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Charlotte He March 30, 2022

Show Me the *Gukhip*: Representation of South Korean Hip-Hop on TV and Film

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Abstract

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By Charlotte He

This thesis examines the representation of South Korean hip-hop on TV and film through close readings of different media objects ranging from the hip-hop competition series *Show Me the Money*, the film *Sunset in My Hometown*, and other peripheral media such as Mnet Asian Music Awards stage performance and episodes from the Reality TV program *I Live Alone*. Different from the government-supported K-pop which is used as a tool of soft power to craft a global image of South Korea, the hip-hop music scene has grown through individual endeavor and strong interpersonal bonds, without significant government interference. By situating certain media objects in a wider sociocultural context and how they represent hip-hop culture, I intend to unravel how the notion of "Koreanness" is communicated through rap music, unfold the multifaceted gender representation in hip-hop competition shows, look at how hip-hop music production is professionalized, and discern how media magnify flex culture.

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Show Me the *Gukhip*:

Representation of South Korean Hip-Hop on TV and Film

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, no one would have expected that hip-hop could emerge and continue to thrive as a popular youth culture for the following three decades in South Korea, a country that is distant from the Bronx, New York, the birthplace of hip-hop. As The Quiett raps in *The 8th Grade Syndrome* (Dingo FreeStyle, 2019), "They say hip-hop in Korea? That's impossible", the initial introduction of hip-hop into South Korea did not enjoy wide support and was even viewed as "representing a vulgar and dangerous dimension of American Black culture" (Shin and Lee, 146). However, hip-hop music has become an important genre in South Korea along with an established commercial ecosystem with a solid audience base. According to the 2020 Music Industry White Paper by The Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), a governmental agency that oversees and coordinates the promotion of the Korean content industry, rap/hip-hop is the fifth most popular music genre among South Korean audiences with 33.1% respondents having chosen it as their favorite music by genre (KOCCA, 2021). Considering that rap/hip-hop as a music genre specifically targets young people in their teens and 20s, such a figure is particularly significant given the short period of time hip-hop has existed in South Korea.

Starting in the 90s, hip-hop culture was introduced to the South Korean audience through the boy band Seo Taiji and Boys and their incorporation of rap into their dance music, followed by music fans encountering American hip hop in online spaces. As Myoung-Sun Song documents in *Hanguk Hip Hop*, "the first generation fell in love with American hip hop often through an introduction via AFKN (American Forces Korea Network) and MTV" (Song, 2). The early development of rap music in South Korea is closely tied with consumption of American television, music performance broadcast on domestic television that incorporated hip-hop

elements, and exchange of information via personal online communities. Rap music experiences a crucial shift from 2011, which Song marks as the beginning of "Rapstar Generation" (Song, 9), as it started to get more exposure on mass media through television reality competitions, and notable independent hip hop artists were widely recognized beyond the hip-hop community. *Show Me the Money*, a long-running rap competition TV show that airs on the cable channel Mnet, celebrated its tenth season in 2021 and is often credited with popularizing hip-hop music in South Korea. Unlike the first-generation rappers who were exposed to hip-hop through the American hip-hop scene, the recent aspiring rappers in South Korea are heavily influenced by TV music programs such as *Show Me the Money* (2012—), *Unpretty Rapstar* (2015—6), and *High School Rapper* (2017—). The 2020 Music Industry White Paper by KOCCA also found that TV Music Programs account for 39.3% of the methods or service used when listening to music among South Korean audiences, and the trend of listening to music through watching TV Music Programs is increasing on an annual basis (KOCCA, 2021). The pervasiveness of such music listening pattern is also evident if taking a closer look at the top songs on major Korean charts during the airing period of TV music programs. Granted the heated discussion around such programs and the expansive song promotions on TV, streaming apps, and social media websites, it has become a common phenomenon that the music charts are dominated by songs produced on these music programs during the broadcast period, with the hottest song topping the chart for an extended period.

