

## Introduction

A book about hip-hop and subcultures is, you would imagine, unlikely to begin with an anecdote about John Shuttleworth, a comedy character whose routines are largely based on the minutiae of life in Yorkshire, England. Shuttleworth's shows debate the complications of one cup of tea not being enough, but two being too many, and the challenges faced by being offered savoury food once already onto the sweet course and they are therefore as far removed from debates of the representation of ethnicity or notions of authenticity in rap music as is perhaps possible. A close friend has a spare ticket for a John Shuttleworth show but he is going with work colleagues. I often feel socially anxious meeting new people and my level of trepidation is not helped by the fact that my friend and colleagues are psychologists and so I presume they will be analysing my every move. I take my seat in the group next to a nice lady in her early 60s who I get talking to and after some time we realise that I knew her daughter, Cara, whilst in the sixth form at school. I then remember a story where I am 15 or 16 and talking to this girl at a disco at the local rugby club. Cara is quite an imposing figure as she is a year older than me but also about six inches taller. Her dyed black hair is spiked upwards, adding another few inches to her height. Her heavy eye-liner and black lipstick suggest an aesthetic debt to Siouxsie Sioux and Patricia Morrison. In passing I call her a Goth. 'Fuck off!' she shouts 'I'm a punk!' before storming off. This previously buried memory is now fixed in my mind as the social mistake which led to my general interest in (sub)cultural affiliation; how we label ourselves and wish others to perceive us.

This book is an exploration of five youth cultural groups based in the South East of England with a preoccupation for American hip-hop and British grime culture. I examine how they view themselves, their participation in the subcultural groups and their views on the imagery and lyrics in the music they consume on a daily basis. This is a multi-disciplinary piece of research, encompassing sociology, media and cultural studies and popular music studies. In Sociology, subcultural theory is a major approach in the literature for studying young adults. It has theoretical heritage and the power to explain young people's actions, practices and values (Brake, 1980) although its relevance and academic applicability has been debated in recent years. It became clear in my own reading that there were gaps in the literature which this book goes some way to addressing. The most significant of these gaps was that much of the work

viewed young people as homogeneous, easily labelled and in many instances as a dichotomous form (subcultural or 'mainstream'/not subcultural). This, to my mind, is an oversimplification of the lives of young people and is not a satisfactory or accurate portrayal of the groups who took part in my own research as their lives were much more complex and dynamic than much of the previous writing in the field would have me believe. The most frustrating stumbling blocks that I came up against when I started delving into this academic area were threefold and, in my opinion, somewhat related. First, there was the overly simplistic determination of young people as either belonging to a subculture or not. There exist a number of books that differentiate between those who perceived themselves to be members of a subculture and the part-timers but such relationships between 'full-time' and 'weekend' tend to be portrayed as fractious and, in some instances, hostile. When I was undertaking my own research this was not a true reflection of what was becoming evident to me in the field. Second, there were the persistent disagreements and intellectual contests in the literature over what I can only describe as the 'academic naming rights' to the term which could/would/should replace 'subculture' in light of varying paradigmatic shifts in the last fifteen years or so. Third, why does so little of the literature in this area explore how the people involved in the research understand and interpret the cultural commodities that were seemingly so closely tied to their identities?

As a result of these aspects, the basis for this book is around three questions:

Does the term subculture still retain academic value and if so in what way?

Do young people commit to cultural engagement in different ways?

How do these people perceive the products of the industry that they consume?

These questions underpin the structure of this book. Due to the central role of subcultural theory as one of the major approaches to studying young people I will examine the relevance of this theory as a mechanism to explore and understand the practices and ideas belonging to five groups of people involved in hip-hop and grime. I first look to assess the applicability of the concept of subculture in order to meet the overall aim of the book. Hodkinson's (2002) notion of subcultural substance is utilised using the data from the fieldwork to elaborate on his attempt to reformulate subcultural theory. Using the qualitative data from the fieldwork the significance of the term subculture became apparent during the research.

This book introduces the conceptual purist/peripheral model of subcultures into academic discourse. This model varies from previously presented theoretical

concepts in this area as it does not merely present a bifurcation between those deemed subcultural and others who are seen to have only a partial engagement in forms of cultural activity or, as Hebdige defined them, the originals and the hangers-on (1979: 122). The purist/peripheral model illustrates the complexity of contemporary subcultural existence by presenting a non-essentialised portrait of subcultural groups and asserts that each individual and subsequent collective possesses relative though varied degrees of agency as well as self-imposed judgements on their position within the subculture. It was found in the research stage that a number of varying subcultural positions could be interpreted in the fieldwork according to the literature of subcultural studies. The concepts of 'purist' and 'peripheral', therefore, do not solely relate to hip-hop subcultures but could be applied to other substantive youth groups to help establish variations of subcultural affiliation and commitment between its members. As will be discussed later in this book, the purists were more actively engaged in the culture when compared to the peripherals and were also, perhaps surprisingly, less likely to use visual signifiers such as dress code as a way to express their subcultural membership — I term the purists as 'inward looking' as their interests are more on cultural capital than spectacular style.

