what might be called a “citizen-witness” who is deeply familiar with the facts of the case and wary of an attempt to obstruct justice. Bridging Miles’s vulnerability to civil rights violation with the implied audience through his own situation in the narrative, Smith commits himself to two attitudes. The first is an attitude of determination to see the due process of law be carried out despite the initial unwillingness of the city to investigate, this can be seen as a demand on both the collective audience-subject and on Pittsburgh’s judicial authorities. The second stance that Smith commits to is an assertion of the guilt of the police officers. As mentioned earlier, this is accomplished through the attribution of intention to the police officers, the imaginative entering of Mile’s perspective during the beating, and the graphic description of Miles’s “beaten and bloody” state at the time of his arrest. These commitments are modal choices that represent one of many potential ways of relating the facts of the case.

The vast majority of 1Hood’s pieces on individual instances of police brutality and murder highlight racial bias as a problematic mode of law enforcement. The argument is explicit at the end of the Trayvon video, as Smith concludes his narrative of Martin’s killing by a self-appointed neighborhood watchman:
And George Zimmerman wasn’t even arrested
the message is only white lives are protected
in America.

In the Jordan Miles video, the focus on race is captured in the lines, “but he was found
guilty before a trial cause he’s a young black man in the wrong part of town.” The racial
profiling of the victims is also specifically mentioned later on in the song, as Smith
describes the details of the incident: “They saw Jordan walking they lips they start lickin
there’s a young black male hell yeah let’s get him.”

Smith attributes an intentional maliciousness to Zimmerman in the Trayvon case
and the officers in the Miles case. In reality, it is impossible to know what the actors were
thinking, but this rhetorical strategy prompts viewers who believe that the perpetrators of
each case did not have malicious intent to recognize that the outcomes would have been
the same, if they had.

Ultimately, 1Hood Media’s highlighting of racial bias is positioned in contrast to
the due process of law or humane treatment as prescribed by civil rights. The incidents
are presented in such a way as to disturb the identity of viewers who see themselves as
part of a just, law-governed society, who must then act to restore justice. Again, the
audience is constructed through this description of the resulting social action, because in
the narrative of the music video, “the whole community” acts, not simply African-
American males or specific advocacy groups. This can be observed in the lines “Now the
whole community wants justice for Jordan, and the cops charged for the crimes they
reported Call the DA and tell him to press charges we demand justice and we just getting
started.”
Another way that 1Hood Media’s overarching narrative works to construct the audience’s identification with victims through a sense of shared injustice has been by expanding from its primary focus on incidents of police brutality against young black males to include an age, race, and gender diverse representation of the victims of injustice. Other racial and ethnic groups and women play significant roles in productions, such as *American Workers vs. Multi-Billionaires, Occupy (We the 99), Who’s illegal?, You’re Fired, Beware Young Girl*, and *Herstory Three Little Girls*, all of which discuss injustices against people from a variety of identity locations. However, the diversity of victims of injustice in 1Hood’s narrative does not extend across class lines. Whether African-American, white, Latino, male or female, these victims are almost always from a working class economic location.

This diversity of oppressed citizens is frequently represented by individuals who either appear visually or speak in the introductory segments of the videos. Typically, the videos start out with news footage and eventually transition to Smith’s performance. There are also many videos that feature the video and audio footage of citizens who represent the particular injustice being discussed. The video for *American Workers vs. Multi-Billionaires* (filmed largely on location at the 2011 protests in Madison, Wisconsin) opens with video footage of an unidentified white female protester who explains her participation in the protest over the first four bars of the instrumental: “We’re out here today just trying to support ourselves, to have the bargaining rights that we deserve as middle class citizens. Scott Walker, you need to learn how to negotiate and not dictate.” The video then cuts to shots of the large crowds assembled in and around the state capitol building. Following the seven-second, silent, *This Week with Jasiri X*
opening sequence, the video for *Beware Young Girl* starts with video footage of prisoner and sexual abuse survivor Sara Kruzan, convicted at the age of 17 for the murder of a pimp who forced her into prostitution, as she recounts, “He had sex with me when I was 13 and um, he’s a very... he uses his ‘manhood’ to hurt.” The video then cuts to Smith performing the song. More footage of Kruzan is played at the end of the video.

In short, 1Hood Media’s texts invite their audiences to experience consubstantiality with a diverse representation of the victims of injustice. While their productions position victims within familiar populist tropes, their range of representations of victims also allows for a wider range of narrative complexity and agency.

The *Occupy (We the 99)* video, which was filmed and released at roughly the same time as the SK launch, offers a clear example of 1Hood’s rhetorical positioning of the audience as both victims of witnesses to instances of injustice. First, the video constructs the victims of injustice and protesters as ethnically diverse, male and female, and predominantly working class. These appeals invite viewers from a variety of backgrounds to see the context of their involvement as one of mutually intertwined rights rather than charitable volunteerism. Smith discusses 1Hood’s participation in the video as partially a resistance to attempts by the mainstream media to discredit the movement by characterizing its supporters as exclusively young, white, privileged students. *Occupy (We the 99)*, challenges this characterization, depicting the bodies that march and that are brutalized by police as disproportionately white but ultimately diverse. The representation of diversity is achieved by the juxtaposition of Smith, an African-American man, with the images of mostly white protesters (see Figure 5-2). This is supplemented by intermittent shots of African-American protesters holding signs. During
one shot, Smith holds up a newspaper that features the image of executed African-American male prisoner, Troy Davis. This invites the viewer to make connections between the unequal and racialized application of the death penalty, and unequal law enforcement with respect to issues of economic inequality.

Smith doesn't appear for the first 40 seconds of the video and his performance scenes are consistently interrupted by the footage of protesters being beaten, pepper-sprayed, dragged through the street, and arrested by police officers. The inclusion of a
variety of instances of police brutality, particularly at the beginning of the video, suggests that police brutality has become a standard mode of law enforcement, rather than an exception in isolated incidents.

Lyrically, Smith describes the scenes playing out on the screen and contrasts the images of police brutality with Obama’s foreign policy rhetoric:

Remember when police beat the Egyptians who were defiant even president Obama condemned the violence but when NYPD beat Americans there’s silence it’s apparent that there’s bias

This rhetorical appeal suggests that in this case, Americans receive less justice than Africans (Egyptians). In other words, this is a form of oppression that is close to the audience and one that they can relate to.

The next lines of the song clarify what Smith means by “bias,” contrasting the brutal treatment of some protesters with supportive policies for banks and investment firms:

sticks for the people but give carrots to the liars those crooked cops just for embarrassment should be fired and if you want to see terrorists then look higher they in them skyscrapers with billions from my labor

The phrase “the people” invites the audience to identify with the working protestors and, by extension, the working class. Smith’s use of the idiom “carrots and sticks” works on multiple layers. At one level it operates as an ironic reversal of Warren Buffet’s 2009 use of the same idiom to suggest, “Wall Street was not evil but needs carrots and sticks” (Crippen, 2009). Since Buffet, a high profile investor, suggested that Wall Street needs “more sticks,” meaning more punitive regulatory policies, any citation of this widely
circulated metaphor in reference to Wall Street can be viewed as ironic. Smith appropriates the metaphor to suggest that America’s justice system operates in ways that reward investors for corrupt practices, while violently punishing citizens who protest that corruption. The term “sticks”—a metaphor for punitive discipline—in this context evokes the image of the police nightsticks that are used in incidents of police brutality.

Like the chorus of the song, “we gon occupy,” the lines, “building skyscrapers with billions from my labor” solicit identification by inviting the listener to sing its lyrics. In the mouth of the listener/audience, the words “my labor” doesn’t refer to Smith’s work, but to the work of taxpayers and investment clients that were defrauded by the practices of the financial sector. Therefore, by singing the lyrics the listener is constituted as a member of the working class. The combination of footage and Smith’s lyrics invite viewers to confront events that are rhetorically framed as injustices.

Another central component of the appeal in *Occupy (We the 99)*, is that 1Hood’s audience is also addressed as rights-bearing American citizens. Under the video’s opening montage of police brutality footage, a voice can be heard shouting the following words:

> Leave these people alone! They’re U.S. Citizens, U.S. Citizens!!!!! U.S.!!!! It does not make you tough to do this to them! It doesn’t! Stop hurting these people, man. Why y’all doing this to our people???? I been to Iraq 14 times for my people. You come here and hurt them. They don’t have guns. They don’t have guns! They don’t, why are you hurting these people? It doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t make any sense! How do you sleep at night? There is no honor in this! There is no honor in this shit! There is no honor in this! There is no honor in this shit!

The voice is that of Iraq War veteran and Marine Sergeant, Shamar Thomas as he confronted the NYPD, following a large Occupy Wall Street Demonstration in Times Square on October 15, 2011. The first words uttered in the video are “leave these people
alone. They’re U.S. Citizens.” This rhetoric refers to the occupy protesters but also attempts to forge a citizenship-based bond with the audience of confrontation (and the officers themselves). The confrontation was recorded, uploaded to YouTube, and went viral in a matter of days, generating over eight million views and widespread blog coverage (“Occupy Wall Street,” 2011). In the beginning of *Occupy (We the 99)*, footage from the video of the confrontation is juxtaposed with the opening scenes of brutality. As an Iraq War veteran who confronts the line of police officers in uniform, Thomas operates as “the ultimate citizen,” modeling the outrage that the video is meant to evoke from its audience. Thomas admonishes the police officers not for brutality, but for abusing “U.S. Citizens.” Thomas’s outrage is not a response to a human rights violation, but what he perceives as civil rights violations wherein police are assaulting citizens that have rights that he felt he had risked his life to protect. By beginning the video with Thomas’s argument, the video offers it as an analytic framework through which to understand everything that follows. Thomas’s shouting of “there is no honor in this shit” is interrupted by Smith’s voice on the chorus of the song, “we gon occupy, we the 99.”

The aforementioned lyrics of the song also construct the audience as rights-bearing citizens:

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we came to crash your party and we ain’t leaving until we’re even
the Constitution guarantees these freedoms
any one against that’s committing treason
you’re not a real patriot unless you stand for what you believe in
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Here Smith appeals to the constitution as the authority that grants occupy protesters the moral right to “crash your party.” The line, “anyone against that’s committing treason” is another Shamar Thomas-esque reference to the police who are framed in the video as
working against the constitutional rights of protesting citizens. The next line continues to develop the rights-based argument, claiming that the protesting citizens are “real patriots” while those who refuse to join them are not. This rhetorical move clearly addresses a United States citizen that imagines themself to be a patriot. Again, the use of “we” invites the audience to identify with the perspective of occupy protesters by singing along.

This construction of a collective subject that is a rights-bearing, American witness to inequality and repression is also at work in other media coverage of 1Hood actions. In an RT interview about the Occupy protests, Smith discusses the attempt of University of Connecticut to censor his performance by contractually stating that if he performed the song *Occupy (We the 99)* he would not be paid (*Hip-Hop artist Jasiri X defends Occupy Movement and Freedom of Speech*, 2011). The introduction of the newscast sets up Smith’s censorship as the primary problematic, and invites the viewer to bear witness to this:

> Just this month he was slated to appear at a political awareness rally organized by the student government. But then he was told that he would only be paid and allowed to attend if he did not perform his song, *Occupy We Are the 99*, because it contained obvious political statements.

When asked why he chose to perform the song anyway, Smith responds by saying “because I felt this was more erosion of freedom of speech.” Smith situates this incident within a narrative of an ongoing erosion of constitutional rights, packaging the frame to appeal to a viewer who would be displeased at such a prospect.

Having explored how each brand narrative positions audiences in relation to victims of injustice, the study now explores how each case constructs heroes and the audience’s relationship to heroic action meant to address social problems. The texts of the
SK campaign construct audiences as students and witnesses of philanthro-capitalist “wealth pedagogy” about the solutions to social problems. The texts of 1Hood Media depict transformative social action through representations of citizens holding local state agencies accountable through legal action, citizens holding corporate citizens accountable through radical protest, and the development of marginalized populations into media literate producers of media.

**Consumer-Activist Heroism and Wealth Pedagogy in SK’s Texts**

The study will now discuss three themes that are at work in SK’s branded texts. Each of these themes involves heroism and constructs the audience as heroes through their relationship to the primary protagonist, 50 Cent. The most important axis of identification in the SK narrative is the relationship of the collective subject to the celebrity persona of 50 Cent. A primary rhetorical task in the achievement of this “transcendental” brand unity is to constitute its publics as witnesses to Jackson’s wealth, power, and autonomy. The specter of Jackson’s wealth is a fulcrum of the SK campaign because it is the source of his material capacity to affect change, the primary source of his authority as a business savvy financial leader, and the evidence of the brand’s meritocratic redemptive narrative.

The music video for his 2010 release, *United Nations*, provides an instructive example of the contradictions within this kind of rhetorical work (*50 Cent Music*, 2012). This text was chosen for analysis because its title seemed to indicate that the song might include some discussion of Pure Growth Partners’s collaboration with the WFP.
Eventually there is a brief three bar mention of the SK campaign, but the vast majority of the song focuses on brand-building tasks related to other products.

Like many popular music texts, the video for United Nations, is a simple and thinly veiled context for the visual consumption and placement of 50 Cent and several other commodities. The plot includes little more than an opportunity to consume images of Jackson consuming products. The video begins with a shot of Jackson’s SMS audio headphones rotating in mid-air, followed by a full-screen SMS Audio logo. The video then moves on to show Jackson driving a Bentley out into a desert area and performing the song for the camera. The shots provide the viewer with a multi-perspectival, voyeuristic gaze that includes close-up shots of the wheels, rims, and plush leather interior of the Bentley. A less close-up but equally voyeuristic gaze is also applied to Jackson, who is seen driving the car, standing next to it, and wearing the SMS Audio headphones (see Figure 5-3). He is clad in a bright blue Dsquared2 t-shirt and blue jeans, bright shoes, and an SMS Audio logo pendant, that is ostensibly made of diamonds or other precious stone. The bright blue color of his clothes and the shiny metallic exterior of the Bentley stand out distinctively against the dusty brown barrenness of the open, desert environment. While performing in this environment, Jackson addresses and interpolates the viewer as a witness, by offering examples of his lavish spending habits:

I put that money in the vault bitch Usain Bolt/
Progress…make a deal then blow mills for real
Time’s a wasting, you watching my watch, ha
You old school, huh, jocking my style
It is also essential to note that hip-hop songs that are sung in the first person often work to interpolate subjects by inviting them to sing the lyrics and perform the narrative. In this way, songwriters provide materials that listeners can use for identity construction (Knupp, 1981). The lyrics take on new ideological implications when they are created for and or sung by audiences as modes of aesthetic pleasure, imagination, emotional expression, or communicative action. In this sense the above lyric constitutes the audience as admirers by teasing them “you’re watching my watch,” “jocking my style,” etc. But it also invites them to perform the lyrics for their own imagined admirers, as a mode of fantasizing about their own wealth, autonomy, consumption, and stimulation of envy.

Figure 5-3: YouTube of United Nations video (earlier shot of Jackson wearing his SMS headphones can be seen in left lower corner)
Later in the song Jackson invites the audience to document the authenticity of his wealth and lifestyle of leisure by reference to *Forbes* magazine, another important site of ideological work. *Forbes* focuses on the documentation and celebration of wealth accumulation, leisure, and consumption.

Motherfucker on the wall, check Forbes, I’m there
Not once, every year
Even when I take a break, my pockets is in shape

In its last two lines, the song finally references its title, United Nations, and the SK philanthropic effort:

I’m with Deepak meditating
In Somalia & Kenya with United Nations
Funding the World Food Program
Finna solve world hunger, god damn

These lines about the WFP collaboration come at the end of a list of consumptive adventures. In this context, performed by Jackson as he stands, jewelry clad, next to a Bentley, the philanthropic aspects of the SK campaign appear as simply more examples of Jackson’s wealth and autonomy. The lyrics “God Damn” operate as a performance of Jackson’s own awe and amazement at the humanitarian potency of his 50 Cent persona. As such, these lyrics model the reaction that the collective subject should also have.

News media clips, such as ABC’s *Nightline* documentary on Jackson’s trip to Somalia and Kenya, also align with a brand narrative in which Jackson’s wealth is the centerpiece. As a context for describing the SK initiative, the documentary reminds viewers that the film *Get Rich or Die Trying* “charts his rise from crack dealer to number two on the *Forbes* list of richest black entertainers.” Images of Jackson on the front cover of *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, and *Vibe* magazine are splashed across the screen during this
voiceover. During a HuffPost Live interview discussing the campaign, host Marc Lamont Hill stands in for the viewer as a witness to Jackson’s wealth. Marveling at Jackson’s riches, Hill frames the entertainer’s accumulation and display of wealth as “modeling financial literacy” for onlookers:

You’re modeling a couple of things here then. One thing you’re modeling is financial stability, and just financial literacy. I mean… I mean in the short amount of time that you’ve been in hip-hop you’ve amassed an amount of money that it took some people much longer even Russell-Jay Z, I mean it took them longer.

In this way, a variety of SK-related texts work to construct the viewers as a collective subject unified by a common witnessing of the wealth of Jackson.

A frequently mentioned aspect of the social value of the SK campaign is its purchase-triggered donation philanthropic model. In this context, the texts of the SK campaign construct the audience as students of Jackson’s valuable financial knowledge and instincts, characteristics they can access through the consumption of his products and persona. Just as, in the previous texts, audiences become consumer-activist-heroes by participating in the SK campaign (and thus symbolically feeding starving Africans), in this heroic modality, audiences can become as the heroic entrepreneurs and neoliberal icons, like Jackson (Peck, 2008). The aforementioned HuffPost Live interview reveals the complicity of news outlets in reproducing this trope. When the previous quote by interviewer Marc Lamont Hill is examined in this light he is not merely celebrating Jackson’s wealth, but also his business savvy.

In this context, SK is positioned as an entrepreneurial model for unorthodox business leaders. This discourse comes across clearly in Jackson’s response in the same interview:
I don’t want to unprogram people to be, or to have people not be entrepreneurs, you know, I think that’s the strongest point of my character: the not seeing limitations is what allows me to come from the bottom and be in the position that I’m now.

Here Jackson presents himself as a business coach whose own meritocratic success was related to “not seeing limitations.” Jackson’s concern about “unprogramming” people refers to anxieties about critiques of wealth inequality that can motivate philanthropic action. In this view, these critiques of capitalist entrepreneurship as the vehicle for social change are equated with “seeing limitations” or placing constraints on one’s autonomy and social mobility. Later in the interview, Jackson is more explicit about which critiques he is referring to. Jackson also used a similar appeal when revealing that an SK distributor’s plan would be available to Africans:

I’ve been fortunate enough to travel across Africa, and one thing I’ve learned is that it is filled with vibrant, young entrepreneurs who are eager to cultivate a sustainable business sector that will fuel growth for their future. That’s why I’m giving African entrepreneurs the chance to bring SK to their country.

This quote positions SK as not simply an aid model, but also a capitalist development model. But it is also noteworthy because it is a rare and obscure instance in SK rhetoric where Africans are referred to as anything other than hungry children or hungry people.

Jackson’s music mostly constructs his authenticity through endlessly rehashing his street/crime credentials, attitudes, and through narratives about his wealth. But descriptions of his entrepreneurial leadership are also present in Jackson’s music in a variety of ways. On the third line of the chorus of United Nations, Jackson advises listeners, saying “you should fuck with a winner bitch if you want to win.” In this usage, the term “fuck with” means “associate yourself with,” and Jackson suggests that partnership with him is a path to various forms of efficacy, loosely defined as “winning.”
As the chorus of the song, this statement positions the rest of the song, including the philanthropic component, as evidence of why audiences should associate themselves with Jackson. The noun “bitch,” which refers to the pronoun “you” (the subject of the sentence being addressed) can be read two ways. On one level, it addresses a female fan in a pimp to prostitute kind of relation. Alternatively, or simultaneously, it can be translated as an admonition, as in “why would you (the audience) work with someone who is not winning?” This layer of meaning constructs and mocks a viewer whose current associates don’t provide evidence of their ability to assist upward social mobility. On Jackson’s (2013) Street King Immortal album this pattern continues. The lyrics, “corporate acquisitions, accumulations of wealth,” on the song We Up (We Up by 50 Cent, 2013), or the choice to title a song Financial Freedom (Financial Freedom by 50 Cent (Official Music Video) | 50 Cent Music, 2013), are other lyrical references to Jackson’s alleged business savvy.

