Defining Authenticity: an Ethnographic Study of Australian Hip Hop

Damien Arthur, University of Adelaide, Australia
Pascale Quester, University of Adelaide, Australia

Hip Hop scholars believe non-American forms of Hip Hop dilute the authenticity of a quintessential American culture. This ethnography of Australian Hip Hop identifies a number of forms of authenticity and authenticating practices. The predominantly ‘white’ sub-culture associates authenticity with being true to oneself. As a result, adopting brands associated with US Hip Hop reflects inauthenticity. However, American brands co-opted by US Hip Hoppers (but not associated directly with American Hip Hop per se) such as Ralph Lauren do convey authenticity within Australia if they reflect the self. Authenticity involves tension between self, local and global images.

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In contrast to the above two papers, Farrelly, Hoffman and Beverland examine the consumption of aesthetic value in commercial products. Rather than authenticity being constrained by sub-cultural influence, these authors identify the highly personalised nature of authenticity. For these consumers, the search for authenticity is part and parcel of their own identity project. For these consumers, products can be authentic if they reflect deeply held personal truths. These consumers place little value on the opinions of others, and are unconstrained by social influences when choosing brands.

Together these papers address the nature of authenticity, the mental and social processes involved in attributions of authenticity and inauthenticity, the tensions inherent in commercialised authenticity, and the goal directed nature of the search for authenticity. Together the papers identified the oppositional nature of authenticity, the relationship between indexical and iconic sources of authenticity, and the importance of authenticity consumption as self-relevant act.

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Damien Arthur, The University of Adelaide
Pascale Quester, The University of Adelaide

Hip Hop is a quintessential American cultural export and its arrival in Australia, as in other places, relied heavily upon mass media. Hip Hop scholars researching this social phenomenon outside of the USA often describe how outsiders label Hip Hop as an American culture and equate any partaking in it by non-Americans as mere imitation (Mitchell 2001). However, our ethnographic research and earlier findings by Maxwell (2003), suggest that being a member of the Australian Hip Hop culture does not entail the slavish imitation of American Hip Hop style, nor the consumption of US Hip Hop brands. Instead, as global Hip Hop values mixed with the local conditions, Australian Hip Hop has become differentiated from its roots, creating a unique ‘glocal’ identity. This, combined with the consumption of other non-Hip Hop brands, has spawned a shared understanding of the symbolic meanings of brands by members of the Australian Hip Hop culture.

In this study of the consumption practices of the Australian Hip Hop subculture, three principal methods of ethnographic research were undertaken: participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Ethnography can often yield better insights into the way people interact with brands than more modernist approaches (Goulding 2003). Participant observation and informal interviews took place between 2002 and 2004, when extended participation enabled the researchers to ‘learn the language’ of those under investigation (Elliot and Jankel-Elliot 2003). For one of the authors, becoming a member of a subculture meant entering as an ‘aspiring’ member and undergoing a socialisation process to obtain subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). Hence, the ethnographic process reported here was evolving, allowing the examination of different elements of the subculture and its signifying consumption practices.

Of particular interest was the central issue of authenticity, a core value in the Hip Hop culture, and one with increasing relevance for marketers seeking to understand the underlying relationship between consumers and brands. One way in which members of a ‘glocal’ culture can ascribe authenticity to brands is through the notion that their symbolic consumption represents its core values, whereas the consumption of mass-produced goods represents artificiality.

Australian Hip Hop members are often labelled ‘Homeys’, just as those observed by Andy Bennett (1999) in his ethnography of British Hip Hop were labelled ‘Wigger’, when clothed in typical African-American Hip Hop style. The notion of ‘blackness’ and the idea that only Americans can authentically experience Hip Hop is an issue often negotiated in the predominantly ‘white’ Australian Hip Hop culture. This is predominantly achieved by deriving authenticity not from colour or nationality, but from a notion of truthfulness to one’s self and place.

In the Australian Hip Hop scene, which includes consumers of Hip Hop music and followers of the Hip Hop lifestyle as well as more established Hip Hop artists, there is no problem with being ‘white’ and Australian as long as you don’t misrepresent who you are, and simulate blackness, or betray your origin and simulate ‘American-ness’. Pretending to be an African-American amounts to not being true to one’s self, or one’s place. Hence, Australian Hip Hop members would be regarded as fake if they were to consume brands, such as Fubu, associated with the African-American Hip Hop culture, because this would be expressing something they are not. Likewise, the brand Ecko, which is heavily associated with Hip Hop in the US, is considered inauthentic by hard-core Australian Hip Hop members as it represents everything that is ‘wrong’ with the commercialisation of Hip Hop. For members of the Australian Hip Hop culture, the company has not kept true to its roots, and has crossed over into the mainstream, a belief exacerbated by the fact that Ecko is distributed in Australia by Globe International, an Australian company licensing other non-Hip Hop youth culture brands such as Stussy, Mooks and Paul Frank.