*Purists and Peripherals* contributes to the growing work on how hip-hop helps establish identity formation for many people but also does something different as a key focus here is on the audience's interpretations of representations inherent in the texts, whilst also framing these responses within the field of subcultural theory. There is currently a lack of research relating to the decoding of audience responses to hip-hop and grime culture. The study seeks to fill a gap in the literature through the incorporation of the interpretative readings of the audience. Writers such as Rose (1994, 2008), Perry (2004), Quinn (2005) and Ogbar (2007) assess the ideological messages inherent within rap music but do not take into account the interpretive mechanisms of the people at the forefront of the commodified variant of the culture, namely the consumers. Riley states that '... much of the literature on rap is ... unconcerned with attempting to empirically locate the interpretive communities and reading formations of the increasingly diverse hip-hop audiences ...' (2005: 297) and this book attempts to address this factor by incorporating the opinions and attitudes of hip-hop consumers to construct an exploration of consumption. The work here is multiperspectival (Kellner, 1995) in line with more recent work in this area by Wilson (2006), Gunter (2010) and Haenfler (2010).

Chapter 1 of this book focuses on the literature in the field of hip-hop studies. I start by discussing the growing field of Popular Music Studies before moving on to an historical overview of hip-hop culture. A discussion of empirical studies on hip-hop is then presented and I demonstrate the lack of studies in the area which examine the reading positions and decoding capabilities of young people.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that subcultural theory is a recurring, though contested, means to examine youth cultural practices (Frith, 1978; Brake, 1980). It is therefore important to put forward an overview of subcultural debates, from the Chicago School work of the 1920s to contemporary postmodern explanations. In recent research there has been an increasing degree of scrutiny of the validity of earlier positions in the study of youth culture and this chapter presents the paradigmatic shifts in this area. The focus here is on the discourse which closely links subcultures to musical consumption. The discussion of key terminology in this chapter should be seen as part of the theoretical underpinning of the study and relates to the research participants' cultural engagement.

Chapter 3 utilises Paul Hodkinson's (2002) notion of subcultural substance as a central theoretical position to assess the validity of the varying discourses on subcultural theory. In this chapter I also introduce the individuals who took part in the focus group discussions, a significant aspect of the research process. The fieldwork data is incorporated here to assess the value of the concept of subculture, in terms of its relevance and application to groups affiliated with hip-hop and grime. Four determinants are used to confirm a sense of subculture. They are consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment and autonomy and are applied to the research subjects in order to demonstrate that the term subculture is germane for the individuals within this study. The first three chapters in this book, therefore, not only discuss the theoretical elements which underpin the work that follows but also address the first of the three main questions of this book which relates to the continued validity of the term subculture in the academic study of young people.

Chapter 4 further develops the focus on subcultures. I argue in this chapter that varying degrees of subcultural agency are evident in contemporary hip-hop subcultures, thereby addressing the second of the book's main questions. A descriptive model is presented which differentiates between subcultural members according to a sliding-scale of agency and creative activity within the culture. The research participants are divided into two descriptive sets—the purists (Canterbury, Lewisham and Ashford groups) and the peripherals (Rochester and Brighton groups). These differential positions are developed further in the

study as they describe the varied reading positions of subculturalists evident in the field. Aspects such as musical knowledge, relative engagement in the culture and the notion of unspectacular style are discussed to demarcate between the purist and the peripheral positions. This chapter seeks to add to academic debates in the discipline and examines the term subculture within the context of early twenty-first century cultural practices. It was found that different aspects of subcultural theory, from seemingly competing paradigms, can help explore the varying behaviours, attitudes and values of the research groups.