Different from government-supported K-pop which is used as a tool of soft power to craft a global image of South Korea, the hip-hop music scene has grown through individual endeavor and strong interpersonal bonds, without significant government interference. However, as scholars such as Robert Hamilton have pointed out, "K-rap has reached a strange interlude

marked by an express desire to find Koreanness in and through rap music" (Hamilton, 137). There exists a tendency of locating "Koreanness" in rap music, a genre with its own racialized legacy. However, no consensus has reached on the clear definition of what constitutes "Koreanness" or what is eligible to be included in "Koreanness", if there could be any consensus on such matter.

While there is a tendency to locate or find "Koreanness" in rap music, TV music programs and other media have also persisted on utilizing formative elements as well as inviting well-known American musicians to authenticate Korean rap music as a "glocalized" version of rap music. However, such efforts have resulted in misrepresentations of hip-hop culture that have remain unchallenged including color-blind portrayals of the rap music genre, blurred racial history of hip-hop culture on television representations, and an overly simplistic approach to the history of rap music.

Facing the complexity of the glocalization process of hip-hop culture in South Korea, it is crucial and helpful to examine how hip-hop culture, particularly rap music, has been represented and circulated on both traditional media and new media platforms. This thesis aims to examine the representation of Korean hip-hop on TV and film by focusing on the dynamic between localization and globalization, the portrayal of negotiated masculinity and gender representation, as well as professionalization and commercialization of hip-hop culture. To narrow down the focus of the thesis, I chose to closely examine two media objects: the music competition program *Show Me the Money* (2012—) produced by CJ ENM and airs on Mnet, and the fictional film *Sunset in My Hometown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2018). *Show Me the Money*, the most popular cable hip-hop music program in South Korea, is representative of how hip-hop music is portrayed and positioned in relationship to the wider Korean music scene. First aired in 2012 and having lasted

till now, *Show Me the Money* holds a significant place in the hip-hop scene in South Korea and the development of the program over the past ten years provides pertinent insights into how the representation of hip-hop has changed over time along with the branding, target audience, and the tone of the show. *Sunset in My Hometown*, directed by the well-known director Lee Joon-ik and the last film in his youth trilogy, provides us with a fresh perspective on how hip-hop culture can be localized in a South Korean melodramatic story and conveyed to the general Korean audience who might not have ample knowledge of hip-hop culture.

Chapter one, "No English, we are *Gukhip*", starts my exploration of how *Gukhip*, the Korean term for South Korean hip-hop, is formed and consolidated in opposition to *Oehip*, the Korean term for foreign hip-hop. Through examining the representation of Black people on hip-hop competition shows, I argue that the overgeneralized categorization of participants in terms of nationalities in Korean media perpetuate and continue to exist in music programs centering around hip-hop culture, a genre with Black and Latino racial heritage. By drawing an arbitrary line between *Gukhip* and *Oehip*, Korean musicians as well as media producers avoid discussions on the racial history of the genre, and either unconsciously or intentionally de-black hip-hop culture.

In chapter two, "Localization and Globalization", I will explore how the notion of Koreanness is deconstructed and reconstructed at the same time on TV and film. *Show Me the Money* prides itself as the first domestic hip-hop competition show that popularizes the genre in the country. By consciously branding itself as a South Korean show, it acts as a gatekeeper in the South Korea music scene by judging who can be included as a "K-rapper" and shaping what "Koreanness" is in K-hip hop. By investigating the notion of "Koreanness" in its manifestations on *Show Me the Money*, I argue that Koreanness is essentially fluid and is subject to change

depending on the respective context and the intended audience. While the show invites esteemed African American rappers and producers including Snoop Dogg, Timbaland, and Swizz Beatz to authenticate the global appeal of South Korean hip-hop, *Show Me the Money* continues to define what "K-hip hop" is by expecting participants to perform a certain Koreanness in order to strike a balance between being international and local. I also perform a close analysis of the hip-hop themed film *Sunset In My Hometown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2018) to demonstrate how hip-hop can be incorporated in a Korean melodramatic story.

In Chapter Three, "Negotiated Masculinity and Gender Representation", I zoom in to explore how masculinity in South Korean hip-hop is both in dialogue with the hypermasculinity embedded in the genre and masculinity in the South Korean scene which entails fulfilling military service, respecting father figures, and taking care of the family. By analyzing how male relationships are presented in *Show Me the Money*, I argue that while some mentor-mentee relationship reflects the toxic masculinity ideals, the program also demonstrates alternative pathways to foster healthy mentor-mentee relationship and supportive brotherhood through hip-hop performance. I conclude the chapter by examining how both female audience and artists are ostracized and unfairly treated in the hip-hop music scene.