As students and supporters of Jackson’s wealth pedagogy, the audience becomes consumer-activist-heroes that assist Jackson, the main hero, with the delivery of food to Africans. This representation of heroic humanitarian action can be observed in the interviews, website materials, tweets, products, and product packaging that are coordinated by the campaign. All of the above use some version of the phrase “every bottle sold feeds a child in need,” or “Street King provides a meal for every bottle that is sold.” Some campaign materials, such as the Are you a Street King? YouTube contest, or certain rewards in the SK Energy rewards program, explicitly invite audiences to participate in this form of action by suggesting that for certain types of brand-related actions a meal or funds will be donated “in your name.” These suggestions directly hail
the audience member with a question that is fairly loaded. The invitation of audience members to associate themselves with SK, as a brand and as a marker of personal identity, reinforces the feeling that the brand is something positive and desirable to be associated with. This framing of social action is not just found in the discourse that is explicitly promotional. An especially literal representation of this form of social action is depicted in ABC’s Nightline documentary, “50 Cent: Hip-Hop Humanitarian.” The six-minute news feature, airing originally on February 24, 2012, chronicles Jackson’s trip to Somalia with the WFP. In one scene, Dan Harris, the narrator of the news segment explains, “he (Jackson) has already provided 3.5 million meals.” As we hear these words, African men are shown moving large white bags of rice into a rice storage facility in which hundreds are already stacked. A photographer who was present on the trip (and interviewed for this project) took a picture of Jackson in what appears to be the same facility standing between two enormous stacks of bags of rice. These shots serve to document the authenticity of the effort, and confirm that food is indeed being delivered as a result of the campaign. It also links Jackson to the scope of not just the problem, but also “the solution.”

Jackson is linked to immediate heroic action even more directly. Later in the documentary, Jackson is shown personally serving cups of food to Somalian children who wait in line. On the surface, this scene documents a service that Jackson provided during his brief visit to East Africa. But since Jackson does not work as a food server for the WFP, this is not meant to be a literal documentation of how the campaign functions. Rather, in the context of the documentary and of the SK campaign, this shot operates as a metaphor for Jackson’s philanthropic “feeding” of the hungry. Additionally, it is meant to
connote a shift in his character, a narrative theme, as discussed above, also offered in
other SK texts and consistent with campaigns for both SK and 50 Cent himself.
Throughout the scene in which Jackson feeds children, Harris’s voice narrates: “the
education of 50 Cent, the battle for this rapper’s soul, is a fascinating spectacle to
behold.” When contrasted with earlier scenes in the documentary that highlight Jackson’s
gangster persona and criminal past, this statement reflects the documentary’s
fundamental frame of redemptive transformation through philanthropic social action
(and, not coincidentally, for many traditionally, classically heroic figures who start off as
selfish and end up helping others). The SK campaign’s use of the discourse of “conscious
capitalism,” works through a related redemptive narrative. It presents Jackson, and
indirectly the audience members who wish to model Jackson (through SK consumption?),
as heroic and agentic.

In fact, the Africans, who are mostly depicted as women and children, only speak
twice throughout the entire six-minute clip. What they say when they finally speak is an
important indication of what the editors of the news segment framed as important about
their identity. Discussing Jackson’s transition to becoming “the hip-hop Bono,” the
documentary first shows a scene of Harris at the center of a group of African youth. He
asks the African youth a central question for the SK campaign: “Are you guys fans of 50
Cent?” In unison, they all answer yes. The camera then cuts to a scene of Jackson
surrounded by African children. He sits with his arms around their shoulders smiling and
stroking them affectionately on the top of the head. Looking up at him, a young Somalian
girl utters the second and final words spoken by any African in the clip, “[can you] sing
one song” (see Figure 5-4). The status of the recipients of aid as fans of 50 Cent is highlighted, which in turn highlights Jackson’s benevolence and global brand reach.

![African children asking Jackson to sing](image)

Figure 5-4: African children ask Jackson to sing in Nightline’s “50 Cent Hip-Hop Humanitarian” news report.

This moment in the narrative of the documentary reveals that the value of Africans in the SK campaign is largely related to their ability boost SK’s brand metrics.

What is not part of SK’s narrative about this kind of social action is any discussion of the sustainability of this model, or the consideration of other models that may offer larger structural change. There is no discussion of where the economic infrastructure and food economies of Somalia, Kenya, or other recipients of aid will be at the conclusion of the campaign. While the United Nations has some discussion of this on less publicized aspects of their website, the SK campaign does not make it clear what hungry Africans are to do after having been provided with one meal. In this regard, the
effort seems more focused on developing and broadcasting metrics about its philanthropy than generating or even creating dialogue about sustainable solutions.

The “wealth pedagogy” of the SK campaign also explicitly supports a neoliberal program of challenging other more radically progressive strategies of social change. At a Deepak Chopra conference, PGP founder Chris Clarke showed the video trailer for the company’s “Just One” movement. The text of the video explains, “it will take $582 million to end extreme poverty. History has proven that governments and charities can’t do that alone. But who can? Business can, that’s who.” The video goes on invite consumers to demand that companies spend “just 1% of their income to give back.” After showing the video, Chris Clarke explains, “we came up with the 1% way before Occupy Wall Street.”

Similarly, in the HuffPost interview, Jackson reveals that Occupy was an inspiration for the SK campaign but that SK’s strategy would remove the need for this kind of progressive movement:

I would just say the concept of this actual project when I launched it too, was around the same time, as to the same time that we were promoting it too, was around the same time of Occupy Wall Street LA, Chicago, all of these issues where people feel like the major corporations are not conscious of the everyday person.

Mark Lamont Hill: Do you agree with that?
Jackson: Well...I mean they do some giving back but this model would totally X-out that concept.

Taken together then, SK’s representations of social action rhetorically construct subjects who want to act to remedy extreme poverty, and improve their own financial status. Through witnessing and supporting Jackson’s wealth, autonomy, consumption, and philanthropy, the consumer participates in a simultaneous project of humanitarianism
and personal entrepreneurial education. As part of this lesson, the subject eschews radical projects of social protest or fundamental institutional change in favor of Jackson’s “proven” philosophy of entrepreneurial empowerment.

We Came to Crash Your Party: Heroic Action in 1Hood Media’s Texts

Among the variety of ways that 1Hood Media depicts heroic action, three stand out in the specific texts under analysis. The first of these is the representation of citizens holding local state agencies accountable through legal action, the second is protest aimed at obtaining accountability from national government bodies and nationally influential private entities, and the third is the process of assisting youth to develop critical media literacy. The aforementioned Jordan Miles video offers an instructive example of this. The video describes the events surrounding the civil rights case of Jordan Miles (as discussed earlier, the Pittsburgh-based African-American youth who was physically assaulted and arrested by police on Jan 12, 2010). As both an educational piece of media about the case and protest song/video, Jordan Miles stands as an example of social action. Specific types of social action are also represented in the text of the song which constitutes a subject position of citizenship.

The primary representation of legal agency in Jordan Miles comes at the end of the song, with the lyrics, “now the whole community wants justice for Jordan / And the cops charged for the crimes they reported / Call the DA and tell him to press charges / we demand justice and we just getting started.” These lyrics are specific about the kind of justice that is being sought. In this case, it is legal action. The phrase “we just getting
started” indicates the intention of the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign to continue to push for this specific end. The use of the term “we” refers to those already in support of the campaign, but it also invites the audience to identify with the campaign through the act of singing the lyrics. This contrasts with the exclusive use of “you” or “I” in 50 Cent’s lyrics. The video ends by directly asking the viewer to take action on behalf of the case by placing the following text in white lettering over a black screen:

Call Steven A. Zappala Jr.
Allegheny County District Attorney
412.350.4400
(screen switch)
Demand he press charges on
the 3 officers that brutally beat Jordan Miles
(screen switch)
For more information go to
justiceforjordanmiles.com

Hood’s texts also depict citizens working to obtain accountability from national government bodies and nationally influential private entities. The song and video for Occupy (We the 99) offers an additional example of this pattern of representation. The song was written as a manifesto for the Occupy movement, and it decries the actions of the financial sector in relation to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, the absence of legal accountability in the wake of the crisis, and the methods of law enforcement directed at the Occupy protests. This video was filmed at Zuccotti Park in NY and in Pittsburgh, PA, and includes footage from a variety of other protests. The video’s clearest symbol of social action is the seemingly endless collage of footage of police physically assaulting protesters at various Occupy events that plays throughout the video. These scenes are juxtaposed with marching and protest scenes and shots of Jasiri performing his verses at
various Occupy locations (see Figure 5-4). The lyrics of the song interpret these images for the viewer in a number of ways.

The song’s chorus “we gon (going to) occupy / we the 99,” is sung by Jasiri “X” Smith. The phrase “we gon occupy” announces the literal intention to continue engaging in politically oriented processes of reclaiming physical space, but it also announces a general intention to take action against the forms of injustice that are argued elsewhere in the song. “We the 99” takes up the rhetoric of the Occupy movement, inviting the viewer to see themselves as the victims of the practices of the financial sector and lax regulatory policies and processes, but also as the hero, as part of a community that reclains space and demands accountability. The verses reaffirm the intention to act and offer more rhetorical appeals that justify action. In this sense, the aforementioned lines, “we came to crash your party and we ain’t leaving until we’re even,” are an announcement of political action. The lyrics go further, to argue that for those who consider themselves patriots, social action is not a choice but a requirement of participation in democracy. But the form of action being discussed, “we came to crash your party,” describes the radical action directed at the institutions involved with the governance of the financial sector. In this case, “your party” is meant to describe the villain, whereas the “we” refers to the constituted audience.

But 1Hood Media’s texts also depict heroic action in the context of less dramatic and reactive processes, such as the development of the media literate and media producers in marginalized populations. The 2011 documentary, Gamechangers, offers an example of this representation. Gamechangers describes the formation of the 1Hood Media academy, which was founded and administered by Smith and Gray, and 1Hood’s
larger work as hip-hop activist/entertainers. Both the academy and the documentary was funded by the Heinz Endowment in response to a 2009 report on the negative portrayal of African-American males in Pittsburgh’s media (portrayal-and-perception: Two Audits of News Media Reporting on African American Men and Boys, 2011). The documentary features footage of instructional sessions and discussions, footage of Gray teaching the youth how to use video equipment, footage of the 1Hood Media videos, and commentary by Smith and Gray, the youth involved, and the narrator (see Figure 5-5).

**Game Changers: The One Hood Media Academy**

Figure 5-5: Smith and Gray (sitting down) are shown teaching in Gamechangers documentary.

The term Gamechangers is itself a brand name for a Heinz Endowment-funded documentary series. Throughout the documentary, the term “gamechanger” or the phrase “changing the game” are used as a code for heroic social action. Both the narrator and the subjects of the documentary use these terms to describe it. Often the quotations that are featured describe empowerment that is enabled by technology. Discussing changes in
media technologies, Paradise Gray states that “media is being taken from the hands of the very few and being spread out to the hands of many.” Later, Gray highlights the creative autonomy and self-determination that is enabled through this kind of training, “they change the game by knowing that they can do it and they don’t need anyone’s permission and anyone’s money to do it.” Youth that are quoted in the video echo this sentiment.

Jasiri “X” Smith is more specific in his explanations of the process of empowerment:

What we’re doing by responding to these, um, situations so quickly, is something that hasn’t been done in rap music, so this is just a combination of our desire to raise awareness about situations, technology, um…and kind of the internet where, you know, I put it out there on Facebook and Twitter and then it just…it goes and just begins to have a life of its own and people begin to blog about it, um, and so. I really believe that it’s gamechanging because we’re able to do something that really has not been seen before.

Throughout the documentary the narrator underscores these points: “Paradise and Jasiri are game changers because they show these young men the power that is within their grasp.”

The development of media literacy is also discussed as a mode of empowerment. The narrator of the documentary explains, “One of the things that the 1Hood Media Academy does is to have frank and honest discussions about videos that are aimed at young people.” Gray explains, “When you teach media literacy to a young person it’s like getting them off the bench and getting them into the game.” This commentary is cut together with images of Jasiri teaching, facilitating discussions about mysogyny and rape culture in hip-hop.

The Gamechanger documentary invites the audience to witness, imitate, and perhaps support the heroic actions of Smith and Gray. This documentary is more hierarchical in its appeal because it is clear that Smith and Gray have special skills that
enable them to execute this particular intervention. In a sense, it constructs audiences as “witnesses to possibility,” but the possibilities seem mainly attainable by working with 1Hood Media and acquiring technological products and skills. Given that the documentary was aimed at the Pittsburgh community, it may have also attempted to construct African-American parents as potential recruiters of their children for the academy.

1Hood Media builds its brand by documenting its involvement in a more diverse range of social action than the SK campaign. However, critics of 1Hood Media point out two concerns with texts like the Gamechangers documentary and other aspects of 1Hood Media’s body of work. First, as 1Hood Media works to brand the careers of Paradise Gray and Jasiri “X” Smith, its productions show less evidence of its roots as a coalition of a variety of community-based organizations. The Gamechangers documentary, for example contains scarcely any mention of 1Hood’s other members or its early history.

In addition, because the Gamechangers documentary is a Heinz Endowment production that seeks to document, celebrate, and promote, rather than rigorously scrutinize 1Hood Media’s work, the text becomes vulnerable to critiques of technological utopianism, in which black youth simply need the right technology and media skills in order to transform their lives. While the documentary mainly celebrates the access that youth have gained through the 1Hood Media academy, it fails to address the situation of youth who may not have access to certain technologies, ecological problems related to technological products, or any critical discussion of the role of media technologies or platforms in capitalist economies. Although 1Hood Media constructs its audiences as
potential producers and/or distributors of ideologically progressive media, it risks inviting them into an uncritical perspective on the technologies and platforms themselves.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the incentives of the brand commodity and the underlying ideological perspective of Jackson and Clarke lead SK to construct their audiences according to very different understandings of transformative social action in the public sphere. SK constructs its audiences in a subject/consumer relation to the celebrity persona of 50 Cent, and a savior relation to the Africans who receive aid and particular versions of social action. Its texts tend to infantilize and speak for the recipients of aid in an effort to boost the self-congratulatory savior appeal of the campaign and product. In its vision of social action, SK mainly constructs its audiences as consumer-subjects who act mostly through consumption but also, potentially, through entrepreneurial action. Consumptive practices and habits of attention and engagement that celebrate the wealth of Curtis Jackson are central to this project. Additionally, the campaign can be seen as explicitly complicit in a neoliberal, philanthro-capitalist project related to activism in which humanitarian issues are progressively removed from the jurisdiction of protests or activism, and placed in the hands of corporations who will provide 1% of their profits to a given cause. As a result, any activist mechanisms for creating dialogue about creating sustainable food economies, the various modes of social participation needed to facilitate long-term change, or the ways in which corporate incentives may hurt these projects are left non-existent. The SK consumer-subject also participates in a project of personal
redemption that represents a microcosmic redemptive reimagining of larger corporate practices. In this way, the audience is constituted as a hero who emulates 50 Cent’s entrepreneurial spirit and redemptive philanthropy through consumption (spectacularly, in the case of 50 Cent’s videos). The victims of the story, mostly voice-less, emaciated African adults, or, more often, children, are not a source of audience identification, but are othered through tropes of orientalism and infantilization.

1Hood Media’s texts construct its collective subject as rights-bearing American citizens who bear witness to, are close to, and respond to instances of injustice. The victims of injustice, who frequently speak for themselves in 1Hood Media productions, are mostly African-American males, but also include citizens who come from a variety of geographic and ethnic backgrounds. 1Hood Media invites its audiences to feel consubstantial with their experiences of injustice. Additionally, 1Hood Media offers a more multi-faceted representation of social action. This includes local and national strategies to hold law enforcement accountable, as well as more radical projects of reclaiming public space. Additionally, the development of art, political media, and new generations of media producers “from the margins,” are also depicted as necessary components for participation in the promotional public sphere. Certainly, Smith and Paradise are prominent figures, even protagonists, in the productions’ stories, but similarities between them, audiences, and victims of injustice are often constructed.

However, as 1Hood Media continues to develop its brand, the organization must remain aware of the pitfalls of technological utopianism. Even more importantly, the organization must take care that the complex history of the organization and the complex
ecosystem of social participation that 1Hood represents, is not crowded out of its texts by
the branding processes and mandates of the promotional public sphere.
Chapter 6

The Cultural Work of Branded Activism

This chapter aims to offer a richer description of the cultural work that is involved at the core of the two cases under analysis. In addition to identifying sites of work and helping the reader gain a clearer picture of the specific kinds of work that go into each form of branded activism, this chapter also offers a beginning step in an evaluation of the effectiveness of this work as a response to the pressures and potentials of the promotional public sphere. Methodologically, this chapter sits somewhere between phenomenology and ethnographic production studies. I am primarily interested in the rhetoric through which workers describe their own responsibilities, strategies, challenges, value, constraints, and autonomy. However, I also triangulate their descriptions with my own observations, the observations of other stakeholders, and other forms of documentation, to allow the reader some opportunities for consideration of a more objective perspective.

Perhaps the most logical place to begin a chapter titled “The cultural work of branded activism” is by explaining what is meant by the term “cultural work” in this context. First, it will be important to sidestep the complex issues of defining the term culture by stating at the outset that I am using the term culture in roughly the same way that it is used in scholarly discussions of the cultural industries. This is not to say that the term culture is fixed or unproblematic in these discussions, but rather to indicate that I am using the term “cultural” to connote communication with audiences and the production of texts frequently associated with aesthetics, arts, and entertainment as forms of social
meaning. (For a more comprehensive discussion of the term culture, see others.) The close examination of the work involved in this conception of culture also illustrates how the processes involved begin to intersect with broader understandings of culture as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1958).

I'm using the term “cultural work,” then, to situate this study within the contributions of a diverse set of literature that take up one or both of two primary concerns. First, there are studies that look at how the character and organization of cultural labor has changed in late modernity. Among the many parameters of change that these authors investigate, changes to the organization and structure of labor are a foremost concern. Authors who have taken up this subject include Hesmondhalgh (2011), Banks (2007), Deuze (2007), Beck (2003), Miege (1989), and many scholars in what might be called the “the production of culture” school. While several of these scholars use the industrial metaphor to describe the set of institutions that create cultural products, they are also interested in pushing past to this metaphor to understand how production is actually organized and structured with a focus on workers.

Additionally, like many scholars, I join these theoretical conversations and interventions with a background of “professional” work in the cultural industries. This background includes my experiences as a full time hip-hop artist signed to two major label distribution deals, and as an artist who has used my creative experiences and promotional knowledge to work within the non-profit world. Research on the cultural industries and on cultural work have provided me with useful and far-reaching explanatory frameworks that revealed new languages of domination and agency. But the access, relationships, and business exchanges that I have participated in have also enabled
me to observe intersections of commerce and creativity that have not been covered as thoroughly in the literature. For example, it is common for studies of cultural production to proceed within categories such as the music industry, the advertisement industry, the video game industry, or the television industry. However, my professional experiences revealed sites of labor and cultural production that blur these conceptual demarcations. Because Jasiri “X” Smith and Paradise Gray traffic in hip-hop videos, songs, and live performances they might at first glance traditionally be studied as part of the music industry. Likewise the work that the WFP does might be considered in the category of development work. In both of these cases these categorizations would miss important sites of work, such as the photography and celebrity-assisted promotional work of the WFP, or the non-profit and advocacy work that is very much at the center of what 1Hood does.

The changing character of cultural work therefore also involves its diffusion into a variety of other areas of the economy. An important subset of this literature uses the term “creative industries” in conversations about the realities of this diffusion. What is partially at stake here is the question of what counts as cultural work, what counts as creative work, and what implications do these categories and labeling practices have for individuals, organizations, nations, and societies.