Chapter 5 focuses on an examination of grime culture at a subcultural level. The appropriation of a localised musical form is suggestive of increased agency in the subcultural groups (Gidley, 2007: 149) and consists of a three staged process — adoption, transformation and retrenchment (Webb, 2007: 175). The grime culture of London, with its roots in dance hall and UK garage, is one notable recent musical phenomenon which has gone largely unrecognised by academic research and so this chapter looks to address this. The origins of grime are considered before an analysis of subcultural engagement by the research subjects.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the representation of black culture in mediated aspects of hip-hop and how the respondents in the study use, interpret and understand such imagery. During the course of the fieldwork and analysis, issues surrounding the interpretive capabilities of the young people involved in hip-hop and grime became central to the research. The grounded theory approach allowed for the development of an appreciation of the distinct reading positions of identifiable collectives in the field, hence the focus on decoding capabilities and the demarcation in the study between the purists and the peripherals. Many previous studies have discussed the portrayal of gender and ethnicity in hip-hop, yet few studies detail the reading positions of the audience from a grounded theory perspective. It was found in the research that this was a significant area for consideration for many in the focus groups and led a number to reflectively assess their own cultural engagement. This chapter details the quantitative data and the qualitative findings from the focus groups. The aim here is to evaluate the interpretative mechanisms utilised by each group in order to determine whether any observable variance is in evidence between the purist and peripheral positions. The qualitative data on the representation of femininity, masculinity and ethnicity are analysed to develop an appreciation of subcultural uses and understanding of mediated cultural images, an aspect which is lacking in the current literature. The data from the groups informs this

chapter and, as a result of the voiced opinions of a number of the respondents, issues relating to hegemony and the commodification of musical artefacts are also considered. White people make up 75-80% of the global market for rap music, a figure often repeated in the literature of hip-hop studies.

Chapter 7 critically examines the notion of authenticity which is a key feature of the popular discourse of rap and grime music. Using data from the field I explore how authenticity is an intangible and contested concept. Debates of authenticity are used within the machinations of the marketing of popular music and within the discourses of the audience. The research findings from the quantitative and qualitative data are presented to further an understanding of contemporary notions of the authentic in popular culture and, more importantly, how such a concept is incorporated into subcultural being. Four dimensions of authenticity were raised by the focus groups and are presented in this chapter: locality, biography/narrative, vocal delivery and ethnic identity. Through the application of grounded theory I draw on the data to examine the nature of authenticity from the perspective of the research respondents and the importance of this concept to their cultural consumption. Chapters 6 and 7 address the last of the book's main questions, that which relates to the perception of cultural products by consumers.

### **Biographical issues and methodology**

In the tradition of biographical work established by the Chicago School under Park and Burgess, I used my experience and familiarity with the setting of the culture to set up positive research relationships with the respondents (Anderson, 1923; Becker, 1963). Feminist studies have also been influential in the use of such an approach in this study as they sought to bring their research set out of invisibility (McRobbie and Garber, 1975; Pollert, 1981; Oakley, 1981). The feminist approach challenged conventional research approaches which were seen to be patriarchal, favoured relationships between researcher and researched that were hierarchical in structure and treated research subjects as subordinate (Merrill and West, 2009). The research process not only encouraged a sense of reflexivity from the respondents but also enhanced my own understanding of my cultural activities and experiences with the research participants.

Miller (1997: 101) suggests that a researcher's personal biography not only influences the area of investigation but also frames the specifics of the research questions. The decision to conduct research on hip-hop comes from a personal interest in global cultural forms and their incorporation into individuals' sense of

personal identity, coupled with a longstanding engagement with varying forms of hip-hop culture. Hodkinson (2005: 131) discusses the idea of researchers, particularly at doctoral level, who have some degree of association to that which is being investigated. The implications of 'insider research' are addressed from a practical and an epistemological stance. Hodkinson raises issues that concern the interpretation and understanding of ethnographic detail from a researcher with some relative cultural proximity to a subculture and its activities. The degree to which the sociological fieldworker is considered either an 'insider' or an 'outsider' by those under investigation will vary depending on their behaviour, including speech, movement and dress, and to the extent to which the researcher considers it significant to be either seen as an 'insider' or 'outsider', which would depend on the context and the group under scrutiny. For example, during the focus group interviews my behaviour was regulated and adapted in order to make the participants feel more comfortable. It was occasionally necessary to adopt the role of somebody with less cultural knowledge; somebody on the peripheries of the phenomenon being studied compared to the research subjects. In this sense the fieldwork strategy was for my role to be that of an apprentice so I could be instructed by the research group (Coffey, 1999). However, this differential approach was not appropriate at a rap gig or club as it would be necessary in order to gain data that would be more pure to appear as a collective member of the audience, following the same ritualistic behaviours as the rest of the attendees. My age during the fieldwork (mid-30s), ethnic background (white) and preferred styles of hip-hop (and, thereby, the acts used as a reference point in conversations) may have acted as determinants of whether co-actors within given situations would perceive the researcher to be inside or outside of their culture. I have engaged at a personal level with aspects of hip-hop culture for many years and although I do not incorporate signifiers of such an involvement in my day to day existence, in terms of dress code and patterns of speech for example, I have a history of consumption of rap records and attendance at hip-hop events. In this respect, this study may be considered to be from an insider-in perspective (MacRae, 2007: 54).