In the final chapter, "Professionalization and Commercialization", I argue that hip-hop culture has been reduced to fashion, slangs, and superficial symbols during the localization process in South Korea. To probe the reasons behind such phenomenon, I examine peripheral media objects such as awards ceremony performances on Mnet Asian Music Awards and Reality TV show *I Live Alone* which casted well-known rappers. As rap becomes professionalized through institutionalization of rap tutoring, the community-building aspect of hip-hop culture diminishes and is replaced with a money-oriented and structured industry. I also examine how

flex culture, once disdained as irrational consumption, is rationalized and affirmed as a way of self-actualization and fulfilling one's filial piety.

Chapter 1: No English, we are Gukhip

In the second-round audition in Season 10 of *Show Me the Money*, Yumdda, one of the judges, bursts out "we are K-hip hop" when other judges are criticizing participants' overuse of unnecessary English lyrics. There is a trend in both the television representation of hip-hop and the music scene itself that promotes the notion of K-hip hop as an independent and self-sufficient music subgenre. Although the notion of K-hip hop, or *Gukhip*, has not yet been consolidated or defined, musicians and mass media outlets in South Korea have made conscious moves to forge Koreanness in rap music. Such moves include strategically rejecting English lyrics, using traditional South Korean instruments or sound in rap music tracks, and fusing representative Korean imagery with hip-hop aesthetics. In this chapter, I introduce the notion of *Gukhip* and break down its meaning in relationship to the context in which it operates in. I will then attempt to trace the historical trajectory of the television representation of hip-hop culture in South Korea from the 1990s when hip-hop was first introduced to the South Korean audience to the present-day rap star generation. In examining the changing framing of hip-hop culture on TV and its reception, I argue that de-blacking has persisted and taken different forms throughout the representation of hip-hop on South Korean TV.

Understanding the Notion of *Gukhip*

It is observable over the past ten seasons of *Show Me the Money* that terms such as *K-rap, K-hip hop, Gukhip* have begun to replace previous descriptive wordings such as the hip-hop scene in South Korea. Major South Korean newspapers such as *Chosun* (2020) also incorporated the term *Gukhip* in their recent reports on *Show Me the Money* and the hip-hop scene in the country. *Gukhip*, written as 국힙, is the abbreviated Korean term for South Korean hip-hop (한국 힙합),

and is used specifically to designate domestic hip-hop music. *Guk*, the Korean word for nation, country, and state, can be seen as the abbreviation of either *hanguk* (Korea) or *guknae* (domestic) in understanding the word *Gukhip*. It is used in contrast to *Oehip*, the abbreviated Korean term for foreign hip-hop.

Whether understood as Korean hip-hop or domestic hip-hop, *Gukhip* has entered the South Korea media lexicon and been used frequently by major hip-hop media platforms to promote South Korean hip-hop. According to CrowdTangle, the Korean search term for *Gukhip* has generated 190,374 interactions in the past year on Instagram from Nov. 28th in 2020 to Nov. 27th in 2021. The majority of the Instagram users whose posts incorporated this term consist of well-known South Korean rappers, hip-hop labels, and hip-hop magazine sites in South Korea. Such data provide ample evidence for the widespread usage of the term *Gukhip* by major players in the South Korean hip-hop scene.

Despite the prevalent usage of the term, *Gukhip* remains an ambivalent term to describe or categorize South Korean hip-hop in relationship to the wider global hip-hop scene. It is still a loose term that requires more nuanced definition and understanding. By examining the South Korean music industry and drawing from existing literature, I argue that such term is a branding tactic by the broadcasting industry to add distinctness to South Korean hip-hop music and locate Koreanness in *K-hip hop*.