Beyond issues of how changes in cultural or creative work reflect and contribute to broader changes in the life worlds of late modernity, some studies of cultural work are also interested in how creativity is organized by the internal structures of organizations, the internalized codes of symbolic producers, and the external pressures that artists, designers, managers, and other cultural workers may face. This subset of scholarship asks
questions that are not necessarily about change but rather about the processes and rhetoric of art, aesthetics, and creativity. They challenge the conception of art as an especially mystical practice that is distinct from other sites of production and unpack the discourses of creativity that are part of the fetishization of art and artists. As a result, these types of studies often involve the “direct observation of specific cultural projects.” The production of culture scholars such as Becker (1984), Gans (1979), and Peterson (1976), set important precedents for this kind of work, and other scholars such as Hoynes, Croteau, & Milan (2011), Mayer (2009), and Toynbee & NetLibrary (2000), have also offered instructive interventions in this regard.

While I agree with Toynbee that musicians enact extraordinary instances of creative expression, I also feel that demystification (that is, the breaking down of the creative process into a series of tasks) is an important analytical tool that should be applied to creative practice. The promotional texts that present artists tend to mystify and reorganize processes of cultural production in ways that fetishize artists and their agency. As such, less glamorous parts of the production process or less empowered cultural workers may inadvertently be hidden as important units of analysis. As a result “the breaking down” must go beyond an analysis of the process of utterance.

A common approach to dealing with these questions has been to apply social theories to ethnographic data, or other empirical information about the nature of work in various fields. Mark Banks (2007) undertakes such a project in The Politics of Cultural Work (2007). Banks engages scholarly literature on cultural work, but he executes this with a focus on the power relations that affect the conditions, organization, and subjectivity of workers. Banks notes three critical theoretical frameworks that lie
underneath scholarship on cultural work: critical, governmental, and what might be called “good work” (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). These can also be seen throughout other works that deal with this phenomenon, and in other descriptions within works on macro-processes in the cultural industries.

Approaches to cultural work, that Banks calls “Critical-Theoretical,” generally operate in alignment with traditions of Marxist, and Frankfurt School critiques of capitalist production. This includes the work of more recent scholars in the political economic traditions, such as Herbert Schiller and Robert McChesney. This work can be broadly characterized as offering evidence and analytical and rhetorical frameworks to support the argument that workers are almost entirely dominated, and that power operates in a top-down, authoritarian, modality. The politics in this sense relates to the ways that cultural workers are both seduced, coerced, and interpolated into alienating, dehumanizing, and vulnerable positions. This perspective assists the current project in a number of ways. Ostensibly, the work being done by SK and 1Hood is distinct from the usual targets of these critiques because these campaigns are reflexive and vocal about social inequality. However, the critical tools of analysis should attune scholars to the ways that labor performed under the moniker of activism can also be a prolific site for the extraction of surplus value and the commodity fetishization of goods and services (as argued in chapter 4). Consequently, through this approach, the subjectivity of artists or other laborers would be primarily understood through the lens of false consciousness or ideological interpolation. Such a perspective can also assist the current project by exploring the degree to which the artists and organizations are constrained in their ability
to conceptualize or deliver critiques of the inequalities, oppressive structures, and solutions related to the causes that they address.

A related approach applies theories of governmentality, such as those of Foucault (1988), Bourdieu (1983), or Deleuze and Guattari (1987), that explore how modern systems of economy and governance systems of modernity often encourage individuals to self-police and internalize the values of the state and other apparatuses of elite classes. This challenges some critical descriptions of standardization and coercive domination by demonstrating how structures reproduce power through producing and shaping creativity rather than squashing it. While the scholars employing this approach seem to recognize elements of exploitation in contemporary cultural work, they note the complex character of worker subjectivity in these configurations. An example of this would be part-time or freelance consultants, who work without benefits or long-term contracts, and who might be encouraged to understand their own labor through titles such as “genius” or “creative.” These titles might apply even to some assembly line positions, such as Subway food workers self-identifying using titles such as “sandwich artists.” Other companies appeal to their employees through hyper-humanizing, caring, hyper-moralistic discourses that connote community, or even familial ties between the individual and the corporation (Brown, 2009).

Aspects of this theoretical approach seem particularly suited to the campaigns in this study that combine creative musical careers and other for-profit work with social justice aims. Informed by this approach, studies of humanitarian efforts or even radical politics might be equipped to understand more thoroughly how cultural workers internalize the values of the campaigns. Additionally, such research takes note of
similarities, differences, and conflicts in how humans are managed and manage themselves within celebrity or artist-led social justice efforts. In the context of this study, it may be important to consider how working conditions may be understood differently by workers who identify as “professional photographer,” or “hip-hop activist,” than they would be by workers that identify differently.

A final strand within this work attempts to evaluate the extent to which rewarding creative values can be promoted within industrial contexts. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) offer a key theoretical and empirical contribution on this topic. *Creative Labour* argues for the value of a normative conception of creative work and attempts, through ethnographic interviews and other forms of empirical analysis, to sort out the dimensions of “good” work in the modern cultural industries. Building on Blauner’s work (1964), these authors identify the need for a more precise understanding of alienation and autonomy as essential components of good work.

Another important question here involves the degree to which workers exercise authorship and agentive creativity, given their reliance on past creative utterances, genre codes, and their situation within market forces. While they often have arrived at conflicting conclusions about these questions, several scholars offer useful descriptions of the creative process and or deconstructions of creativity (Deuze, 2007; Negus, 1999; Stahl, 2002; Toynbee & NetLibrary, 2000). Others also consider how conceptions of creativity are strategically deployed and reflexively internalized in discourses of corporate governance. Banks (2007) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) pay serious attention to the critical implications of this, but they ultimately suggest that the
individualizing and flexible tendencies of corporate production in late modernity may have also enabled some space for relatively autonomous, non-alienating, creative work.

However, these works differ from the current study in that they focus on how cultural products are made within the popular cultural industries, rather than how musical talents and celebrity influence are employed for activist/humanitarian causes. In contrast, this project is ultimately concerned with the production of social activism, and it will engage the contexts and processes of media production with that focus. This means that my focus of analysis must expand beyond the practices directly involved with the release of music or imagery. These discussions must be combined with consideration of the civic identities and critical reflections of philanthropically-minded workers in a way that has only been done in a relatively small body of literature. Another important question involves the degree to which social activism and the artistic lifestyle as tropes, sanction certain exploitative working conditions (Stahl, 2002). However, in looking at SK’s collaborations with programs such as the WFP, or the evolution of 1Hood into 1Hood Media, the role of the brand-commodity as a currency in the promotional public sphere must also be considered. It is a central factor in nurturing and navigating creative careers, taking in certain types of socio-political initiatives, and eventually bringing the two together in the extraction of value.

Perhaps the work most valuable to this study in this regard is Brand Aid, by Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano (2011). This work differs in its focus from some other works on celebrity activism. Tsaliki, et al. (2009), for example, focus almost exclusively on defining different aspects of what celebrity is, and many other works aim specifically at a better understanding of branding. Brand Aid, on the other hand, focuses on how the RED
campaign brings together celebrities, causes, and corporations in the creation of new
types of affect and financial potential. It offers a more developed discussion on the
pressures that corporations are under, and the pressures that they may transfer into the
complex of relationships that constitute “Brand Aid” activities. Richey and Ponte’s work
is also squarely critical. As such, it moves beyond abstract critiques of heavily branded,
philanthropic development efforts and identifies the specific contradictions of capitalism
as articulated within the campaign. Additionally, the work argues that through the “aid
meets marketing” framework, companies are able to capitalize on populations of people
who exist “outside of the flows of global capitalism.” This critique resonates with the
conclusion of several other works that focus squarely on cause marketing (Einstein, 2012;
I. L. Stole, 2008). The current study provides more detail and insight into how this
process works.

My own scholarship on cultural work focuses on critical issues of domination and
social transformation. As a result, my scholarship is informed by three basic themes that
are addressed in some way by the aforementioned works. These themes can be roughly
organized into three categories. First, contexts of labor can be sites for the analysis of
issues of power and autonomy. The assumption here is that a certain amount of autonomy
is necessary for modern subjects to avoid alienation, to pursue fulfillment, and to
participate in democracy. Second, closely related to the issue of autonomy are issues of
meaning and social critique. How do workers understand their own involvement in the
production of broader ideologies and discourses? Third, contexts of work present
opportunities to explore processes of capitalist exploitation. This involves a close look at
labor practices with the goal of identifying hidden or unrewarded labor, risk, and
insecurity required by certain contexts of production. With varying levels of specificity and normative orientation, these works essentially question the extent to which “good” work is a possibility under a productive economy based largely on capitalist wage labor.

With these questions in mind, I considered work and the worker within three very generally defined categories: public relations, the production of media texts, and social media promotion. In its short institutional history, there have been a number of ways of defining public relations. My definition roughly follows Hutton’s definition of looking at public relations work as the management of strategic relationships (1999). This definition embraces a wide variety of practices, such as research and information gathering, persuasion, education, advocacy, and image-maker and other roles. Each organization participates in these practices, albeit in very different ways. The production of media texts considers various aspects of the labor that goes into producing the videos and photographs of these campaigns. Finally, social media promotion focuses on the specific ways that workers use social media platforms such as YouTube, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook, to distribute media products and PR messages. The separation of social media promotion and public relations into distinct categories is not meant to suggest that these are mutually exclusive; rather the discussion of social media promotion can be considered as a focus on a specific sub-category of public relations practice. Within these themes, I tried to engage examples that address three areas of ongoing scholarly inquiry in the fields of cultural work and cultural industries: 1) how workers understand the context of their contribution to cultural work and social justice endeavors; 2) how they understand issues of labor, and value; and 3) how they understand issues of autonomy and their creative careers.
Keeping the Energy on Message: Public Relations in the SK Campaign

SK’s public relations work is influenced by the fact that the campaign is both dispersed and hierarchical. Pure Growth Partners, SK’s parent company, is a completely separate entity from the WFP. Pure Growth Partners manages its public relations through its offices on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, NY, but communications about the SK campaign also emanate from its associated record labels, namely G-Unit and Shady/Interscope, and from freelance public relations agents who might be hired specifically to work with Jackson and the other celebrities related to the campaign. The WFP has regional offices in countries throughout the world. The public relations of the US branch of the company are primarily managed through one office in Washington, D.C. However, in speaking on behalf of the agency as whole, the workers in the US office also speak on behalf of various pilots, drivers, managers, stock workers, and security agents who operate at regional food and service delivery sites.

The hierarchical aspects of SK’s public relations work can be partially seen in relation to these divisions between the work that is done in offices, on computers, in media studios, and the work that is done at remote delivery sites. But there is also hierarchy in the flow of message control. Messages are fashioned by brand strategists at Pure Growth Partners. Jackson then adjusts the messages as he delivers them in a variety of interview outlets and media platforms. The structure is essentially top-down, flowing from PGP and Curtis Jackson to other staff, media outlets, and fans. The control of messaging is made even more complex because the campaign’s promotion uses large amounts of user-generated content. However, in my research and interaction with the
campaign it was clear that staying “on message” was an important priority of the campaign workers at most levels, given that the messages that were most widely and consistently repeated tended to be the basic philanthropic narrative of the campaign that had originated from the brand strategists at Pure Growth Partners.

My interactions with individuals in the offices of Pure Growth Partners and the WFP USA’s media team provided instructive perspectives on the organization and character of the public relations work in these contexts. Some important insights resulted from the challenges that I faced while trying to get beyond the public relations messaging of the campaign. In some respects, the techniques of information framing and gatekeeping that were targeted at me, and my consequent successes and failures were more informative than the content of my interviews. But even the interviews that consisted mostly of talking points offered important clues to the ways that campaign spokespersons understood their work.

My most personal experience of the control of messaging in the SK campaign occurred during my first visit to the offices of Pure Growth Partners. Via email, I set up an appointment at their Madison Avenue offices with Patrick Kerns, an employee that I identified and contacted based on his publicly available LinkedIn profile. After signing in with the secretary, I was told that he was out of the office and would be back shortly. Immediately after, a young African-American woman, also listed publicly on LinkedIn.com, as “general counsel” for PGP, came out and explained that she needed to talk to me briefly before I spoke with my contact. We walked through the all white décor of the PGP offices, which were staffed with about 30 employees. The legal counsel’s offices were in the back and we sat down to talk. Once we were seated in her office she
explained that although my contact had set up the appointment with me, I needed to talk with her first to clarify whether or not he could help me.

The legal counsel took about 15 minutes to screen me. During this time she asked me what my interest in SK was. I explained my project and handed her a copy of my IRB paperwork while she vigorously scribbled notes. She then asked if there was anything that I wanted to ask her. When I asked what the primary work of PGP was, she said that their work was about trying to build brands in a way so that the brand could give back. She then excitedly asked me if I had seen the “Just One Movement” video. Although I had seen it several times, since it was on the PGP website, in an effort to build rapport I agreed to watch it again, and she turned her computer screen around so that we could watch it together. She then explained to me how much it meant to her to work for a company that was giving back. Next, she asked me if I had seen the ABC Nightline documentary about Curtis Jackson’s trip to Africa. She encouraged me to see the documentary and explained that Jackson’s willingness to go to Africa shows that he really cares about this cause, and that she regrets having passed up on an opportunity to go on the trip. Although the video is on Pure Growth Partners’s website, the young woman suggested several times that she would try to obtain “a copy of the video” for me.

I then asked the legal counsel how she sees her specific work within the organization. At this point she explained that a large concern of the company was their competition from 5-Hour Energy. 5-Hour Energy had a monopoly on the energy drink market with no real competitor, and the company had a record for using lawsuits to destroy potential competitors. She revealed that corporate espionage is a very real concern and that her concerns about allowing me to proceed with my study were based in
the company’s concerns about revealing secrets to 5-Hour Energy. She also explained that she would be unable to provide any details regarding the specific financial details of SK’s “give back” component. She explained that this concern was due to past instances where the company had been accused of not giving back. She assured me that the “give back” component was real, and that she had the documentation to prove it, but could not share it for these reasons. Finally, I asked about the social media strategy of SK. The legal counsel also revealed that she was unable to discuss this aspect of their work due to concerns about 5-Hour Energy. Their social media strategy was unique and she wouldn’t want to reveal that to a competitor. I was then told that my contact would be allowed to escort me out of the building, and it was at this point that I realized I would not be allowed to speak with him or anyone else in the office in any significant way.

However, it was during my short walk out of the PGP offices that I gained another interesting insight. While I waited for the legal counsel to bring me an unsolicited bag of SK products and merchandise, Kerns and I spoke informally. I confirmed that he had formerly worked at Interbrand (a “brand consultancy” company) and he asked me how my university was making out in the wake of its own public relations scandal. I explained that the revelations about the decisions of Joe Paterno had made it difficult for many members of the Penn State community to reconcile their own strong identification with the Penn State brand. My contact sympathized. He explained that at Interbrand, he learned about the pros and cons of what he called the “hero” branding strategy. Hero brands were very effective, Kerns advised, but dangerous, because if something happens to the hero than the whole strategy and any related brand investments are jeopardized.
Obtaining an interview with WFP’s media spokesperson was less challenging in terms of gaining access but it was equally challenging in terms of getting beyond official talking points. SK viewed me as either a threatening agent of corporate intelligence or reputational damage or as a potential consumer. Neither of these possibilities incentivized them to engage in any in-depth dialogue with me. As a non-governmental agency it was clear that the WFP felt some responsibility to me as a member of the broader public. Securing the interview was a tedious but rote process of calling, emailing, explaining, re-explaining, scheduling, and rescheduling over a period of two months. The 24-minute interview that I was rewarded with seemed at first to offer little more than various re-workings of SK and WFP talking points. Despite this lack of deeply expository or insightful commentary, this conversation did illustrate some dimensions of what PR work is in the context of the campaign and some points of comparison with my experience at Pure Growth Partners.

While the legal counsel at PGP identified her primary work as “brand-building,” in the context of her seemingly PR-influenced conversation with me, this work translated into repeating the official brand narrative and reinforcing the authenticity of its philanthropic aspects. The language that she used was largely limited to the language and rhetoric of brand-building. In contrast, the Chief Spokesperson for the WFP, Bettina Leuscher, described herself using several titles including humanitarian worker, media spokesperson, and celebrity coordinator, and she described her work by saying that her job was to tell stories to illustrate issues and solutions:

So you know, basically what we’re doing is, we’re telling the stories of our work in the field and trying to win a wider audience for it because that’s what it is all about; the amazing stories out there in Africa, and Asia, and Central America;
about amazing human beings, sometimes tremendous suffering, but also stories of real hope...and um, you know, celebrities can help us really shine a light on those issues, shine a light on the solutions also, and create solutions. (B. Leuscher, personal communication, October 19, 2012)

Leuscher described the changes from traditional media to social media partially through their effect on this story-telling function and on the complementary and alternative narratives that may be in the public sphere. This reflected her understanding of changes in news consumption habits, but it also suggests that an important dimension of her public relations work involves monitoring Twitter for both positive and negative narratives about the WFP:

I’m coming from the traditional media. I worked for a long time with CNN and, you know, the web has changed everything and social media has changed everything. I mean I’m on Twitter all day long, and everything I learn nowadays is first often from Twitter and then you go to the other media. So the story telling has changed at the same time the reach has, you know, totally changed. (B. Leuscher, personal communication, October 19, 2012)

Throughout the interview she frequently used the term “deep in the field.” When describing the work of the WFP, she used this term to construct the WFP as an authority on the frontline realities of development work, and to connect her work, which might be seen as superficial, to work that is widely recognized as materially effectual. Ironically, this was often done through a disavowal of her public relations work:

My little sliver of work here is miniscule. I have more than ten thousand colleagues who are deep in the field driving trucks, riding elephants, riding motorbikes, or with food on their backs or in their trucks to help empower women. We’re bringing school meals and education to more than twenty million kids all over the world. We’re making sure that pregnant moms get good nutrition so that their babies are born healthy. We make sure that little children under five get good nutrition. ....That’s our real work: hard dangerous work deep in the field in some of the most difficult places you know, and so my little thing sounds exciting but it’s a tiny little, you know (laughs). (B. Leuscher, personal communication, October 19, 2012)
Leuscher also expressed that although she held the title of celebrity coordinator, she spent very little time with actual celebrities. Instead, the value of her work to the agency was more about being able to perform the labor for the media relations team in an efficient and frugal manner, and thus downplaying the significance of this PR-element of the organization:

I think if I add the time that I hang with celebrities per year, it comes combined to maybe five days... so you know the celebrity work is only a small part of what I do. I’m a media spokesperson here from food program. No, but what we’re doing is we’re taking care ...uh...I’m just a little player here in New York in a very small office. It’s me and a colleague who are manning the media team. We’re very hands on, very efficient. We’re probably having the lowest admin costs of any aid organization. (B. Leuscher, personal communication, October 19, 2012)

Both the spokesperson at the WFP and the legal counsel at PGP discussed the importance of protecting their organizations from external attacks. The legal counsel at PGP saw those attacks in terms of both competition and reputation damage, expressing to me explicitly that her screening of me stemmed from both of these concerns. My contact at the WFP conversely, focused on the public reputation attacks that are now possible in the age of social media:

You know, the world is coming together. The world is not getting smaller but obviously much more connected, and you know you’ve seen it also not in our work but how one video posted somewhere creates trouble in scores in countries and goes viral. There’s incredible, good potential and social media but also if anybody has bad intentions, the reach is much further than it would have been, you know, ten or twenty years ago. (B. Leuscher, personal communication, October 19, 2012)

Finally, it is noteworthy that both of these workers referenced the publicly available texts of the campaign, and referred me to them as sources of validation of their claims about the campaign. Specifically, the WFP spokesperson referred to the ABC Nightline clip, the Business Effect video, and the social media responses to the 50 Cent
Twitter account. While the vast majority of the publicly available media coverage of the SK campaign is positive, it was clear that these spokespersons aimed at constructing these specific texts as especially representative evidence of the campaign’s authenticity and value.

Despite the success of PGP in covering the details of its public relations work with an opaque cloak of talking points, we can make two reasonable conclusions about public relations in the SK campaign. First, the public relations work of the campaign is almost completely abstracted from the alleged beneficiaries of the campaign work. The reasons for this are fleshed out further in the next section, but it results from the fragmented division of labor that is spread out among the different institutions involved in the campaign. Second, it seems clear that both storytelling and brand protection are important responsibilities of these cultural workers. In both cases, infusing their own personal story into the narrative was a key part of this work.