The ethnic background of a social scientist incorporating a focus group methodology has been addressed by Briggs and Cobley who state that from their experience such an approach '... yields a specific kind of data irrespective of the racial identity of the moderator ...' (1999: 339). They maintain that, on occasions when the ethnicity of the researcher and the respondents differs, the task is to facilitate free-flowing discussion with the group at the centre as

opposed to researcher-led interviews. This was an issue that was not seen to be significant in my own research as positive relationships were established with all focus groups very quickly.

There are many variant genres within hip-hop, from gangsta rap, through to party rap and conscious rap. My own preference was offered in conversation when deemed necessary, perhaps to illustrate a point with some clarity or to offer an example of my own knowledge and experience in order to further the relationship between researcher and the object of the research. It became clear within the focus group interview process that many of the acts that I had knowledge of were unknown to a number of the participants from the Rochester and Brighton groups who were, for the most part, very much consumers of mainstream hip-hop. Whereas I choose to listen to acts such as Immortal Technique, Clipping, MF Doom and Latyrx these groups were very much more interested in mainstream, corporate acts such as Kanye West, Eminem, Jay-Z and Drake. Had I used my favoured artists in focus group discussions this would have undoubtedly led to a degree of alienation for the respondents with no prior knowledge of these acts.

Brewer states that an effective ethnographer, in gaining trust from the subject, must ‘... eat like they eat, speak like they speak and do as they do ...’ (2000: 85). This is a common line within the literature of ethnography and follows on from the anthropological writing of Malinowski who perceived the need to fully immerse oneself in the culture in order to gain an understanding of the subtle complexities of the matter being investigated. However, it was decided that total immersion within the hip-hop culture, incorporating a variant form of speech and dress code, would only hinder my understanding as the participants would likely see me as a ‘faker’ and would therefore cease to engage with me in a positive manner. There does need to be some demonstration that the researcher has some background understanding, some form of cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1986) and subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) of the lifestyle choices made by the individual participants, and therefore an introductory conversation with each focus group included an historical overview of my own personal involvement with rap music. The fact that I have regularly attended hip-hop events and concerts since 1991 made the participant observation aspect of the fieldwork uncomplicated inasmuch as there was a familiarity with the expected customs and behaviour patterns at such happenings so as not to stand out in the crowd when undertaking research whilst also maintaining ‘... rigorous standards of objective reporting designed to overcome ... potential bias ...’ (Angrosino and



Mays de Perez, 2003: 108). It was decided that during the research I would not dress in a spectacular hip-hop style nor incorporate vernacular speech patterns or walk using hip-hop mannerisms. During the fieldwork I dressed in the manner that I always have when engaging within the cultural sphere of hip-hop. This conscious notion of self-presentation reflected the significance of impression management to the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The approach taken in the research was that I would demonstrate basic understanding, experience and knowledge of the culture but that the group members, as the focal point of the interviews, possessed a more enriched and perceptive interpretation of hip-hop and grime. It is argued that insider status enhances the quality and effectiveness of qualitative interviews (Hodkinson, 2005: 138) and therefore acceptance of my own experience and knowledge by each focus group aided the research.

In regards to the methodologies used in the research for this book, I used a mixed methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data came from 132 questionnaires which were completed from a range of sources including educational institutions and internet music forums. I sought the opinions of fans and those who declared no particular fandom or affiliation to hip-hop or grime culture in an attempt to establish whether variations existed between these sets of respondents with regards to their views on the culture. The qualitative aspect of the research centred on five focus groups who met regularly. This approach allowed the respondents the opportunity to discuss aspects of the culture that they were aware of rather than address a prescribed set of criteria established by the researcher. Both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that the research respondents declared a preference for American performers and, therefore, the focus in this book is largely on the consumption of American rap artists by young adults. British rap and grime acts were mentioned during the fieldwork by a number of the respondents and the relative positions of popularity of artists from the States and the UK in terms of consumption is reflected herein.

I also attended a range of parties, concerts and nightclubs where hip-hop was a central component to further enhance my knowledge of the field although this book largely centres on the focus group interviews, with reference to the quantitative data where appropriate. The research process began (slowly) in 2008 and ended in 2012. I also spent a considerable amount of time and effort in trying to secure interviews with a number of recording artists and other practitioners in the field of hip-hop and grime and managed to speak to a significant number

of artists. This book, however, centres on the young (and not so young) people in the research who live and breathe hip-hop and grime. In my opinion a book such as this, one which privileges the voices of those engaged at a subcultural level with hip-hop and grime as opposed to the academic musings of a scholar far removed from the grassroots level, is long overdue.