Historicizing the Representation of Hip-Hop on South Korean TV

When it comes to examining the representation of South Korean hip-hop on TV and film, it is necessary to recognize that what is shown on South Korean TV and film is the mainstream, commercial hip-hop culture mediated and commodified by the media industry. As Greg Tate

argues in *Hiphop Turns 30: Whatcha Celebratin' for?*, "what we call hiphop is now inseparable from what we call the hiphop industry" (Tate, 64). The distinction between the underground and mainstream hip-hop scene has blurred, so has the difference between hip-hop culture and the industry. In the South Korean case, the broadcasting and cable TV industry further complicates the hip-hop scene as it takes a dominant role in introducing the genre to the general audience, popularizing hip-hop music, and promoting the next rap star for public consumption through producing annual music competition shows.

The first appearance of hip-hop culture on South Korean TV is through Seo Taiji and Boys' incorporation of rapping and break dancing into their music performance on television music programs. Seo Taiji and Boys, a music group active from 1992 to 1996, is credited for the rise of hip-hop music in South Korea. Roald Maliangkay relates the group's popularity to the emergence of individualism in *The Popularity of Individualism: The Seo Taiji Phenomenon in the 1990s*. Maliangkay describes the 1990s in South Korea as a time of consumption and mass communication when "most families had color televisions, private cars were filling up Seoul's streets, and first pop magazines emerged for teenagers, and most dance music acts began to lip-synch their music 'live' on TV" (Maliangkay, 297).

Although Seo Taiji and Boys successfully incorporated rapping and other hip-hop elements in the group's music performance, their appropriative usage of dreadlocks during promotion of their second album led to a ban from the national television channel KBS-TV. Newspapers explained the ban by "referring to the gang culture it [dreadlocks] was associated with". Maliangkay also suggests that aside from the possible association with Los Angeles's gang culture, Seo's popularization of various fashion elements conjures a sense of unfamiliarity, thus was associated with a "strong noncomformism in Korea" (Maliangkay, 301). It is evident

from Seo Taiji and Boys' case, a lack of proper understanding of hip-hop origins and the stereotypical image of Black culture circulating in the traditional South Korean media resulted in the rejection of certain aspects of hip-hop culture. It pushed the need to further localize hip-hop culture to fit into the South Korean societal context, even when this means to de-Blacking the genre and imposing Koreanness onto the representation of hip-hop music.

Between Seo Taiji and Boys' introduction of "rap dance" in 1990s and the popularization of hip-hop on South Korean television in the past decade lies the localization phase during which hip hop fans started to experiment hip-hop music making and performing in local clubs, followed by the emergence of independent hip hop labels founded by the first-generation rappers. Song describes the roots of hip-hop development as "it started in the rooms and personal computer spaces of hip hop fans and moved to the streets and performance spaces of Hongdae like Club Master Plan" (Song, 10). Right from the beginning, most artists' encounter with hip-hop music was highly mediated by digital technology and online communities. Aside from circulation of hip-hop media in online spaces that shaped first-generation rappers' experience of hip-hop music, the returning Koreans during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis also brought firsthand accounts of experience of hip-hop culture in America to the music community in South Korea. Hip-hop remained as an underground subculture while first-generation rappers started to establish independent hip hop labels such as Soul Company and Big Deal Records.

Hip-hop culture continued to flourish in the independent music scene and maintained underground until it experienced a shift when hip-hop made its major appearance on reality competition shows through cable TV. Starting from 2012, music competition TV shows such as *Show Me the Money* and *Unpretty Rapstar* sprung up on Mnet, a cable music channel owned by the most influential South Korean media entertainment company CJ ENM. In *Shifts in Korean*

Television Music Programmes, Sun Jung studies the rapid changes of the structure, content, and policies concerning Korean television. Jung points out that the emergence of cable television and the governmental support it enjoys reflect how "the Korean government quickly adapted to neoliberal globalization practices to meet the increased transnational competition in the changed global media broadcasting landscape" (Jung, 189). The birth of *Show Me the Money* coincides with Mnet's shift in focus onto "globalization and social media in early 2013" (Jung, 190).

Different from Seo Taiji and Boys' self-initiated incorporation of hip-hop elements in their music performance on TV, Mnet has witnessed the rapid development of the domestic hip-hop scene where independent music labels, crews, and a solid close-knit fan base of youngsters collaboratively formed an almost mature hip-hop market. Han Dong-chul, Mnet's chief producer for *Show Me the Money*, seized the opportunity to introduce the then hip-hop subculture to the mainstream music audience by creating music competition shows. *Show Me the Money* proves itself to be a successful program in promoting and popularizing the hip-hop genre to its national and even international audience.