Community Relationship Management: 1Hood Media’s Public Relations

1Hood Media is a media production and media advocacy company that has its roots in the public relations efforts of the broader 1Hood coalition. The work of public relations is therefore at the core of what 1Hood Media does, but this work looks much different here than it does in the context of the SK campaign. This means that part of the “work” of 1Hood Media is the various labors involved in the physical and virtual participation in protest events. The contrasts in organizational structure are based in the fact that while SK is a large, integrated marketing campaign, 1Hood Media is a two-man
operation. This creates several additional differences. First, the scale and reach of 1Hood’s efforts are much smaller than that of SK’s. Second, while the public relations and media efforts of SK are almost completely disconnected from the populations that are served by the WFP’s work, a significant portion of 1Hood’s PR efforts directly involve the individuals, families, or organizations they advocate for. Third, where the division of labor in SK is hierarchical, delegated, and distinct, the division of labor in 1Hood Media is blurred. Both Gray and Smith must be fluent in several labor skill sets and perform various kinds of labor. They handle their own public relations with the help of their fans and supporters. Finally, the information and vetting work of 1Hood Media is closely related to and often indistinguishable from their public relations work. In SK and their partner, the WFP, research and PR are distinct and the flow of information from PR spokespersons to media and the public is mostly one-way.

Both the members of SK and the members of 1Hood Media had a sense of the different ways that hip-hop work could strengthen social justice efforts. In the context of SK, this knowledge was reflected in Chris Clarke’s choice to partner with Curtis Jackson, and the WFP’s decisions to partner with PGP and the SK campaign. In the context of 1Hood, Paradise Gray’s previous experience with political movements, political hip-hop movements, and with online musical and media distribution technologies, contributed to a particularly rapid learning curve in this regard. An important component of this was that, at least initially, 1Hood Media didn’t seek to break into the “mainstream music industry,” but rather to create an audience large enough to be financially viable, continue to make media products, and to increase the scale of their political influence. Between 2007 and 2012, they saw Jasiri Smith’s music career and Gray’s career as a director,
producer, photographer, and manager gaining momentum as part of their larger work as a media organization. In 2010, Smith signed a recording deal with Wandering Worx, a small, independent, Canadian label (Muhammad, 2010). But this deal was mainly a split production and distribution deal between himself and the label, and although the label helped him release an album and videos for his own career, it simply added to his need to multitask on 1Hood’s media productions.

Another way of saying this is that Smith and Gray gradually realized that the work they were doing constituted a different kind of media industry. This was a media industry in which the media texts they created would spread because of their mutual relevance to local and national political stakeholders, and their audience-building value for media institutions and news organizations. In this sense, the promotional capital the two-man operation had accumulated could be converted into various opportunities. This kind of media industry included the types of work that were being done by record labels, especially the production and exhibition of songs, videos, and live performance, video production, and promotion. But it also involved other kinds of investment in sites of work that seem to fit more in the category of activist-networking than entertainment or cultural work.

An important part of 1Hood’s public relations was their ongoing relationship building and relationship maintenance work. This required their physical presence and active involvement at political conferences and events. For example, in 2011 and 2012 Smith and Gray attended 67 events outside of Pittsburgh and 40 events within the Pittsburgh area. Some of these events involved performances, but they were rarely, if
ever, the kind of drive-through/perform/leave events that Curtis Jackson engaged in as part of the SK campaign.

One such event was the Justice for Jordan Miles rally that took place on January 16, from 2 - 4pm. The event began with a rally at the Homewood Coliseum and extended into a March through the Homewood area of Pittsburgh. The March ended in front of the home of Jordan Miles’s grandmother where police allegedly beat Miles. Smith was one of several speakers at the event, and he performed, but both he and Gray also participated in a number of other ways. Throughout the event they greeted people they already knew. They shook hands, smiled, and welcomed those that had accepted their invitations from other events or online. Gray carried several cameras, taking pictures and recording video during the entire time. He posted some of these pictures to Facebook during the event and posted many others following it. Both men walked with the March through Homewood for its entire duration. For many in Pittsburgh’s progressive political community, this kind of participation characterized 1Hood’s public persona. But it was part of an ongoing maintenance of and gradual widening of communal relationships and advocacy that might be called “community relations.” In 1Hood Media there was little if any separation between PR and “field work.”

One of my sources talks about this, having witnessed their participation in many local events:

They were always the type of brothers who seemed to be very very coalition- and collaboration-oriented, so you would frequently see them at different meetings or hear about them being at different meetings. They would just attend and support sometimes. Paradise would just be there taking pictures. Jasiri would just be there and support. And so anything I was at they were there. Chenjerai: What do you mean by support?
Men Aungkh: Just there to support. He’s not speaking, but he’s there. And so I would see them at anything I went to. (Men Aungkh, personal communication, 2012)

HOod’s public relations also involved participation at national political events and conferences, and these events required a different level of networking and relationship building. Smith and Gray often met future clients and bloggers at these events, so there was an intensification of networking labor in these contexts. At NetRoots Nation 2012, a conference for progressive activists, Smith performed for the entire audience of the conference during a well-attended lunch event and Smith and Gray participated in three separate panels over a two-day period. Two of these panels took place simultaneously, and then Smith participated in the third panel as its facilitator and as one of the panelists. In between these events, both men stood in a central location, greeted old contacts and developed new ones. During this time they were approached by various organizers, such as Billy Wimsatt, founder of the League of Young Voters and author of Bomb the Suburbs, who asked their advice about an initiative called Hoodie Vote. They were also recruited to march at an upcoming NY-based protest of the Stop and Frisk laws. After the conference was over, they participated in conference-related social gatherings at restaurants and bars in Rhode Island. In interviews, Smith had mentioned that it was in the context of one such event at a previous NetRoots conference that he met “novanator,” a key contact in the marketing of the Justice for Jordan Miles video:

I go to Minneapolis and so that’s when I met novanator at some bar and he was like, yo, I can make you go viral. Yup. Gave me his information and I was like yo, I just put this video out. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)
But an equally important component of 1Hood’s work involved the tactical steps related to the campaign, building around high-stakes issues of police brutality. In the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign these early phases of work were important steps in making the decision to be involved and gaining the legal right to later make creative works about sensitive subjects. In Gray’s understanding, these first steps were not directly involved with publicity or media. It really had to do with understanding the claim and determining if they would be involved. Discussing this, Gray explained that the first thing he would do when talking to someone about an incident such as the Jordan Miles Case is to encourage them to document the events:

So I would ask them to, I would ask the person for documentation, to document it. You know, I need a timeline. What happened? When did it happen, who did you contact after it happened. What’s your feedback been so far. How’s…you know…is the shit over with? Whatever is going on, is it ongoing or is it done? (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Based on the information gleaned from this process, Gray could better delegate tasks and determine 1Hood’s willingness to become involved, as Gray clarified:

I would call other members of 1Hood and I share the information with them and then I, um, I ask the person who had the incident to send me a detailed email with a timeline. And then I take that and I send it to my partners, and I see what kind of traction we get. And then I reach out ... I vet it with Jasiri and or other members of 1Hood. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

As Gray understood it, these steps of events and consensus building within 1Hood served various purposes. First, if there was to be any request for police accountability the victim would have to file a variety of reports with state agencies. As such, this work was a form, considered brand and media PR work, meant to safeguard advocates such as 1Hood and other organizations from being discredited later. Gray explains this:
You gotta file a complaint with OMI [Office of Municipal Investigations] if it’s police brutality, you gotta file a report with the civilian police review board… and certain paperwork and things you gotta do first. Get that out the way. Get that done so that you have all of your I’s dotted and your T’s crossed. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

It is important to note that if the proper due process steps were not followed, or if a claim of police brutality was found to be fraudulent, both the specific cause and 1Hood’s brand would be in jeopardy. As a result, implementing this process serves the functions of strategic relationship management between 1Hood and the family or individuals that they advocate for, as well as strategic management of the relationships between the family and the larger “enabling public” (Hutton, 2001, p. 200). Discussing the importance of this kind of vetting process, Gray explained that “We always do that before we put our self out there. Because you know, you could really be like a dog chasing his tail if you just jump and run on everything you hear or read or follow.” It was not always clear that 1Hood would be involved or to what extent they would support various causes. Smith talks about his more distant involvement early on:

I kind of, I was little bit at a distance at first with Jordan Miles because of sort of my disappointment in other organizing that we did, I don’t know, and me kind of feeling like we wasn’t gon get no justice anyway. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

Several of the members of 1Hood talked about how it was important to connect with the families related to the causes that they were advocating for. For these members, connecting with families was first and foremost a matter of offering in-person, communal solidarity with stakeholders in incidents so that they could better understand and support their perspective. Gray explains why it was important for him to meet Jordan Miles and his mother:
So what we always do is we always reach out to them personally. You know, because beyond the headlines are real people. Beyond the statistics is a real living, breathing, human being that has their own fears and frustrations, so we always be mindful of that. These are regular people who had some incredible bullshit happen to them. You know, we always try to give the people a personal touch so we call, we visit, you know, we get the story ourself. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

But the strategy of “getting the story ourself” also served other purposes. Like the aforementioned processes of documentation, meeting the family members allowed 1Hood to verify the facts of the incident and generate the internal inspiration to create the motivation to power a social justice campaign:

You know, meeting the people personally, hearing their story itself, looking them in their eye, getting the gist of it, and when we met them, we could see the pain in their eyes, you see the fear in their eyes, you see the a whole family discombobulated and upset like that, you really understand that it's real. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Ultimately the public relations work of press interviews and song and video production was prefigured by 1Hood’s national and local relationship building and relationship maintenance. The practice of obtaining consent from the family served the family’s purpose by giving them a sense of control over the media narrative. But it also gave 1Hood access to valuable first-hand sources. Eventually, this access would be key in establishing the credibility and relevance of the media products that they would create (see Figure 6-1).
Producing the Cause: Media Production in the SK Campaign

This section focuses on two types of media that were produced specifically for the SK campaign: the television/internet commercials and the photographic documentation of Curtis Jackson’s trip to East Africa with the WFP. The commercials for the SK campaign were produced with considerably more human, technological, and financial resources than 1Hood Media and Jasiri “X” Smith’s videos. On the surface, the media production
of SK and the media productions of 1Hood appear to be completely different. Indeed the content and narrative styles of each organization are different. SK’s most widely distributed productions are commercials and an ABC Nightline news clip, while 1Hood’s productions are mainly music videos and an online hip-hop style news series called “This week with Jasiri X.” But in place of concluding that SK’s and 1Hood’s production were completely different, the results of this study indicate the more precise conclusion that production was organized very differently in both campaigns. For their television commercials SK was able to hire a higher-end director and production team, and split production into several different stages handled by different divisions, while Gray and Smith did virtually all of the production on 1Hood’s productions, themselves performing the multiple roles of songwriters, talent, directors, and editors. As we shall see, pressure-filled, and often relentless multi-tasking can be the price of DIY autonomy. But a variety of tedious tasks are frequently involved in media production even when it is done on a high-budget project, such as SK. Working conditions were therefore contingent on one’s location in hierarchies of creative labor.

Original Film Company produced the first three SK television commercials under the direction of Jessy Terrero, who had previously directed music videos for R&B singers such as Ludacris, Chris Brown, and 50 Cent. Post-production and editing were done between Original Films and Hooligan Films, with the help of an award winning editor, John Del Gatto. But some similarities can be drawn between this context of work and the conditions of work that 1Hood faced. Where the pace of 1Hood’s media production was governed by the momentum of local events or catching the arc of news coverage related to certain events, Terrero needed to produce within the time frames of a larger integrated
marketing campaign that involved celebrity schedules, complex media planning, and quarterly sales accounting. In a promotional “behind the scenes” clip uploaded to YouTube, the commercial’s director, Jessy Terrero, talked about facing time constraints and the challenge to complete the video quickly:

Like most shoots, time is always of the essence and it was a one-day shoot, which one-day shoots are always tough. We spent about, you know, two weeks in post editing and, you know, doing some effects and colors. (“VIDEO,” 2012)

The two weeks spent in post-production relative to the one-day spent shooting the video also reveals that editing was a demanding aspect of the work in the SK context. Editing houses such as Hooligan, located in New York, employ experienced video editors who work on state-of-the-art editing equipment. But they also employ interns and assistant editors who are expected to pay their dues by putting in long and often unpaid hours of work. These assistant editors face many of the same conditions as 1Hood, with little or no compensation or credit. Terrero also mentions that the work of digital effects editors was crucial to the commercial:

We also ended up having to interchange the bottles, so the bottle that we actually use in the shoot we ended up doing a different version, where they created another computer generated bottle and they changed the way the bottle looks. (“VIDEO,” 2012)

The fact that Terrero cites this work in the promo spot but digital effects work is not credited in the commercial’s credits is worth mentioning, given 2013 protests by digital effects workers.

Because 1Hood’s songs and videos contained detailed explanations and discussions of the causes that they advocated for, the production of their videos involved them with people who were the stakeholders and required them travel to the physical
locations where these stakeholders were. Like all of the workers that were interviewed across the various branches of this campaign, director, Jessy Terrero, spoke of being inspired by the philanthropic aspect of the campaign, but a strategic marketing choice was made not to include the philanthropic aspects of the campaign in the television commercials and radio ads of the campaign. Instead, these commercials marketed SK as an aphrodisiac/energy/focus supplement, using an eclectic blend of celebrities in a variety of energy related schticks. This means that production of the video didn’t involve even a conceptual connection to the people living in materially impoverished and/or war torn regions that the campaign aimed to help.

The moment where the media and humanitarian components of the campaign came closest together was during Curtis Jackson’s WFP hosted trip to Kenya and Somalia. The trip was filmed by ABC’s Nightline, and Chris Clarke also hired a photographer to take pictures that could be used by Nightline and by the SK campaign. The photos that were taken on the trip have become the central images on all of the campaign’s platforms and they have also been picked up by the majority of other outlets who have reported on this aspect of Jackson’s career. My talks with the photographer, who I shall call “Linda,” offer a window into the realities and rhetoric of cultural work in this context.

The decision to bring Curtis Jackson to Somalia and to film this trip was partially an effort to address the disconnect between the high-profile celebrity persona of 50 Cent and the distant realities of material inequality in the Global South. The texts that were produced during the trip try to make the realities of hunger real for potential audiences of the SK movement, and they feature Curtis Jackson displaying up close, personal
involvement and concern. But the realities of material insecurity in the Global South can cut both ways, making the crossing of such divides easier said than done for cultural workers. The entire group, which included PR people and on-the-ground workers from the WFP, Chris Clarke, Curtis Jackson, the Nightline crew, and on-air personalities, was given a security briefing before going on the trip.

But Linda felt that the security consultants in Somalia were especially concerned about her safety, given that she was a young, blonde, white American photographer. They recommended that she pay $30 a day to have a fully armed team with her throughout her trip:

They knew [inaudible] like you should bring two armed guards in with you everyday. It costs $30 a day. You should just have armed guards next to you all day. And I was like, no, it’s like really rude to treat people like an asshole. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Chenjerai: They were saying you should have armed guards?
Linda: Yeah, like when I went in by myself. So the teachers just organized this one big guy, named Ali, to just walk around with me, who lived in Kibera and he use to be like a total thug but now he’s— that’s how they explained it. But now he’s like a born-again Muslim or something. He’s a very nice dude. But anyway, he just walked me around everyday and no guns and no. I don’t know. I didn’t want to create any more of a scene than my blond hair and light face was already. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Linda recognized that the threat of danger was real, but she felt that her work required her to forge a connection of consent and understanding between her and the people she photographed. She felt that the spectacle and power display of guards flanking her with AK47s would get in the way of that. Another element of the trip that got in the way of her aesthetic work was the time schedules of the trip. Linda felt that it was important to try to forge some type of relationship to the people whom she would photograph and the environment in which they lived and worked. Unfortunately, the
demanding scheduling of such a large organizational effort produced less-than-optimal
time frames.

Yeah. Fifty Cent was in Kibera. I think he was there for a total of like three days
between Somalia, Kenya, and Nairobi. So I mean, Kibera is in Nairobi but he was
in and out. But definitely, like it was a quick trip for him. I stayed for three weeks
and shot in Kibera after he left. (Linda, personal communication, October 16,
2012)

Although Linda was allowed autonomy in her aesthetic choices about what to
shoot, she experienced this rushed context of production as a constraint. Her discussion
reveals her perception of the “drive by” conditions of celebrity work as well as her
displeasure with this pace of the photographic process.

When I’m shooting they gave me the freedom to shoot whatever I wanted in the
time but with that campaign was so limited that I was kind of thrown in a situation
like, um, like I imagine celebrities, they do this stuff so fast cause either they’re
busy or they only have to do this part of their trip or whatever. Anyway, it felt like
that. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

At a quick glance, Linda’s photographs may seem to contain similar orientalist
representational patterns as some humanitarian campaigns. In fact, Linda was highly self-
reflexive about this and tried to make an effort to avoid those kinds of shots, as she
understood them:

There’s so many campaigns, humanitarian campaigns, where they go in and
they’ll shoot the African kid with flies on his face living on the ground and like
they show that on TV for money and the kid looks desperate and like he has no
hope and like he’s worthless you know, and I don’t believe in that. I think that all
these campaigns should be a little bit more optimistic and more hope-involved;
and not saying that all campaigns are like that, but I definitely believe in giving a
subject dignity....and I think it’s important not to shoot down on that subject....
physically and literally and figuratively. (Linda, personal communication,
October 16, 2012)
Linda also revealed that her standard for comparison of working conditions was based on other development photography work that she had done that was less based on a cultural industries model and therefore allowed her more time to connect.

In Congo, I had a way to get to know my subjects and a lot of time with them and shoot them. But this was very much like in and out, which is hard, but I guess this is what a lot of documentary photographers struggle with and go through. They feel like complete assholes, you know? (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

As mentioned earlier, Linda shot for three weeks after Curtis Jackson and the Nightline team left, to shoot more pictures for her own documentary work. But Linda described differences in the day to day living and working conditions in Somalia and Kenya while she traveled with the SK campaign, noting, “when I traveled with 50 Cent, honestly it was great, luxurious and easy. Not necessarily going out in the field, but we stayed in a nice hotel.” But she compares this to the additional time that she spent in Kenya after the SK and ABC personnel left, and especially to her former work in the Congo:

I stayed in [inaudible] for ten days and we didn’t have any water. Even though it was a French place and on [inaudible] lake you would collect rain water left over from months past...everyone got Diarrhea so...baby wipes [inaudible] shower...Yeah, that was in some ways interesting. I mean, like bathing, and then the food on top of it, you really can’t eat much. You’re trying to avoid getting sick. I guess. But when they don’t have water you can’t imagine what they can really cook cause everything’s kind of stale. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Linda suggested that these combined challenges of security, obtaining the consent of potential photographic subjects, cultural difference, emotional, and physical endurance conditions of work, and a variety of human factors associated with them, are influential factors on the ability of documentary photographers to achieve their aesthetic goals:
Taking one picture was so hard because you have to have a translator with you and a [fixer] cause everyone gets there...You have to make sure that you are in an environment where people won’t get mad. It’s just exhausting. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Among the many interesting things about these conditions of aesthetic production, two stand out as particularly relevant to questions of cultural work. It is accurate to describe the media production of the SK campaign as having a strong element of cultural tourism, but it is also true to say that this was mediated to a large degree by the kind of work that the cultural producer was doing. The relationships they constructed with specific individuals were circumscribed by the context of production, and whatever challenges the photographers and technical people faced during the time they were there were temporary inconveniences. But public figures such as Chris Clarke, Curtis Jackson, and Dan Harris, who flew in and out in three days, experienced these on a different level. The WFP media spokesperson who was also on the trip had a more enduring connection to the day to day challenges of humanitarian work, because she worked with workers on the ground. Although I didn’t get a chance to interview those workers for this study, it seems clear that their relationship to the problems they seek to address are longer-term and more rooted in the everyday realities of the populations they face. But it is also noteworthy that these workers were not involved in the production of media for the WFP or for the campaign. Although Linda traveled with the SK team, it was clear that she felt that her work required a different kind of investment and engagement with the people and the environment than Jackson and the rest of the SK entourage had participated in.
A second interesting component is the way that Linda used the SK campaign as a platform to do her other work. She explained that she was willing to endure the monotony of wedding photography because of its ability to fund her other documentary projects:

I guess every artist struggles to find a balance between art and making a living, so I shoot like high-end weddings to make a living. That pretty much takes up most of my time, but I also get the freedom to go to places like Congo and Somalia and shoot freelance stuff for projects that don’t necessarily have a budget. (Linda, personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Despite the fact that the SK campaign was a humanitarian campaign, Linda viewed its functionality similarly. Flying to Kenya on the SK budget allowed her to stay in Kibera for three weeks and to create a distinct documentary photo series. Linda’s website, which is separate from her wedding photography website, features the SK series but also features the Kibera series as a separate documentary series.