Interestingly, although members of the Australian Hip Hop culture tend to frown upon the consumption of some US brands, this does not apply to all US brands. Hence, it acceptable to consume US Hip Hop brands within the Australian Hip Hop culture as long as the brand authentically represents who you are. For example, Hip Hop DJ Nixon would never consume brands that have meanings associated with African-American Hip Hop, such as Fubu, as this would clearly be a misrepresentation. He
does, however, consume other US brands such as Polo Ralph Lauren and Nautica. Although these brands have in the recent past begun to coopt Hip Hop style, they have not grown from Hip Hop culture. Rather, they are products of mainstream fashion designers and hence their consumption could hardly be symbolic of Hip Hop authenticity. However, this is exactly what these products are for Nixon, representing his ‘white’ middle-upper class private school background better than the consumption of most other brands. Therefore, Nixon is truthfully representing himself through his symbolic consumption and his actions are consistent with the values of his subculture. Australian Hip Hop is not middle-class per se but its middle class members can remain true to their own sense of identity and be part of the Hip Hop subculture.

This research also found that the values of the Australian Hip Hop culture required members to represent their place. Hence, Australian Hip Hop brands were often favoured over US ones, consistent with previous findings of country of origin research (Phau and Prendergast 2000). Indeed, the competitive nature of Hip Hop, and the desire to represent one’s place, has created a situation where members even try to represent their place over other Australian places, by consuming brands with meanings associated with their home city. This constitutes a form of subcultural capital, ascribing higher membership status for those ‘in the know’. This has serious implications for US Hip Hop brands. As the Australian Hip Hop culture continues to mature, local Hip Hop brands will be deemed to represent its members’ place more truthfully and should be able to successfully leverage this greater perceived authenticity.

**AESTHETIC CONSUMPTION AS AUTHENTICATING EXPERIENCE**

Francis Farrelly, Monash University  
Lisa Hoffman, Monash University  
Michael B. Beverland, University of Melbourne

This study of aesthetic consumption involved twenty-one depth interviews with a sample of consumers known to be high in three categories - value, acumen and response intensity - each critical to the centrality of visual product aesthetics (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold, 2003). Biographical elements were included in the interviews (Huffmann, Ratneshwar and Mick 2000) as the aim was to reveal structures of personal and social action (Roberts 2001).

Respondent stories revealed the use of aesthetically pleasing products as expressions of an idealised sense of self. Authenticating acts are said to be self-referential behaviours consumers enact to produce the “true” self (Arnould and Price, 2000). Whilst pointing to a range of products (a polished metal photo album, a candelabra and a table) one respondent reflected on what she considered distinctive about herself. “Sometimes these products remind me how much worth I place in detail as really I think the beauty is so often about the effort put in by the designer and to get the most out of this type of product you really have to understand this effort and genuinely appreciate it. I suppose in some ways they [the various products] indicate what it is to get to know people well in that you must make a real effort, take the time to listen and appreciate what they have to say, and help them get to know you and use this positively in long term relationships with important people like partners, family and friends”.

As this and the following examples clearly demonstrate, the value in these products went far beyond their aesthetically pleasing exterior and often related to affirmations of individuality (“something I think I have always had in me”) personal growth and desired relationships. One specific authenticating act involved anthropomorphism where products were assigned human-like characteristics (DiSalvo and Gumperle 2003). Another respondent noted how her juicer had a child like shape.

“It is really interesting but at the same time really ugly and quite industrial too. It’s ugly but beautiful at the same time there’s no life to it, but then it almost looks like a person where there’s feet the stomach and the little body, it’s like a person. Sometimes the most beautiful person is the ugliest thing inside but then the ugliest person is the most beautiful thing inside. I think it’s the same with this. It’s so ugly but once you start using it, it becomes the most beautiful thing…I’ve just grown to love it”.

Price and Arnould (2000) note that products become highly valued when consumers nurture them as part of a self-narrative. For this respondent value increased over time as she transformed the product in accordance with her deeply held beliefs about appreciating people’s inner qualities. Claxton, Reid and Murray (1994) suggest that anthropomorphism is often used for objects that have particular salience in defining who consumers are individually or culturally. Another respondent spoke of her refrigerator (the door was glass) having human-like emotions, “Everyday it changes according to what’s in my fridge…it’s got a lot of life to it if I’ve just been to the market…By the end of the week, it’s kind of sad because it’s empty”. In this study engagement was at the product level as the ambiguity in design (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, Bloch 1993) stimulated the co-creation of value. In the context of this respondent’s story, this meant engaging in ways that reflected the importance she placed on being a responsible and caring mother.

Another significant finding was that the consumption experience was authenticating in ways commonly discussed in narrow contexts such as extreme sports (Celsi, 1992) other physically challenging adventures like river rafting (Arnold and Price 1993). First sighting of the product often produced a sense of elation, and in some case their efforts to describe this experience had ineffable aspects in that they either suggested it was difficult to truly capture the feeling at the time of purchase or what the product meant to them now, or were loath to do for fear it may in some way deface the value of the product or experienced (Zaltman 1977). Respondents had far less trouble however in highlighting the significance of their acumen (Bloch 1995) to both the discovery and appreciation of the product, or in playing down external influences such as marketing communications or other consumers. On many occasions they described a fate-like connection with the product.