This maintenance of multiple professional identities and profiles online reveals the fragmented ways that cultural workers are invited to conceptualize and present their own work in the promotional public sphere. In the context of corporate production, a connection to the causes for which one advocates ultimately boils down to cost-benefit analyses of investments of time, resources, attention, and public perception. In the context of grass-roots advocacy and coalition building, connections are a mandatory factor that creates access and defines the legal and publicity strategies. The integrity of identity across contexts of cultural work can be empowering or costly to the creative careers of artists who are also social justice actors.
Producing the Cause: Media Production in the 1Hood Campaign

There are several points that can be made about video production in the context of the work that 1Hood produces. The timeframe for this, roughly 2007-2012, occurred when digital technologies became much more affordable and easier to use, which in turn facilitated the production of higher quality video and photography by independent artists and journalists with limited resources. During this period, video production and distribution (especially online) became a central component of 1Hood’s political action and of their related entertainment careers. Here, Gray describes his evolution into a video director:

Well, when the video cameras evolved to allowing it to happen. You know, I started out with like a Canon that was like a old-school mini D-V. Once that went high def. with the mini D-V that’s when shit changed. When the price of those cameras went down from $1500 and below it opened up the market for people to be able to do it. Especially for me, you know, like I said, I wouldn’t get no budgets from nobody, we funded everything our selves. So once that happened I started capturing everything. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

There are a variety of labor intensive processes that 1Hood performed in order to produce texts. This labor is often conceptualized theoretically, financially, and promotionally in terms of crude categories such as recording, editing, pre-production, and post-production. But there are many dimensions of this labor that may be hidden from or less obvious to those who don’t actually perform this work. It is in this way that increased access to high-end media equipment brings with it other forms of labor.

For example, both the recording and streaming of video also requires the physical work of carrying around the camera itself, camera batteries, and other accessories. The camera batteries must remain charged, which can require grueling routines of hunting
down power outlets and monitoring them. This can be particularly challenging in the context of the public and often mobile outdoor events that 1Hood frequently participates in. Errors in the charging of camera batteries can result in missed opportunities to record key events. Additionally, it requires relentless on-the-spot creative decisions about what will be filmed and what won’t. The level of planning and precision needed for these decisions varies according to the type of media that is being shot. Music video productions, such as the Jordan Miles video, required complex “storyboarding” efforts to ensure that the visually rendered narrative would unfold in a coherent and aesthetically pleasing manner.

But one component of 1Hood’s video production work that truly stood out in this study was the work of editing. There are several aspects of video editing that make it especially labor intensive. First, digital editing requires knowledge of a variety of both hardware and software. Computer-based video editing software such as Vegas, iMovie, or Final Cut Pro, are feature-intensive platforms that require the user to become literate with both concrete and abstract aesthetic concepts and parameters and adept at using these concepts in creative practice. Even with this software, the work of editing videos can be extremely repetitive and time consuming. Often editors and editing assistants must weed through hours of video footage, even when making a short production such as YouTube clips or music videos that are often under five minutes in length. This raw footage, or “dailies,” must be carefully watched to select the best candidate clips for future edits. When these choices have been made, there are still many pre-editing tasks that must be done relating to the sequence and length of clips in the graphical display. Often this means that candidate clips of video must be “trimmed,” ordered, and reordered.
according to timing grids that are graduated in fractions of a second. Professional editing houses such as Hooligan, where SK was produced, use a highly delegated division of labor and high-end equipment to accomplish these tasks. In contrast, editors who work under the conditions of Gray and Smith, are often using the sometimes less-than-ideal equipment that they can afford, and performing these editing tasks in between other kinds of labor.

During an early 1Hood production, “This Week with Jasiri X,” (an 18-episode series of three to five minute music videos in which Jasiri would rap about the weekly news (“Best of 2009: All Aboard the Real Talk Xpress | Goddesses Rising.” 2009), Smith found himself operating as songwriter, hip-hop vocalist, video performer, video editor, and video and song promoter. Describing this he notes that initially his music videos were collages of photos, news clips, and other video footage that he and Gray would edit to his songs. But once he began to perform live, the labor requirements went up significantly. Additionally, Smith and Gray worked to build Smith’s career as an artist and activist while Smith was simultaneously working his part-time paid job with the Pittsburgh school district. He discussed the extreme stress after enduring 18 weeks of the intensive labor requirements of producing each installment.

So I’m like...I look back on it and wonder, like, how I was able to do it, but it was just rough. I’m talking about I remember the final episode of season two is the first one where I am in the video, we did it at the inauguration and I just remember editing after the process in was so different cause I never did it like that. I was just doing these updates, and so when we moved into season three where… I was in every video...Brother, I literally, I almost had a mental breakdown…Like at the end season, I ended up going offline for three months. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)
Smith also confessed to wanting to have a relief from this kind of labor, but he was reluctant to give up his aesthetic control to another producer. Because 1Hood was unable to hire editors who could execute exactly what Smith wanted, he ended up accepting the additional labor involved with editing:

I actually tried to get somebody to edit the video for me. Cause I wanted to stop editing. Cause it’s time consuming. And it was, the video never came out cause it was… it wasn’t what I wanted cause, you know, especially because you know…when I write for these types of songs I have a clear visual vision. It wasn’t what I wanted so I ended up never putting it out so when we did the Trayvon [video]... So in editing that [Trayvon] video I learned a way to edit even faster that I use now, so it’s not as much but, I just had to learn to resign myself. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

So Gray and Smith generally described their handling of multiple roles through the discourse of empowerment and media literacy. However, escaping these conditions of song and video production was part of Smith’s alleged motivation for eventually signing a record contract with Wandering Worx Entertainment, a record label based in Vancouver.

When I signed the deal one of my dudes was kind of like “You shouldn’t a did it,” (but) I kinda wanted to see it was like with some help (laughs). You know what I mean I never had that experience. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

One consequences of these conditions of labor was that Gray recorded much more video than Smith could capture or edit. While 1Hood Media consistently releases different kinds of music and video production, the quantity of edited and released material is dwarfed by archives of unedited videos that Gray has from many years of attending and recording political and entertainment events across the globe. Discussing this, Gray notes that, “You know I upload certain things to YouTube. A lot of stuff I just kept it for myself. A lot of footage has never been seen.”
But if the current technological environment allows production and participation through all of these channels, the promotional public sphere demands it in ways that are specific to the hip-hop genre. Because the field of hip-hop production includes so many participants, those who do not consistently find ways to connect with their audiences may be quickly forgotten. As a result, mix-tape outlets, blogs, music distributors, television channels, and magazines all expect a certain level of regular productivity from hip-hop artists.

I stress this point because this genre-based expectation is helpful to activist or humanitarian partners like the WFP or the Justice for Jordan Miles campaign. The hybrid hip-hop political forms that both Curtis Jackson and Smith created—images, audio, music, print, writing, and interview—moved across these platforms and modalities as an already necessary part of the maintenance and extension of their hip-hop artist/celebrity persona. It is in this way that the genre of hip-hop helps political groups and artists to negotiate the pressures that are present on several participants of the promotional public sphere.

Social Media, Brand Building, and Self-Promotion: SK

The tensions between the image of “50 Cent” and the public persona of Curtis Jackson was a key theme of the media coverage about SK, including the Nightline documentary which highlighted the management of activist and musical identities as key parts of the campaign. The managers of SK’s social media also attempted to negotiate these elements. The Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr pages, and other online sites needed to
speak to fans of Curtis Jackson the philanthro-capitalist, and 50 Cent the gangsta hip-hop artist. The relationship of these two identities is an interesting matter to consider because the narrative of Curtis Jackson the philanthro-capitalist is essentially a narrative of redemption which needs the gangsta 50 Cent image in order to make sense. The persuasive and marketing power Jackson’s new persona becomes a function of his former rejection of any ethical or political obligations. While data such as the posts of fans on 50 Cent’s Twitter account, suggest that many fans embrace this narrative, it is also clear that there are fans who would like to keep Jackson’s gangsta aura separate from his “hip-hop Bono” status. As shall be discussed in this chapter, actors such as the WFP program worked strategically to leverage the fan power of 50 Cent without explicitly endorsing musical content that it doesn’t “condone” (personal communication, Bettina Leuscher, Oct 19th, 2012). In either case, focusing inordinately on Curtis Jackson's career conceals similar tensions in the careers of less high profile workers in the SK campaign. One such career is the career of Bryan Sharpe, a SK “consultant.”

Sharpe is a social media consultant, and a hip-hop artist, but it is not easy to determine his legal name and identity through an encounter with his online profiles. This is because Sharpe goes by a variety of online identities, including “Ethan Hunt,” “Daddy Bawsten,” “Ali Shakur,” and “Garvey Bawsten.” Sharpe maintains these identities across a variety of online platforms. For example, Sharpe’s most recent (as of March 2013) active alias, “Ali Shakur” has a Twitter page, a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, and several YouTube posts, pictures and videos. The same is true for “Daddy Bawsten,” which was Sharpe’s most popular alias.
Sharpe provided a glimpse of the complexity of his promotional work in two interviews posted on YouTube. The first interview is a 2010 radio interview in which Sharpe appears as “Daddy Bawsten” (*Daddy Bawsten 1620AM Interview with DJ Tommy Gunz*, 2010). In this interview he identifies three distinct career-related roles. Sharpe discusses his transition from artist manager to hip-hop artist and his evolving career as a hip-hop artist. The interview mostly focuses on his musical career and he discusses plans to release several mix-tapes and an upcoming album release. But he also discusses his management of an entertainment industry gossip blog called “Def-glam.”


But by 2012, Sharpe’s career as a hip-hop artist seemed to be less of a focus. He appears in a 2012 interview describing his current work. Although the interviewer addresses him by the name of his hip-hop artist persona “Daddy Bawsten,” Sharpe describes himself as a “social media and marketing consultant”:

Currentlly I’m a consultant with Street King, SK Energy Shots with 50 Cent. I’m a marketing consultant. I build the architecture for the social media campaign and some other things that they do. You know, just come up with real creative ideas on how to take your fan base and galvanize that into the best brand advocates you can find out there. (“Whois defglam.com,” n.d.)

Due to the fluidity of Sharpe’s identity in the spaces of online media there are aspects of his work and identity that require more data than what was gathered in this study. But the evidence that does exist online allows for several conclusions. For example, it is not clear how Sharpe’s work with SK affected his decision to end his musical career as “Daddy Bawsten.” But the available information does allow us to put a chronological order to the development of Sharpe’s online personae. At some point
between 2007 and 2008, Sharpe began to go by the name “Daddy Bawsten,” or simply “Bawsten.” He joined with another New Jersey-based artist, “Demic” and the two began working together as “Bawsten and Demic.” In 2011, Sharpe began to work with the SK campaign but he continued to record and perform under the Bawsten title until 2012. During this time, Sharpe also started several online consulting and music publicity-related ventures. First, in 2009 Sharpe registered the domain “defglam.com” and began promoting that as his major venture. In 2010, he registered the domain name, “elevator music group.” This site featured publicity for upcoming artists and offered to provide electronic press kits.

In 2011, Sharpe formed another company, “wirelion.com.” The Wirelion website lists its founders as Bryan Sharpe, Ali Shakur, and Dwayne Henry, but there is significant reason to suspect that Ali Shakur is a fictitious identity managed by Sharpe. Roughly around the time of the initial launch of the SK campaign, Sharpe’s “wirelion” company was hired to handle some of its promotional efforts. One of the company’s first actions was to start a Facebook page called “The Street King Inner Circle” (now “SK Inner Circle”). Invitations to the page appeared temporarily on several of the other social media sites related to the campaign. One such invitation read:

We are already familiar with the Street King energy drink, which hit the market last year and we have been able to see 50 Cent’s mission in Africa. Following his work, the rap mogul 50 Cent showed how serious he is towards his new mission and how ready he was to be the change he wanted to see. Street King provides focus and energy, two qualities 50 credits with being crucial to his success. And every single bottle of Street King purchased provides a meal for a hungry child.

But now it is the time for us fans to show our support, and help 50 Cent reach the point he is aiming for. All you have to do is JOIN THE Street King INNER CIRCLE on Facebook. This is a group where you can meet Artists, Promoters, Community Service Samaritans, Distributor from around the world that are
willing to support Street King, and eradicate world famine & poverty at the same time.

Also, through this group you can be awarded Street King swag, which includes Street King hats, t-shirts, jackets, chains, concert tickets etc. New mission will be actively given to you, join and show us your energy!! (“The Street King Inner Circle,” 2011)

The group’s about page, which was only visible to accepted members, offered the following description:

Time for you all to be part of something bigger. Time to bring the creativity, passion and energy. Time to shine in the SK Inner Circle. This group is for you all to come together and forge a grass-roots movement in your communities that will virally spread the SK message. We’ll post tips and ways you can activate your hood as well as highlight the best expressions we’re seeing here and at Facebook.com/StreetKing. Do it for the hungry in Africa. Do it for SK and 50. Do it for yourself. – SK (“The Street King Inner Circle,” 2011)

The SK Inner Circle is an interesting aspect of both branding and cultural work because it is another site of the tensions between the administrative branding structure of top-down hierarchy and the aura of grassroots community and interactivity. The stated goal of the Inner Circle was to “forge a grass-roots movement in your community.” But by definition, the Inner Circle title appeals to its members’ desire to be part of an exclusive and elite “circle” of influence. The group was made private on FB so that membership requests were required. The administrator’s Facebook profile name was another Sharpe alias, “Ethan Hunt.” Ethan Hunt was an alias borrowed from the central character in the Mission Impossible movie franchise, and it appears next to each of Bryan Sharpe’s Facebook profile names.

Sharpe played a variety of roles for his new client. Taking on a new identity (Ethan Hunt) his primary role here would be to run the SK Inner Circle Street Team on Facebook and eventually develop a website for it. But Sharpe also played other
promotional roles, such as hosting several SK live events with Curtis Jackson. In these live performance roles, Sharpe appeared as “Daddy Bawsten” and appeared to be using his connection with Jackson and the visibility and promotional contexts of the campaign to boost his career as a rapper. In this regard, his relationship to the campaign was similar to Jasiri “X” Smith’s relationship to various political blogs.

The Facebook profile of Hunt periodically handed down “missions” to the Inner Circle members. These missions included participation in the rewards program, but also included other responsibilities that exceeded those of the “rank and file” rewards members. This included PR efforts, such as adding comments to articles about the SK campaign or “owning”—meaning marketing to—a particular SK distributor. Ownership in this context doesn’t involve rights to information or profits of the campaign, but refers to a sense of personal and territorial investment in one’s freely volunteered labor.

One way to understand the SK Inner circle is as a volunteer based “street team.” The street team is a promotional tactic that dates back at least as far as 1975 with the formation of Kiss’s “Kiss army” fan club (“IQ,” 2006). Street teams perform a variety of promotional labor for artists, bands, or companies. Frequently, the team is composed predominantly of fans whose enthusiasm and desire for exclusive promotional items and connections motivates them to perform this labor (Horovitz, 1994). While fan clubs of bands have used this strategy for a period of time, its use in hip-hop culture was innovative in a number of ways. One component of this was that hip-hop labels and imprints such as Rawkus Records, Bad Boy, Roc-A-Fella, Jive, Loud Records, and others used the street team to increase the brand equity of the artist and label. The increased
visibility was then part of the equation that would factor into the label’s valuation when they were purchased by larger, major-label outlets (Charnas, 2011).

The SK Inner Circle helped the company coordinate the efforts of a wide variety of actors working with the company. This included workers at G-Unit, at Shady Records, various deejays, promoters, aspiring artists, and fans of the beverage. In fact, the SK Inner Circle was promoted as a platform for aspiring artists or media professionals to network with industry insiders. For example, the SK Facebook page included posts by Street Overclocking members and invited fans to join the Inner Circle and “Chat with Funkmaster Flex.” It was through this type of discourse that the campaign both drew on and reproduced systems of hierarchy in the entertainment field of cultural production.

In the context of the SK Inner Circle, Jackson’s declaration that “we own these streets” (made in the initial launch video) could be translated as a war cry for brand dominance. The Streets in this context would be not only the geographic locations where Inner Circle members might use their accumulated influence or desire for influence to explicitly market the product, but also to dominate any site, especially online, where there was a chance to interject promotional messages and increase brand visibility and brand equity.

Towards the end of 2012, the Twitter handle for “Daddy Bawsten” was changed to “RIP Bawsten,” indicating that Sharpe would no longer promote himself under that internet identity. A November 28, 2012 Tweet on the RIP Bawsten account stated, “I have been reincarnated as Ali_Shakur13eyes.” At this time the Ethan Hunt FB account also featured the name Ali Shakur. The pictures of Ali Shakur were pictures of Sharpe, who now had grown dreadlocks and looked different in many ways than he had looked
before. In another much less viewed YouTube clip, Sharpe, who is now taking on the Ali Shakur identity, explains to SK Inner Circle members how to get more SK clothing and merchandise. His appeal is fairly direct:

What you want is to just be really active on the website skinnercircle.com. Of course uh, you know, comment on other people’s stuff and, uh, post pictures inside the SKenergy thread. You know, go to the store by some SK, give it to your friends, make em take pictures, bring it to parties, do interesting things with the SK bottles, and just post creative content. That way I can give it to the headquarters and they can post it on Facebook and everybody can get their uh...notoriety up. Another good way to get on that list is to post receipts, whenever you go buy an SK shot just post the receipt, you can post in the SKenergy thread. I always keep track of them. Take the link, post it on Twitter, follow us on Twitter at SKEnergyShots.com. You guys got any questions, just post it in the threads and you know, somebody will get back to you—one of the mods or myself. Peace.

Eventually, the SK Inner Circle was moved to an independent blog platform that strongly resembled the SK site but was distinct from it and administered by Wirelion. In early 2013, Hunt handed down what appeared to be his final message:

To our elite members --
On behalf of the entire SK Energy team, thank you for working so hard in 2012 to further our mission. We continue to give the world a better source of energy made from the best ingredients. Your execution has been phenomenal and your support unwavering. Because of our success, we give you the opportunity to make it your own. The group has matured and we feel like it will continue to blossom as its own self-sustaining forum. Starting Monday, February 11, there will be no missions handed down, no more pushing from SK itself. Instead, we leave it up to you to recruit more loyal fans to help spread the positive energy of SK. It has been an honor to grow and work with you. Keep up the determination, focus and love. (Street King Inner Circle, 2012)

By tracing Sharpe’s identities and the various work that was performed through these identities, we can gain two central insights. First, we see that the management of multiple online identities assists Sharpe in the management of his promotional capital. The aliases of “Ethan Hunt” and “Ali Shakur” allowed Sharpe to create a charismatic...
online personality that could engage in affective exchanges with the SK Inner Circle. He was able to document his production and management of audience-commodities in each consulting job that he performed.

Secondly, we see that Sharpe’s music career took shape within a networked, promotional, hall of mirrors in which his promotional activities as a musical manager and social media consultant led to opportunities as a hip-hop artist. Sharpe then used the self-promotion of his hip-hop artist identity to serve as evidence of his promotional acumen, which then led to opportunities to operate as a promotional consultant for the SK campaign. But since Sharpe now had access to Curtis Jackson, he used Jackson’s celebrity notoriety to promote his own musical career. Once he decided to end his career as “Daddy Bawsten,” he attempted to rebuild Bawsten’s promotional capital in the form of followers to his “Ali Shakur” identity, which he could then direct into the building of future brands. In short, Sharpe’s use of various identities assists him in accumulating the specific promotional capital associated with target demographics, and this process also helps him to consolidate it, and re-market audiences for other purposes.

Sharpe is an example of a class of precarious but useful social media-entrepreneurs who are able to latch on to various kinds of marketing campaigns. Their knowledge of how to break through the noise of the promotional public sphere, particularly in its opaque and dynamic virtual spaces, can be valuable to these campaigns. The technological skills of setting up internet platforms are necessary skills, but the promotional capital that these entrepreneurs bring to campaigns is equally important. It is the potential that they bring to mobilize audiences as both consumers and commodity-
labor in the service of brand-commodities with a low financial investment that makes them attractive.

But in addition to the financial renumeration that workers like Sharpe receive, they also build more promotional capital with each project they acquire. They are thus bound in a mutually promotional relationship, but one that is unequal. Sharpe formed a new online personality for the promotion of SK and appears to have put his own musical career temporarily on hold. However there is no evidence that SK is invested in helping his musical career or making any long-term commitment to his projects. Social media entrepreneurs like Sharpe may latch on to corporate philanthropic efforts, but they are also used by them in the interest of efficiency and the preservation of the brand’s social narrative which only requires an independently achieved celebrity status.

Social Media, Brand Building, and Self-Promotion: 1Hood Media

In the promotional public sphere, there are several parameters of labor that deal with promotion. In 1Hood’s case, its efforts to build and maintain audiences for its media products and to create entertainment careers for Gray and Smith took several forms. In addition to other dimensions of 1Hood’s work that were focused on objectives such as educating citizens about the facts of cases, their personal online media participation took on an increasingly promotional character as 1Hood Media developed into a brand.

Over time 1Hood experienced some challenges in its transition from traditional media, such as letters and face-to-face recruitment, to internet-based media and social media. One challenging element of social media was the ability to maintain relationships
and followers. It is clear that this dimension of work required a choice of platforms with specific technological affordances and a relentless commitment to post consistently.

Another local organizer talked about 1Hood’s participation in social media:

Paradise—probably of the people in my feed—posts most voluminously, uh, about Pittsburgh events and national events of anybody on my feed, and that’s saying a lot. I have 1,900 friends and he probably posts more frequently on my Facebook feed than any single person on my feed. I mean, if you go in now, I went in yesterday for example, and looked at my feed briefly or the day before and he had posted maybe six times in the space of that 12-hour period of time since the beginning of that day. News articles, clips, blogs, quick bullets, it’s always someone who seems to be very media-literate, and media-attuned, to the media, so he’s reading papers, he’s online, he’s doing whatever, and he has a wide circle of contacts as well. (Personal communication, 2013)

Gray attributed decisions on how enthusiastically he would engage in social media partially to his own feelings of personal connection to particular issues related to police brutality. His work as an advocate for families such as that of Jordan Miles was defined both by the needs of the campaign and his own emotional investment. He indicated that he would post frequently or “bang” more, the more connected that he felt:

It depends on how I feel it. If it’s some really fucked up shit, I’m a be banging it like like it’s my child, you know what I’m saying, depending on how much I’m invested in the story. You know …you know…you know? Other than that, if I’m not creating all the media then I’ll just forward and post and work like a publicity agent for any media that’s generated with the family or their lawyer or the organization that’s working closest with the family…like with Trayvon, we went hard with Trayvon before there was any media for Trayvon because I have a 23 year old son. Who…who, if he had a hoodie on and was walking would have been a target of a guy like George Zimmerman. You know what I’m saying? So I’m not going to wait until it’s my kid for me to get like feeling like I’m going to go all out. I’m not going ask you nicely not to kill my son either. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

But Gray’s active social media use was also about fulfilling the mission of the coalition by supporting other community events:
If you look at, like, most of the posts that I post it’s not even about things that #1Hood is specifically organizing but things that other community groups are organizing and we want people to get involved. And help them do that instead of keep trying to reinvent the wheel. You know? Oil the wheel that’s already rolling, you know? (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Gray also felt that Facebook lacked certain affordances that had been present in earlier platforms such as MySpace. For Gray, these were related to his ability to generate and maintain audiences. Gray’s dilemma also speaks to the challenges of building platform-specific branded forms of promotional capital in an age of constantly changing social media platforms. New platforms surface daily, and it is difficult to predict which ones are worth learning and investing the labor of “prosumption.” But if you invest in the wrong platform, hard won effort and promotional capital may be wasted or unconvertible if that platform ends or loses popularity:

I had a solid online presence from back working with mp3.com. So I had a solid online following on MySpace. I’m still laughing at um, on Facebook, I have like 5,000 friends and 700 something subscribers, but I mean, back then on Myspace, I had 50,000 friends back then. You know what I’m saying? I had more friends on MySpace than I have Twitter and Facebook combined right now. I think Facebook, the way they did it, they slowed the game down. I mean, I’m not as effective as I was back then. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Smith also expressed frustration with the different mechanisms of audience maintenance across platforms. But in his case, the issue was also related to the aforementioned exhaustion of video editing labor. While Smith felt that he had to take a break in order to maintain his mental, physical, and emotional health, he hadn’t realized that Twitter’s account policies would cost him valuable social capital:

At that time I had maybe 2,000-3,000 Twitter followers. I didn’t know if you shut Twitter down you couldn’t get the same name. That’s why I’m Jasiri underscore X…couldn’t get the name back or nothing ….I didn’t know like, you know how on Facebook you can go off and come back. Twitter you couldn’t do that so I when I was offline for three months and I basically had to like rebuild my
following. I remember telling Dise, you gotta get on Facebook and him not wanting to …now this dude is the Facebook updater every 3 seconds…um so now I’m having that same conversation with Twitter, like, Dise you gotta be doing Twitter. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

It was clear that some of Gray’s affinity for MySpace over Facebook was based on the fact that he had built a larger network of people in this platform as well as in email listserves. But he also cited other feature-based differences between the two platforms, involving interactivity and chat-friendly platform design.

I like the way that the feed use to work better. More people would respond. It was like a chat. It was like immediate, like Twitter. So MySpace, basically I use it like Facebook and Twitter combined (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

YouTube offered Gray stronger affordances related to the upload and distribution of original video content:

We didn’t have access to link the video from MySpace like we do now, so it’s better now because now we could create our own media and use that. Not just constantly aggregate other people’s video…now that YouTube is in the mix. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

This affordance of the ability to release original content was important since the majority of 1Hood’s YouTube account, and a significant portion of their sharing features, originally produced content.

Another important dimension of 1Hood’s promotional work was blogging on a variety of national music and political blogs. Smith, for instance, blogs on blackyouthproject.com, michaelmoore.com, allhiphop.com, and soundstrike.com. Taking time to write blog posts that could be shared with a variety of blogs and authoring specific articles and combined audio-visual posts for particular blog audiences served a number of important functions. It is difficult to disentangle the promotional effects that
this blogging had on the entertainment profile of 1Hood Media through the career of
Smith, the journalistic, educational, and ideological functions that they played with
regard to the causes that they advocated for, and the financial/promotional/brand value
that 1Hood Media content had to the blogs that they were posting on. All three of these
functions operated simultaneously.

Although they learned about the Pamela Lawton event from local media, both
Smith and Gray felt that the determining promotional strategy for the Pamela
Lawton campaign was best based in leveraging their national media connections:

We got Pamela Lawton’s story in the media because we first went national, it was
in the Source and the Final Call before it got covered by the Pittsburgh local
media....we tried to talk to them but they wasn’t really covering it to the degree.
(P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Smith explains how 1Hood then used this experience to launch the Jordan Miles case:

Cause we knew dude who wrote for the Source, so with Jordan Miles we did the
same thing, so the Final Call did a big piece on Jordan Miles, so some national
magazines....especially after the video popped...some national blogs picked up
the story...some national magazines, Huffington Post....nahmsaying, so it got on
that level so, we were able to do that...and push it there from our previous
experience, you know what I’m saying? (J. Smith, personal communication, June
12, 2012)

Gray also talked about the importance of his national partners in distributing the media
that they generated:

We have so many connections with, like, AllHipHop.com and good people like
that, so when we create media or when we pump media we send it out to them and
then they send it out. So it like, it quadruples and makes what do even bigger,
being that we are able to get our media in all of these important urban
independent media outlets. (P. Gray, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

At a Netroots panel, Smith discussed the role of these outlets in not simply spreading the
news but specifically making video content go viral.
So what I do is I have like a list of, you know, and it’s hip-hop blogs, political blogs, or influential people, and I kind of ....I, so when I do video I’ll send it to them, uh, first, before then I’ll either put it out myself or put it on Facebook and Twitter. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

But in other discussions Smith had also made it clear that these same outlets were responsible for helping to create his musical career. He explained that content managers at allhip-hop.com advised him to produce more content, and gave him a national, online, music industry-based platform to share his work.

Specifically allhiphop, cause allhiphop broke the Jena Six...At the time, I didn’t even really, it was just allhiphop (.com). I knew allhiphop and my man (redacted) at the time was now the executive director of the... so, I’m sending them and, uh, I remember week 4, the dude hit me back from Allhiphop, like, “you gon do this every week?” and I was like, yeah. So he started posting them and that’s when, you know, people started, you know that relationship with allhiphop. Really, man allhiphop, that’s why I got a lot of love for them cause really, I wouldn’t be here if they didn’t look at me and not say, well he’s not famous, or he’s not a star, and play my song. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

Here, Smith discusses the spreading of the Jena Six video, but as a key moment in his musical career rather than simply as an example of a successful political campaign. This is probably because it was the song and video, Free the Jena Six, that earned him the attention of nationally syndicated African-American media mogul, Michael Baisden, who gave him radio airplay and concert tours nationwide following this event. It is also clear that as branded media products, 1Hood’s productions had value to popular hip-hop blogs such as Allhip-hop.com. 1Hood’s content legitimized and helped the site construct itself as supportive of underground and independent hip-hop, and to draw in the types of fans who would be attracted by that type of content and reputation. Similarly, for Michael Baisden, the Jena Six video offered him the cultural capital that allowed him to position his show as a cutting-edge location for media on the emerging Jena Six situation. In other
words, Baisden could convert cultural capital into promotional capital (in the form of ratings). The promotional capital could in turn be converted into financial capital (via higher prices for advertising space) and social capital relationships with entertainers.

1Hood was motivated to make their videos go viral both as an activist and musical project. But this pressure to go viral did have a certain structuring effect on the creative process. There was some evidence that the desire to go viral influenced the kinds of issues for which they could successfully advocate. These decisions were mediated through conceptions of “share-ability.” This constituted a set of rules that 1Hood felt pressured to internalize. A shareable video had certain features that needed to be included. For example, audiences might see some subjects as “too complex”:

> You know, some issues are tough. I mean for me, one my favorite songs and videos that I’ve done was about Afghanistan. It’s called herstory and it kind of...but of course nobody cares, they’re like, Afghanistan? ...You know and then you could almost see like see people’s eyes just... “I don't really…it’s too complex…” (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

This didn’t necessarily mean that 1Hood would refrain from creating material they thought was important, but it influenced strategic decisions about when and how to perform certain types of promotional work. A key viral strategy was to attach the creative texts of political hip-hop to larger mainstream news narratives about specific issues.

Timing and rapid response was also a key element:

> You have to do it very, very quickly, um, if you’re kind of responding to something. So if you don’t have that mechanism to do it quickly, um, by the time you go through that whole process and finish it, just like she said, something else can come up and everybody moves on and it’s like I just spent all this time and resource into something that, you know, nobody really wants to see now. That’s frustrating. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)
The necessity of responding quickly added to the aforementioned created pressures on the timelines for production. Smith spoke of the necessity of having versions of their political material that were also useful to the larger sphere of journalism and entertainment that they relied on to amplify their message. While there was generally not a corporate management structure producing these pressures, the necessity of connecting to the short media cycle of particular stories caused 1Hood to internalize a similar level of urgency.

Finally, a related strategy was to create pre-produced aesthetic commentary on political issues that they felt were important or that they predicted might become important. Smith described the role of these “versions”: they allow for an inventory of relevant content that could later be “promotionalized” if the issues addressed became mainstream media stories:

So to me, part of the key is versions. So I have videos done on certain topics that are pretty much done and this is one of the things we learned, we learned to kind of almost predict, so now when that topic comes back up we’re like, we take the video and people are like how did you do that so fast, and we already had it, we already had it done. (J. Smith, personal communication, June 12, 2012)

The pressure to maintain audiences on social media platforms, to maintain relationships with national entertainment and political blogs, and the pressures of generating viral videos all structured the nature of 1Hood’s labor. Frequently, these pressures operated to guide them towards designing their products according to timelines and aesthetics that would generate audiences for advertisers, other news blogs, and stakeholders in the promotional public sphere. Simultaneously, Gray and Smith were forced to multi-task, since the centralized two-man production team didn’t allow them the luxury of any specialization or division of labor.


**Conclusion**

Debates about what truly counts as creative or cultural work have played an important role in shaping labor focused research in the cultural and creative industries. These debates were intensified by the use of the language of “creative” in the United Kingdom, and a variety of other regional pushes to develop “creative cities” as sites for increased tourism and transition into economies that involved an increasing amount of “symbolic” work. In this context responded with a stigmatization of the term creative industries based on its conflation with policies and discourses of the information society. Scholars such as Miller (2009), and Garnham (2005) are indeed right to worry about the apparent mutual benefit of small scale entrepreneurs, cultural workers, and large media conglomerates under the banner of the new creative sector. Likewise, it makes sense to look carefully at the changes in policy, and the funding of structure of arts and humanities projects and education under the idea that “creative” futures must also be digitized and technical.

Therefore, think that these categories, cultural and creative, and their discursive positioning in terms of qualitatively distinct kinds of work may help scholars and cultural workers to ask questions about power and these distinctions are particularly important to maintain at the level of policy. For example, if states and corporations are using the allure of work in the cultural industries to lubricate new exploitative economic orders that are based on precarious labor, then this should be recognized and resisted. But these categories, cultural and creative, the modernist conception of the autonomous artist, or non-technological cultural production, and the idea that truly creative work is produced in
fits of inspiration by individuals imbued with mystical aesthetic talents should also not become conceptual prisons that blind us to the realities of work as it unfolds in practice. In this regard I would like to identify two specific dangers that observers and critics of cultural work should carefully avoid. The first is the tendency to assume that cultural productions that happen in less corporation-centered venues are somehow less implicated in the economic systems of the promotional public sphere. An important part of my aim in this project has been to demonstrate how commodity logic simultaneously impacts the media production of organizations like both SK and 1Hood Media.

The second pitfall that scholars and observers should be wary of is the assumption that the symbolic work that happens in tightly controlled corporate environments is less creative than work that happens beyond such constraints. An example of this would be the production of a text such as a spoken word poem that is produced specifically for something like a bank advertisement. The profit motive, instrumental agenda, and formulaic techniques involved in producing such a text would tempt some scholars to dismiss such a product as less inspired, sophisticated, and complex. But such an assumption underestimates the ability of capitalist production to embrace, absorb, and redeploy complex cultural formations. Inability or unwillingness to attend to the complexity and creativity involved in producing the popular, mundane, and redundant can contribute to a failure to understand and appreciate the potency of these articulations in our experience.

Therefore, leaving room for the analysis of production that happens beyond the conceptual constraints of the aforementioned categories, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from the preceding accounts of cultural work. In the context of public
relations work it is clear that SK’s work was much more hierarchical and fragmented of
the two cases examined. This meant that their work was abstracted from the social
conditions of its alleged beneficiaries but also from any democratic process of human
communication. The new context of communicative labor was the brand. Reification of
the brand meant that a whole series of storytelling processes and brand-defense
procedures must be deployed in ways that created and protected specific types of value.

The public relations of 1Hood was often grounded simultaneously in brand-
building work, participation in the progressive political public sphere, forming
relationships with other organizations and media outlets, tactical work related to
campaigns, and an attempt to forge genuine connections to the victims of injustices. In
practice, Gray and Smith didn’t experience these as separate parameters. However in the
context of some of the national campaigns, Jasiri “X” Smith’s career, and as 1Hood
became 1Hood Media, their work took on a more promotional quality. The 1Hood Media
brand represented a potential to earn income and to optimize its function as a tactical site
for the accumulation of promotional capital. As a result, 1Hood Media’s tactics tended to
become more abstracted, and the 1Hood Media brand incorporated some elements of the
original aura of the coalition while functioning separately as a more flexible site for the
production of various kinds of capital. In a sense, what was the work of a dynamic and
diverse community-based coalition appeared reified in some contexts as an autonomous
two-person media brand.

In the examples of media production that were explored, SK’s structure appears
more well-funded and is delegated among various sub-contractors, such as production
houses, directors like Jessy Terrero, editors like Johnathan Del Ghatto, and photographers
like Linda. Because SK must coordinate the release of media in relation to the overall integrated marketing campaign, and because of the expenses of production, the release of media content is a corporate decision and there are limits to the quantity and speed with which material can be released. In contrast, the lion’s share of 1Hood Media’s production-related labor is performed by Gray and Smith. Although some of 1Hood’s videos were produced in conjunction with non-profit organizations, their decisions about the types and amount of content to produce are ultimately in the hands of Smith and Gray.

These differences in structure are therefore partially responsible for a surprising reality. Because SK relies more on user-generated content than 1Hood Media, an argument can be made that 1Hood Media is a more prolific producer of media content than SK. For example, between its launch in September of 2011 and April 2, 2013 there were 16 videos uploaded to SK’s official YouTube page. From the plethora of video content on 50 Cent’s official page (that goes back until well before the SK campaign started), 11 videos are in some way related to the SK campaign. Six of these videos are really just songs from the Street King Energy mix-tape, that feature mix-tape cover artwork and no moving images. In contrast, 1Hood’s page has uploaded 33 (of its total of 42) videos to its account during roughly the same time frame. Jasiri X’s page, which has functioned as a major site of 1Hood’s media activity, has uploaded 14 of its overall 81 videos in a similar time frame.

The centralized structure of 1Hood Media’s production team allowed for fast decision-making but it also created challenging work conditions. Some productions, such as Justice for Jordan Miles, related to the needs of the overall campaign, but as the
organization focused more on building the 1Hood Media brand and Jasiri “X” Smith’s musical career, the pace of production demands became more intense and more reliant on external factors. These factors included the need to stay relevant amidst a constantly shifting field of production and the strategy of attaching their productions to specific news items.

Finally, the explorations of self-promotion through social media reveal an important similarity. Promotional capital is a cloth from which post-modern musical career paths can be woven beyond the conception of label deals as central elements. The examples explored here show how actors move fluidly between the worlds of entertainment and social justice action as they follow opportunities to build and mobilize audiences around their personal brands. Some of the creative exchanges that take place also involve exchanges of money, while other parties exchange their own brand commodities as channels of exposure. The nature of promotional capital in social media means that all value created by individuals also benefits the corporate consumers of the data that is generated. Sharpe consciously directs this process so that the social media activity of his mobilized audiences delivers value to the campaign. 1Hood appears to proceed with an assumption that the benefits of leveraging social media metrics in the service of political efforts and creative careers outweigh the problems of strengthening the privately owned, digitized, corporate infrastructures as central mechanisms of democracy.

The promotional public sphere makes conceptions of the integrity of individual identities across different channels cumbersome and increasingly less practical. Curtis Jackson doesn’t appear to feel that he can afford to import the fullness of his gangster
celebrity persona into his philanthropic activities, just as he may feel that he cannot afford to fully inhabit his musical self as a mature, businessperson with an emerging social conscience. Under his various aliases, Bryan Sharpe interacts with a variety of different audiences, but the nature of his investments in these publics is not fully clear. The problem is not Sharpe’s failure to project an authentic identity. Philosophically it is not clear that such a thing exists. But one can certainly raise questions about an allegedly “humanitarian” campaign where there is no assumption of sincere discourse between the leadership and the constituency. Linda, the photographer for the Nightline documentary, cannot afford to fully explore the full implications of her critique of development photography in every shoot. She must maintain a portfolio of wedding photography and rushed documentary projects such as SK’s in order to sustain the portfolio of work that she is more committed to. Likewise, she must repress her impulse to include a baseline standard of human interaction in some projects in order to create opportunities for such interactions in future ones. The public personae that Gray and Smith carry across their media productions and public appearances seem relatively consistent and stable. But they have not managed to carry the fullness of the diverse coalition of more than ten organizations, that preceded and gave momentum to the 1Hood Media brand, into the majority of their media productions. Indeed, it seems impractical to do so. How could one translate the social relationships, physical presence, creative expression, and democratic process into a compelling set of mass communication messages or social media platforms? If we find that the answer is “we can’t,” that says something important about the contemporary public sphere. If the needs of promotionalism shape how we construct
and present ourselves in public contexts, does it also shape how we represent our political and public interests?

My point is that in each of these different kinds of work, public relations, media production, and social media-based publicity, the most sustainable and progressively transformative potential lies in cumbersome and impractical human interactions, creative expressions, processes of critique, and relationship-building. Often these processes may work against the brand-friendly, readily translatable, and efficient promotional mechanisms that campaigns seek to recast them as, but they must nevertheless be at the center of any democratic project.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: What’s the Use of Hip-Hop Activism?

Much of the contribution of the foregoing analysis has been in its description and narrativization of complex social phenomena of two case studies of branded “hip-hop activism.” But before we review the specific findings of these cases, it may be helpful to review some of the key theoretical concepts that helped contextualize them.

Chapter 2 explored the promotional public sphere, the brand-commodity, promotional capital, and the social narrative of the brand. The primary contribution to this study of this final point, the social narrative of the brand, is in the way it illustrates relationships between the first three concepts. The promotional public sphere is a description of the context for social action and cultural production. The chapter describes the ways that insights by Habermas (1991), Wernick (1991), Graham Knight (2010), and Bourdieu (1983) all speak to important dimensions of this concept. Graham Knight discusses the impact of new identity politics on the public sphere, highlighting the way that these politics inspire stakeholders to promote identities rather than ideas. In turn, I suggest that Knight’s discussion of the promotional public sphere can be further augmented by considering how a multi-directional and omnipresent promotional mode of communication, ushered in by transformed market dynamics, has also affected the public discourse, entertainment culture, and civic engagement efforts.

The concept of the brand commodity serves as a reminder that in spaces where branding becomes a salient discourse, processes of commodification and exchange
related value assessments are often underway. Such a reminder is important when the language and logic of branding becomes viewed as neutral software that can be used by a variety of non-profit actors to interpret, construct, and present themselves more effectively. The concepts of abstraction, equivalence, and reification, as developed by Goldman (1992) from Marx’s original formulations, are not meant to be central to this study but were nevertheless useful in describing the changes in value and meaning that take place as social processes are taken in by brands.

A third concept introduced in chapter 2, and central to this study, is the concept of promotional capital. This term refers to the accumulation, circulation, and documentation of the ability to mobilize the attention of audiences. Promotional capital is an abstraction of the labor required to mobilize the audience-commodity. Promotional capital circulates through the objectified, institutional, and dispositional forms which Bourdieu identifies for social and cultural capital (1986). As such, it can be converted into money but it may not have to have an observable impact on social relations.

Armed with these concepts, the study then analyzes a variety of empirical data related to each case and related to the aforementioned primary research questions. It may be helpful to attend more closely to these specific research questions, originally articulated in chapter 1, as a means of reviewing the salient issues and examples of this study. Following this, the second half of the chapter reflects on some limitations of this project, as well as additional research possibilities.

Research Question 1: What might citizens and researchers learn about the contemporary media/political environment in which these movements take place, and about their potential to produce various levels of social change in this environment?
At the most basic level, this study concludes that all versions of hip-hop civic engagement are not equal. In this case, SK’s hierarchical and overly simplistic model of purchase-triggered branded philanthropy with a good dose of neoliberal rhetoric shows little efficacy as a sustainable method of transforming the social conditions that create hunger or other manifestations of extreme poverty. 1Hood’s example shows more promise, through examples and textually rendered pedagogies of democratic participation and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In general, 1Hood engaged both local and national politics with a practice of establishing long term “on the ground” relationships with the regional stakeholders.

While neither SK’s philanthropy or 1Hood’s activism took place on the “outside” of capitalist exploitation, it may still be important to use the language of empowerment to assess and describe certain dimensions of their efforts. The foregoing analysis also allows for a more nuanced discussion of how empowerment is articulated in each case. The WFP brings a mixed vision of what empowerment means. Its neocolonialist origins within the United Nations push the organization toward definitions of empowerment that construct the disempowered as potential sites for free market expansion. But, as discussed in chapter 4, the importance of supporting sustainable regional food infrastructures is recognized by the agency and included in its strategic reports. As a result of its own need for a compelling and simple marketing narrative, SK encourage a neoliberal and apolitical articulation of empowerment in which he and other Western actors benevolently bestow meals upon African children. 1Hood has a different version of empowerment that centers much more on providing access to critical frameworks, and fostering the ability for stakeholders to engage in critical dialogue about problems and
solutions. With these kinds of criteria for empowerment in mind, evidence of empowerment is clearly visible in the coalition building practices of the early 1Hood coalition and the ongoing political participation of Jasiri Smith and Paradise Gray. The building of media literacy and media production skills in the 1Hood Media academy is another form of empowerment, but the local communal bonds that are reinforced through the involvement of both parents and children in such a project are equally important.

However, both organizations exist in a promotional public sphere. That is to say, that they both exist in environments where the ability to effectively participate in democratic practices is increasingly based on one’s ability to cut through a complexity of agendas and identities, all vying for public attention. The cost of public attention is often conformity to modes of communication that bring profit to the very media systems that control the dominant media platforms.

In this milieu, both efforts used “the technology of the brand,” but they each used it very differently. For SK, branding centered on an energy drink and the career of a hip-hop artist and entrepreneur. This meant that the structure and appeal of the brand were hierarchical, focusing on the flow of information from “the king” (Jackson), down to the subjects, and the flow of resources from the subjects back up to the king. 1Hood’s brand began as a coalition and focused on bringing together a variety of different constituencies around a common violation of injustice. It emphasized a diverse array of supporters and tactics. Additionally, 1Hood’s brand often supported community-based efforts.

Both efforts also used hip-hop in very different ways. While it can be argued that Curtis Jackson himself came from the margins, his success as an artist situated him as fixture of mainstream hip-hop and, at least for a time, of mainstream music in general.
The type hip-hop Jackson supported emphasized self-promotion, conspicuous consumption, misogyny, and capitalist power. 1Hood’s media production used hip-hop to promote precisely the opposite messages. Its songs often focused on community-based and communal efforts rather than individual achievements, and it challenged the institutions that were the face of capitalism, such as Wall Street, the G8, and conservative politics.

There were also some differences in the social media efforts of each organization. SK used social media to spread its high-end television commercials, promotional messages, and press coverage in order to generate a community of brand-loyal consumers around the energy drink product and brand merchandise. 1Hood used social media to raise awareness around issues of injustice. Their Facebook messages, tweets and YouTube videos offered education and editorial commentary about news events.

These differences are crucial to understand because behind the trope of hip-hop activism there are very different understandings of social transformation. One is focused on individuals and charity, is consumption-oriented, hierarchical, and reliant on an increased flow of resources and ideological support of capitalist, private sector institutions. The other is more based in the conditions of marginalized communities, adheres to some conception of issue-based advocacy, and is reliant on the ability and willingness of informed citizens to hold institutions accountable. But in noting these differences it is also crucial to note the ways that aspects of both organizational efforts are implicated in the reproduction of wealth accumulation and power.

Branding is often discussed unproblematically, as a means to assist these efforts by creating efficiency within organizations and creating symbolic unities around
organizations and issues. But does it really do this? Critics of branded, purchase-triggered
donation efforts have noted that more resources often go to brand promotion than for the
causes that the brand aims to help (J. L. Stole, 2008). In the case of SK, for example,
promotion of the branded effort led the organization to publicly proclaim its intention to
spend $72 million on advertising while its one meal per drink promise translates into a
donation of between $0.10-$0.25 per bottle. A photographer involved with the campaign
suggested that more money may have been spent on the jet fuel for one publicity trip than
what was given to the population that the effort served. 1Hood started as a coalition of
organizations working toward a generalized community presence. And while 1Hood’s
branded media efforts have been central to the successes of the campaign, it was a wide
variety of organizational efforts, in-person protests, and activist strategies that have been
responsible for the campaign’s successes. The underlying question is whether the
technology of the brand really aids social efforts or whether it serves as a technology to
describe efforts as successes and to co-opt the value produced in these efforts for a
smaller subset of shareholders.

The aforementioned narrative of how hip-hop and celebrity are used in the
campaign suggests that artists used the tools of the hip-hop genre of entertainment culture
to help a social cause. But in both cases there is evidence that the social causes
reciprocally helped the artists to build their careers. In the case of SK, it is clear that the
campaign served as a rebranding of Curtis Jackson. At a minimum, there is a cross-
promotional relationship between Jackson and the SK effort. In the case of 1Hood
Media’s central artist, Jasiri “X” Smith, his most popular songs have been attached to
public news issues that consequently served a promotional function for his career.
Because his musical brand (as part of 1Hood) was established based on explicitly activist texts he has fought to separate his career from being issue-based. The important issues here are twofold. Does the promotional public sphere pressure or invite increasingly precarious cultural workers to look upon humanitarian causes and popular social problems with a predatory gaze? Or, conversely, can elements of social activism been seen as a career hindrance if it dominates a young artist’s “brand”?

Finally, in both cases the usage of social media reveals opportunities for empowering creativity and promotion but also for exploitation. SK’s use of data-mining and user-generated content reveals a distinctly different face of humanitarian action than its promotional face. These practices represent an intensified instance of the exploitation of immaterial labor that is highly vulnerable to critiques of audience, of commodification, and the ideology of interactivity.

1Hood has also been able to use social media platforms to amplify the reach of their messages, and their centralized social media production is surprisingly prolific. However, the limited labor resources place the two-man production team in stressful working conditions. Both organizations rely heavily on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, which means that their content also delivers their demographics to these corporate platforms and their corporate advertisers. Additionally, these platforms push content creators in the direction of their stylistic standards as creators learn how to compete successfully in the accumulation of “likes,” views, impressions, and other metrics.

Research Question 2: What are the nature, incentives, and origins of the organizations behind these initiatives?
This question has been addressed in different ways throughout the study, but to summarize concisely here, Street King (now SK or SK Energy Shots) is the first brand developed by Pure Growth Partners. Pure Growth Partners, founded by advertising executive Chris Clarke and Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson, describes itself as “a brand and creative consultancy with a private equity arm that makes strategic investments.” Both Pure Growth Partners and the SK brand are therefore jointly owned by Chris Clarke, Curtis Jackson, and other partners. Pure Growth Partners has committed to donating a portion of its profits to the WFP. This purchase-triggered donation, philanthropic aspect of the business model has also constituted a prominent component of the marketing campaign. Simultaneously, it has operated as a career rebranding mechanism for Curtis Jackson’s musical career, which in turn helps to promote his other business ventures. This underlying business structure is important to note because it has structured the logic and shape of the philanthropic effort in important ways.

1Hood started as a coalition of organizations working toward a generalized community presence. Chapter 3 explored 1Hood’s development out of the convergence of national organizations, local spiritual organizations, and artist-activists as they came together to collectively address various conditions of violence in Pittsburgh’s impoverished African-American communities. In a sense, Pittsburgh’s example can be seen as an empirical manifestation of some of the components of the promotional public sphere. The principles of democratic participation, communal relationships, and the diversity of the coalitional membership functioned as a “public sphere ecosystem” that was itself an important aspect of the coalition’s value. Initially, the coalition’s leaderless structure allowed for a multi-organizational presence on local issues such as the
Homewood marches and the Pamela Lawton event. Various organizations could draw on their own constituencies, thereby broadening the democratic participation of community members. In this sense, the value of the organization was not primarily about its oneness; it was equally as much about its diversity and its facilitation of tensions, different philosophies, and the ability of its different constituencies to flourish with respect to some commonly held aims. In the earliest phases of the organization, Paradise Gray also suggests that it was not intended to be a structure that could directly receive funding. This approach was meant to protect the coalition from the influence of funders who might want the organization to adopt priorities that did not emerge from within its coalitional structure. But a number of pressures explored in this study led 1Hood to adopt deliberate and strategic practices of branding. Again, the question is, how did those practices ultimately affect the aforementioned processes of value creation?

*Research Question 3: How does the logic of branding influence each organization’s approach to its activist or humanitarian efforts?*

In SK, like many for profit brands, the intention of branding is ultimately to develop a commodity-sign that can attract equity. This equity can come from the profitability of products, like the SK energy drink, that the commodity sign helps to differentiate in the energy drink market. But equity can also take the form of promotional capital, documented in the brand’s ability to mobilize the attention, sharing, and creative production of audiences.

To understand how the brand commodity structured SK’s response to the promotional public sphere it’s necessary to understand what potentials were foreclosed by the commodity logic. With SK, it is not helpful to conceptualize the pre-brand use
value of SK because the initiative was conceived as a for-profit brand from the outset. But it is possible to consider alternative ways that the initiative might possibly have evolved in relation to its resources and stated aims. Given its mission and the considerable resources behind it, how could such an organization have been more effective? There are several ways that the campaign could have optimized its effectiveness. Considering Curtis Jackson’s international celebrity, the campaign could have engaged his fans in a conversation about the best solutions to solving hunger in the Global South and here in the United States. Pure Growth Partners and the U.N. itself could have led this effort by tweeting about a variety of approaches and highlighting both expert and lay opinions about why one approach is the best. The subject of U.S. trade policy must come up in any serious discussion of food crisis, and the campaign could have made some effort to heighten the visibility of this question. Interactive contests and conversations that were featured on social media could have focused on questions such as: What causes hunger? What are some of the best examples of fighting hunger that you can generate? How are U.S. citizens connected to issues of hunger and malnutrition in other parts of the world? This type of promotion of a robust public dialogue about the question of hunger would be an important contribution to transformative social change in and of itself.

In light of all the aforementioned possibilities, several elements of this study suggest that as a brand-commodity SK presented the work of the WFP and the larger issue of hunger according to a set of priorities that made critical reflection less likely. For example, an important measure of the value of SK’s philanthropic efforts lies in the WFP’s efforts to deliver food to countries in need of food assistance. Ultimately, the
questions of supply chain management and SK’s financial accounting are beyond the scope of this study. But the effect of SK’s branding on the ability of the campaign to promote critical thinking about development work is an important aspect of the data presented. Based on the leverage that SK could wield given its potential contributions, the organization could stipulate that it only works with partners, such as the U.N. World Food Program, who implement the most sustainable interventions. This would pressure organizations that were desirous of SK’s financial and promotional capital to adopt particular kinds of production practices. For organizations that employ a variety of strategies, such as the WFP, SK could require it to highlight its most effective and sustainable kinds of interventions, such as building local food infrastructures. Since Jackson has developed his image as an unorthodox rebel he could use his entertainment products and the campaign messaging as a platform to call out contradictions in development practices. For instance, he might highlight questions about the impact of farm subsidies on African agricultural markets, or the ways that corporate partners such as Monsanto and Pepsico, that support farm subsidies, influence the direction of development. These are complex questions that won’t have simple answers. Their complexity and urgency makes them all the more worthy of a more prominent place in the public dialogue about development.

The discussion of the brand narrative in chapter 5 explained that SK was primarily interested in constituting its audience as consumer-activist-heroes who would view their own consumption, their user-generated content, and other dimensions of online brand-centered performance as effective humanitarian interventions. The texts of the campaign didn’t offer any real sense of the complexity of development work. Instead, the
campaign focused on Curtis Jackson’s wealth and the audience as fan-heroes in relation to him. Africans were depicted through a series of orientalizing and infantilizing representations. In reality, successful development work is complex and it requires a constant updating of perspective on macroeconomic dynamics and regional economic and governance structures. A recent study on the successes in the battle against HIV suggests that it is regional religious leaders rather than western development organizations or pharmaceuticals that have been responsible for the biggest decreases in the spread of the virus (Trinitapoli & Weinreb, 2012). Walking people into these kinds of complexities, however, risks dampening their enthusiasm about purchasing the campaign’s products or their enthusiasm for the campaign. The important thing to focus on here is that it was the priorities of branding and selling the drink that created the need for a particular kind of narrative and its constituent set of representations.

The logic of branding and commodification also caused the WFP to become complicit in these representations. As demonstrated in examples such as chapter 4’s discussion of the SK quiz, the WFP allowed its websites to be transformed into advertising sites for the SK campaign rather than locations for anything resembling a substantive dialogue about the problem of hunger or food equity. What is noteworthy here is that the desire of the WFP to strengthen its brand by associating it with other brands created incentives to foreground the least complex and least informative aspects of its own practice.

1Hood Media’s adoption of branding logic was more gradual and less explicitly focused on profit, but the brand commodity nevertheless began to exert a structuring influence on the organization’s response to the promotional public sphere. There were
two basic pressures that caused 1Hood to brand itself more deliberately. In the context of the 1Hood coalition, the pressure resulted from the coalition’s need to control its own media image. Another set of pressures resulted from the desire of both Gray and Smith to use their own skills in media production, advocacy, and public relations to generate full-time careers while also furthering the activist projects they believed in.

The young 1Hood coalition’s effort to control its image reveals a clear example of the way that actors are pushed toward branding in the promotional public sphere. Chapter 4 discusses the value that a variety of stakeholders saw in the coalition’s media image. This included individual coalition members as well as external forces in the local media. By covering 1Hood, the local Pittsburgh papers were finding ways to increase their own financial and reputational value. Individual members of the coalition wanted news coverage that would amplify their efforts, but they were concerned that the resulting high profile of the organization would squeeze them out of media coverage and funding opportunities.

The branding that resulted from this was a combination of the organization’s own press strategy and the media’s reification of the 1Hood brand. Just as SK’s branding presented a simplified and spontaneous concept of hunger and development work, the media coverage of 1Hood tended to eschew the complexities of coalitional politics. Alternatively, mobilizing audiences meant creating simplified narrative structures. The reified 1Hood narrative centered on specific personalities. As the 1Hood coalition morphed into the 1Hood Media production company its image—highlighting Jasiri Smith and Gray—resonated with some of the tendencies of early media coverage. But the coalition members didn’t submit to this process in any simple sense. On the contrary, the
organization pushed back against its own commodification. Gray and Smith knew that advocacy required an ongoing process of negotiations between activists and media. The media tended to promote stories that furthered its own agenda, and as 1Hood Media’s self-presentation leaned increasingly towards this type of story the organization began looking less like a reflection of a public sphere ecosystem and more like a small activist organization that was effective at generating media attention.

As a result, the concept of the brand commodity also offers important interpretive insights to understanding the 1Hood Media brand and Jasiri “X” Smith’s related personal brand that emerged from these processes. 1Hood’s texts contrast with SK’s texts, which simplify complex social problems into product-centered narratives. But what is interesting about Jasiri “X” Smith’s texts and 1Hood Media’s texts is that there is no evidence of earlier coalition members. The 1Hood brand narrative preserves many of the coalition’s original values of democratic participation, protest, and advocacy for marginalized populations. While 1Hood’s media efforts have been central to the successes of the campaign, they are inevitably a part of a wide variety of organizational efforts, in-person protests, and activist strategies that are not easily depicted in their fullness, diversity, and complexity as part of brand narratives.

Additionally, as the two men sought to make their efforts understandable and fundable as a for-profit entity they needed to engage increasingly with the promotional mandates of the public sphere. In this process, the reputation of 1Hood and the individual reputations of each man became important magnets for the acquisition of promotional capital. During the period under analysis, Smith’s career made notable use of this kind of promotional capital.
Research Question 4: What are the central media texts created by these campaigns and how are social inequalities, artist/activists, private and public institutional actors, and the audience constructed within them?

Research Question 4.1: How do these representations flow from and contribute to the logic of each hip-hop activist brand?

An important task of this study was to gain some sense of the kinds of media texts that comprise hip-hop activism and how those texts invite audiences to think about and engage social problems or humanitarian efforts. To that end, I monitored a wide selection of music videos, songs, news clips, interviews, tweets, Facebook messages, and blog posts, subjecting a smaller subset of those texts to a closer analysis.

As discussed briefly in chapter 2 and more thoroughly in chapter 5, the theoretical framework of constitutive rhetoric and narrative analysis aided me in identifying narrative patterns that took shape across these texts. The analysis focused on how audiences were constituted and how they were situated in relation to social problems and other social actors. There was evidence of themes of heroic action in each case, but with important differences between them. SK’s narrative of heroic action was hierarchical, orientalist, and neoliberal. Jackson, the primary heroic figure, stood in as a symbol of entrepreneurialism and corporate wealth and as a protagonist archetype in a redemptive narrative. The villain was a vague conception of hunger rather than any specific policies or human practices that connect to poverty. “Fighting hunger” is therefore rendered equivalent to consuming the energy drink product, thereby providing one meal to a desperate and helpless African child. The audiences for the texts that construct this narrative are constituted as consumer-activist-mini heroes, whose job is to learn from
Jackson’s for-profit development model, and then act by purchasing the product. Another important part of this theme, that comes out in interviews with Jackson and a speech by Chris Clarke, is that SK’s model claims victory where government-based, non-profit models, and protest movements like Occupy Wall Street, have failed.

Themes of heroic action also emerge from the analysis of 1Hood Media’s music videos, interviews, song lyrics, and documentary coverage. 1Hood’s vision of heroic action centers around the violations of citizens’ rights and the enactment of a participatory democratic protest. In this vision, the lines that distinguish the audience from heroes and the lines that distinguish the heroes from victims are much more blurred. Inspired by the facts of various social conflicts, 1Hood Media’s productions and appearances generally tell the story of violations of rights by various manifestations of systemic or institutionalized oppression—often the state committing brutality or murder on citizens. In this narrative, the victims of these rights violations are simultaneously heroes who must act to obtain accountability. The audience is constructed as “consubstantial,” or connected to an ethnically and gender diverse set of victims who are seen as people that “could have been you.” In other productions, such as the song and music video *Occupy (We the 99)*, the text depicts police brutality on Occupy protesters but suggests that the audience itself has been the victim of state sanctioned financial corruption. Financial companies and the governmental bodies that enabled them have violated your rights and now you/we are rising up to address this. This last issue points to another important way that the construction of social inequalities in 1Hood’s narrative differs from SK’s narrative. The villain is much more clearly identified with specific societal actors in 1Hood’s texts. Although 1Hood is clearly committed to a systemic
analysis of rights violation based mainly on race and class, there are times when the focus on individual actors, such as George Zimmerman or the officers in the Justice for Jordan Miles case, is so pointed that it may start to feed into a personal indictment at the expense of systemic analysis.

An analysis of the texts of the campaigns also assists in an analysis of the textual elements of “hip-hop” in hip-hop activism. One of the factors that made Curtis Jackson appear to be an unlikely candidate in the eyes of many is that Jackson’s musical production centers on a limited range of topics. Virtually all of these topics place Jackson in the persona of a gangster or various other wealthy criminal archetypes. These performances of masculinity also involve sexual themes, including tales of Jackson’s sexual prowess and his ability to have sexual relationships with women on his own terms. Across the large body of work that he has generated since his first album in 1999, there is virtually no engagement with any issue of social or political advocacy.

This trend persists within the media products that were directly promotional for the SK campaign. Very few lyrical references to the drink or the campaign’s philanthropic aspects appear on the mixtape. The politics of the music and texts must be engaged through an analysis of how they contribute to a reinforcement of the overall brand narrative. As discussed earlier, Jackson’s wealth plays a central role in SK’s brand narrative.

1Hood’s media, music, and videos differ from SK in that they directly engage with the causes and social efforts that they are involved with. In many cases the texts were made for and speak directly to specific activist efforts. Jasiri “X” Smith and Paradise Gray appear as heroic figures but, as mentioned earlier, their texts also
constitute their audiences as citizens that actively participate in democracy. In addition, the very production of the videos is itself an involvement with sites of activism, such as Justice for Jordan Miles rallies, Occupy Wall Street encampments, or youth media literacy workshops. Their videos thus depict processes of protest and creatively rendered social commentary within an active (if heavily promotionalized) public sphere.

How then do these texts, contribute to the social narrative of the brand? SK uses its texts as advertisements with the intention of making profit that will be partially used to “fight hunger.” But it also operates as rebranding for Curtis Jackson’s media products and an advertisement for Pure Growth Partners’s private sector development model. Additionally, it must provide tools for the identity construction of potential supporters. Jackson’s role in the narrative allows the campaign to build on Jackson’s fan base. The construction of fans as mini-heroes sets up the purchase-triggered donation and online sharing aspects of the campaign. The depiction of Africans as helpless victims conveys a sense of urgency. Consumer heroes need to act/purchase now. Complex discussions of the sources of hunger detract from the brand’s ability to create promotional capital. So while the architects of the campaign and its supporters may not intend to participate in a reductionist, simplified, orientalist, and neoliberal narrative, the brand commodity requires it.

As discussed earlier, 1Hood’s branding processes originated in the need to take control of the potentially unruly and agenda-ridden media messages surrounding a diverse coalition of organizations in the Pittsburgh progressive civil society. Additionally, they sought to provide tactical media production in support of specific social justice efforts in Pittsburgh and nationwide. Finally, Jasiri Smith and Paradise Gray sought to
use their creative skills to generate a sustainable income from activist work. In this context, the texts serve as presentations that educate citizens about problems. Press releases present strategically calculated but still, ultimately, simplified versions of social issues that can then become a part of the larger media narrative, and politically oriented entertainment. The 1Hood Media, Jasiri “X” Smith, and Paradise Gray brands are collectively or individually built into these narratives as essential and natural components of these processes. As such, 1Hood’s texts illustrate the value of 1Hood Media, Jasiri “X” Smith, Paradise Gray, and specific activist campaigns, like Justice for Jordan Miles—as brands—to potential stakeholders that may wish to participate in an exchange of reputational or promotional capital.

The social media efforts of each organization were also different. SK used social media to spread its high-end television commercials, promotional messages, and press coverage, and to generate a community of brand-loyal consumers around the energy drink product and brand merchandise. Additionally, the campaign made heavy use of user-generated content. The intensive management of SK’s online brand communities was an important aspect of the campaign that was handled in two ways. First, its rewards platform, administered by CrowdTwist, tracked consumers across a variety of platforms and ensured that only fans of the brand with particular types of activity were rewarded. Second, social media consultants like Bryan Sharpe, used their virtual presence to manage other brand related communities, such as the SK Inner Circle. In this way, social media was a platform for the distribution of “missions” that involved promoting the brand and promoting consumption in a variety of ways.
Social media eventually became an essential component of 1Hood Media’s work as well, but their use contrasted SK’s use in several ways. YouTube was a primary distribution channel for 1Hood’s music videos. Other organizations were then able to use 1Hood’s videos as their own forms of political commentary. By sharing their own texts and blogging about specific campaigns, 1Hood Media was sometimes able to work their own social commentary and advocacy efforts into journalistic narratives. But social media also played a crucial role in documenting Jasiri “X” Smith’s and 1Hood Media’s growing promotional capital.

Research Question 5: What kinds of cultural work go into the production of the campaigns under analysis?

Research Question 5.2 How do the workers in each case negotiate the relationship between art, commerce, and civic engagement?

There are several points of interest regarding the issue of cultural work. The first issue is that SK’s cultural work tended to be much less connected to the social conditions of stakeholders that motivated it than 1Hood Media’s work. In other words, it was much more abstracted than 1Hood’s work. 1Hood’s public relations, creative production, and promotional strategy were closely connected to its communal relationships, democratic participation, and advocacy on behalf of specific causes. For most of SK’s work, the sites of labor were abstracted from the social conditions of its philanthropic beneficiaries and its only reference points were the needs of its constituent brands.

The second point has to do with promotional capital. Many of the cultural workers in both cases were trying to make a living and express their creative talents, and this required the generation of at least two kinds of capital. They needed financial capital,
which meant that they did things like shoot weddings or take other less than ideal gigs, as project photographer Linda did, but they also needed audiences in aggregate to demonstrate the salience of their work to others.

The third critical point has to do with the story of empowerment that can be told based on the new availability of digital media tools and social media platforms. These tools have indeed helped cultural workers to access the means of production and they are less constrained than large commercial organizations in the amount and diversity of work that they put out because they are not constrained by the needs of the capital that has been invested in them. Furthermore, the ease of distribution in social media platforms means that artists can maintain multiple online identities, fragmenting their subjectivity across digital spaces in order to maintain their perceived integrity for specific audiences.

The implications of this are several. The focus of promotional capital and the orientation to build audiences can replace an understanding of work as being activist or creative. The cultural workers in SK seem to operate on the assumption that if they have enough of an audience, they will be able to simultaneously realize activist, creative, and for-profit ends. But constructing oneself via the acquisition of promotional capital means that one is always constructing oneself according to the logic of advertisers. In fact, this is important: the impulse toward promotional capital in the promotional public sphere is a logic that is largely intensified by the needs of advertisers. It’s the interests of advertisers that have inserted an ever increasing range of metrics to measure and track the online activity of users in social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter as cultural workers chase likes, followers, and views. This kind of work affects the nature of texts as illustrated above. The maintenance of these currencies of promotional capital is
itself a demanding form of cultural work that requires literacy with the right platforms and constant production. The need to consistently produce creative work that can attract these currencies of promotional capital also puts specific demands on cultural work, which can, in some cases, create exploitative working conditions. Workers like Linda had to endure challenging conditions of photography in order to gain finances, exposure, and travel resources for her own projects. 1Hood’s media production was highly centralized; Jasiri Smith and Gray did the vast majority of editing and promotional work. While their media production was at least as prolific as SK’s work, they also bore the burdens of relentless hip-hop activist multi-tasking.

There are also important points to be made regarding the nature of hip-hop careers. Given the foregoing analysis, we are in a better position to assess what the phrase “hip-hop career” means with respect to each of these cases and how hip-hop is related to the activist or humanitarian efforts involved. In the context of the SK campaign, the term “hip-hop career” (to the extent that it refers to the career of Curtis Jackson) refers to a variety of for-profit ventures that include the SK energy drink and his earlier lucrative foray into the beverage industry with Vitamin Water. But they also include his website and various record label contracts, film appearances, live performances, agreements and merchandising deals. Jackson’s ownership of intellectual property is related to particular texts and brands, such as those that run through each of these ventures. In this sense, Jackson’s career resonates with traditional conceptions of a music career but it simultaneously pushes the boundaries of the term due to the diversity of cultural products and revenue streams that Jackson has become involved with. In this context, SK, then, figures into Jackson’s career as a specific profit-generating stream, as a branding concept.
for a new range of products (namely the energy drink and the *Street King Immortal* album), and to some extent as a career-rebranding device.

In the context of 1Hood Media’s efforts, the term hip-hop career has many contrasting denotations. It is clear that 1Hood Media and Jasiri Smith’s principle aim is to generate full-time careers from the production of media texts and their participation in activist events. But it is equally clear that the ability to create, perform, and distribute critically reflective works on topics of social and political justice is a motivating incentive for the group. Looking at Jasiri “X” Smith’s career between the years of 2007 and 2012, it was only in 2010 that Smith signed a contract with a recording label. In interviews, Smith explained that it wasn’t until well into his production of the first season of “This Week with Jasiri X” that a friend informed him that there might be a way for him to make money from his creative work. Even while under this label contract, Smith went on to record and release a variety of songs and videos outside of the label context.

“Hip-Hop career” is therefore a term that can be implied when hip-hop texts figure into an actor’s public persona and income generation. But this can take a variety of shapes. Promotional Capital is an important non-monetary form of currency that cultural workers such as Jasiri X Smith carry between various categories of public performance.

**Limitations**

As is the case with any study, this study was performed with limited resources and limited time. In addition, there were many aspects of these campaigns that could
potentially be studied, so choices had to be made. As a result, there are several aspects of
this study that need to be built upon by future work.

One challenge that I faced with reference to the SK campaign was the challenge of access. As mentioned earlier, I never expected to be able to interview high-profile figures such as Curtis Jackson or Chris Clarke, nor did I see that kind of data as particularly relevant to my research questions. However, I hoped that I would be able to obtain interviews with other workers close to the campaign in Pure Growth Partners for example. In the end every interview with SK campaign was hard won. What I did not predict was that when I got the interviews it would still be difficult to get past the public relations messaging of the marketing campaign. Ultimately, I was able to address these challenges in two ways. While interviewing higher-ups in the campaign was challenging, I had more success interviewing people lower on the totem pole. People less directly involved with the central operations of the campaign (whether they realized it or not) were also more frank, descriptive, and willing to speak beyond the brand’s talking points. With reference to the more opaque interviews that I secured with official spokespersons, such as in the instances with the United Nations and SK’s legal counsel, I limited my conclusions to what seemed to be verified by the content of the interview. Additionally, I considered and analyzed what the process of public relations meant for the study’s larger research questions.

Another difficulty that I ran into regarding access was that I was not able to interview U.N. workers who worked in the field in the African countries or other places to get their perspective on the branding practices, texts, work, and overall efficacy of the campaign. This might be seen as vulnerable to the critique of decrying the practices of
speaking for the oppressed in the SK campaign but also reproducing it through the usage of exclusively western study participants. My solution here involved avoiding drawing too many conclusions about the nature of development work in the field or any conclusions about the perspectives of the aid recipients. Future research might choose to gather data from development workers on the ground about their views on this subject. In the meantime, there are many other important types of data that I was able to gather and I have presented what I feel is the best of that here.

In terms of the 1Hood case, the problem was the opposite: an abundance of available data. Because 1Hood’s events tended to be open to the public it was easy to observe them at work. In addition, Jasiri Smith, Gray, and other participants tended to be down to earth and willing to describe their work and the history of the coalition in detail. On top of that, 1Hood was constantly involved in events and so there was always another occasion to observe them, or a new campaign that seemed relevant. Ideally, I would have liked to observe 1Hood Media’s work over a longer period of time, at more events, and to spend more time with former 1Hood coalition members. From the wide pool of available information and the broad range of data that I gathered, I selected what I thought was the most relevant information. Although I could not attend every 1Hood event, I traveled to Pittsburgh multiple times and called participants back to clarify points that needed more explanation under analysis.
Future Research

The aspect of this study that calls out most for more research is the concept of promotional capital. The concept has been used sparingly in other works but not really developed in depth beyond this study. This study has made an attempt to offer a basic definition of the concept and to demonstrate its working in the context of these campaigns. But this study was interested in looking at these campaigns broadly, and promotional capital only figured in to them to a certain extent. What is needed is a body of work devoted to this form of capital, the history of its development, and research on many more of its manifestations.

Other prospects for future research extend logically from the aforementioned limitations. While there are numerous studies of development work and some studies of the impact of celebrities, artists, and branding on humanitarian campaigns, there have been few, if any, studies of how these humanitarian campaigns impact the recipients on the ground in the fieldwork of development. Do the recipients of aid see the promotional texts that these campaigns produce? If so, how do they interpret the messages? Also, what are the branding and media practices of regional activist and development organizations and artists?

This study intentionally chose two campaigns that were distinctly different in their structure and ideology. The goal here was to focus on their differences as a way of comparing different types of civic engagement. But it might also be valuable to compare more similar cases of hip-hop activism to understand differences between those. For example, a campaign like SK might be compared to a project like Jay Z’s water campaign
or another hip-hop philanthropic effort. Alternatively, it might be compared to other hip-hop campaigns in which the brand was a site of protest, such as Ultraviolet’s Anti-Rape campaign to encourage Reebok to drop Ross due to a pro-rape lyric, or the Till’s family’s campaign to have Mountain Dew drop Lil Wayne.

Finally, there are a number of more specific questions that can be asked about the tactics of hip-hop activists like Jasiri Smith and Gray. There was data gathered about the Jordan Miles and Occupy campaigns that were deemed to be beyond the scope of this study, but it is nevertheless important information about the nature of activism in the promotional public sphere. More focused studies on their creative techniques and intra-organizational dynamics would certainly constitute valuable contributions to a variety of scholarly disciplines and to practical activist work. In addition there, are many other similar initiatives by artists and organizations, such as Rebel Diaz, Immortal Techniques, Wise Intelligent, Rhymefest, Soundstrike, The Coup, Invincible, and Black August, all of which blend hip-hop and progressive politics. Each of these organizations and groups have produced bodies of creative work and more concrete contributions to political efforts that are worthy of analysis.

This study contributes to these literatures by demonstrating, through the examples of these case studies, the profound extent to which promotionism shapes public life in late modernity. In order to be heard one must make the kind of messages that can resonate with a lot of people and establish an audience of a lot of people that can be traded for access to various platforms of communication and participation. The ubiquity of commodified communication means that promotion is ongoing and multi-directional and non-promotional spaces exist only in theory.
For activists and social justice actors, it means that their causes will inevitably serve promotional purposes for artists, media outlets, politicians, and other social actors. This means that in order to gain certain types of categories we must rethink categories such as activism and entertainment, non-profit and for-profit work. This study reveals that while actors may use these terms to describe the kind of work they do and even to think about their own aims, in practice they operate based on a logic in which the mobilization of audiences is the practical goal.

There are those who hold on to the hope that a different kind of logic can inform our rituals of communication. The foregoing analysis is not meant to suggest that they should not push back on this reality—they should. The non-neutrality of the promotional public sphere means that those interested in democratic communication should also invest heavily in the structural interventions that target the roots of this state of affairs. But as they do this, they must simultaneously recognize the capacity building and symbolic value of momentary victories for the most marginalized and urgently oppressed among us.
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Appendix A
List of Interview Participants

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<th>Participant</th>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Interview Format</th>
<th>Organizational Affiliation</th>
<th>Occupational/Role</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
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<td>Benito Corp</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>Contractor/Photographer/Entertainment Professional</td>
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<td>Email</td>
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<td>Author</td>
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<td>Researcher/Consultant</td>
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Note:
Appendix B
Interview Schedule

Hi my name is Chenjerai Kumanyika. Thank you for your participation in my study. The purpose of this study is to better understand strategies of social justice activism that involves artists and celebrities. We seek to understand the advantages and struggles that come when organizations use this kind of communication. And we also seek to understand how these promotional strategies connect organizations of different kinds organizations. Before we begin, however, I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers and you are not required to answer any questions you aren’t comfortable with or don’t want to discuss. The whole interview should take about sixty minutes. Are you ready?

How did you first become involved with your organization?

How would you describe the work that you do? (Please provide examples)

How would you describe a typical work day? How would you describe the steps of your work? (Please provide examples)

What has been your experience with advertisers and sponsors? Please provide examples

Who is the primary audience or customer of your work?
What do you think distinguishes the kind of work that you do from the work of other people who work in this organization?

What other people are necessary for you to produce the kind of work that you do?

What other institutions or organizations are necessary for you to produce the kind of work that you do?

Does the work that you do involve social media?
If so how? Can you provide examples?
If not why not?

Please describe the goals of the organization as you understand them.

How does the work that you do assist the goals of your organization? Please provide examples?

Do you feel that you use work that would typically be described as art or entertainment?
If no why not? If so how? Can you provide examples?

From your perspective how does the organization use work that would typically be described as art or entertainment?

How would you describe your position in the entertainment industry?

What changes in the entertainment industry have most affected your career? Can you provide examples?

Why do you do the organizational work that you do?
(1) What do you think have been the most significant accomplishments of the campaign?
(2) Elements that the campaign could have done better?
Appendix C

IRB: Exemption

The Office for Research Protections (ORP) has received and reviewed the above referenced submission application. It has been determined that your research is exempt from IRB initial and ongoing review, as currently described in the application. You may begin your research. The category within the federal regulations under which your research is exempt is:

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Given that the IRB is not involved in the initial and ongoing review of this research, it is the investigator’s responsibility to review IRB Policy III “Exempt Review Process and Determination” which outlines:

- What it means to be exempt and how determinations are made
- What changes to the research protocol are and are not required to be reported to the ORP
- Ongoing actions post-exemption determination including addressing problems and complaints, reporting closed research to the ORP and research audits
- What occurs at the time of follow-up

Please do not hesitate to contact the Office for Research Protections (ORP) if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for your continued efforts in protecting human participants in research.

This correspondence should be maintained with your research records.
VITA: Chenjerai Kumanyika

Education
Ph.D., Mass Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, August 2013

Publications


Selected Conference Presentations


Employment
2010-2013 Instructor, Pennsylvania State University
2008-2010 Teaching Assistant, Pennsylvania State University
2006-2008 Studio Director/Mentor Street Poets Inc.
2004-2006 Studio Director/Instructor, Youth Empowerment Services
2004-2006 Studio Director/Instructor, Freire Charter School
1995–Present Producer/Vocalist/ Performer, Spooks