With its target audience of trend-chasing young people in their teens and 20s, Mnet noticed the need to reconcile between authenticating South Korean hip-hop and localizing the foreign genre to suit the national audience's taste. Such orientation prompts the augmentation of representative and oftentimes stereotypical hip-hop elements on the show ranging from street fashion, imagery of extravagant lifestyle, to aggressive dissing battle between rappers. For example, the most representative visual symbol on *Show Me the Money* is the iconic necklace taking the shape of a gold chain with a horizontal plate at the button. The name of the show is engraved on the plate with the first letter *S* in the shape of the US dollar sign. Although gold chain fashion has now been taken as simply a hip-hop dress code to symbolize wealth and

success, it is the 80s that popularized the gold chains we associate with hip-hop culture today. In *Show Me the Money,* contestants are awarded with the necklace during the first two preliminary rounds if passed or asked to return to the producers before leaving the show if failed after the second preliminary round. The *SMTM* necklace, resembling a gold chain, is not made from gold, and is utilized as a mere proof of the contestants' success in passing the auditions. The imitation of gold chain and adoption of US dollar sign can be seen as an effort to authenticate South Korean hip-hop in relationship to the birthplace of hip-hop. But such efforts fall short of meaningful usage aside from aesthetic appropriation and reduction of simple cultural symbols.

Scholar Robert Hamilton points out in *Shadow Representations: 8-Milin's Identity and De-Blacking Rap Music in South Korea*, "K-rappers are socially pushed to do Blackness without being affixed to it", thus "producing a 'realness' that ultimately is not one" (Hamilton, 127). Music competition TV shows take hip-hop elements out of the historical and racial context and remold them into pure aesthetic symbols. Mainstream hip-hop culture is thus gradually being de-blacked in the South Korean mediascape and merely treated as a popular global art form of which K-rappers can partake. Hamilton also argues that *Show Me the Money* and other alike nationally televised hip-hop shows reduce rap music to "a technical art," and "choose to ignore rap as a racialized space altogether" (Hamilton, 127). TV producers' choice to focus on rap music' technical aspect is not only a result of the negotiation between authenticating and localizing hip-hop in South Korea which will be analyzed in chapter two, but it also reflects a continuation of racial blindness in the media portrayal of popular art forms that have a racialized legacy and an avoidance from addressing racism in the wider South Korea society which is relatively racially homogenous.

Hip-Hop's Racialized Legacy and De-blacking in South Korean Media

Hip-hop, a cultural movement started in the mid-1970s in the Bronx, New York City, has become an inseparable part of global youth culture as musicians adapt this cultural form to be more socially acceptable in their own countries. Rap music, a crucial component of hip-hop, has its roots as a cultural expression for young, working-class African Americans and Latinos from the margins of urban America. In *Race…and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity*, Gilbert B. Rodman clarifies that the racialized legacy of hip-hop does not directly translates into that it embodies any sort of essential blackness at the music's core because the racialized ways of categorizing music are "culturally constructed articulations". He instead argues that to acknowledge its racialized history is to acknowledge the "broad and tangled patterns of musical performance, distribution, and consumption that historically have been associated with African Americans" (Rodman, 187). Not only do *Show Me the Money* and other alike shows shy away from the racial history of hip-hop culture, but they adopt an approach of color blindness in positioning hip-hop as a mere foreign music genre. In a similar fashion, the term *Oehip* (foreign hip-hop) overgeneralizes the origin of the genre and loosely groups all non-Korean hip-hop as "foreign". De-Blacking in media, in the South Korean context, can be referred to as the avoidance of discussions on race and the dominant structure of categorizing media objects in the simplistic dichotomy of domestic and foreign. Deracialization of hip-hop music can also be found in the portrayal of Black people on such shows. Whether they are well-known rappers, producers, or contestants, their racial identities remain undiscussed and are depicted only as "foreigners" in regard to their locations, be it from New York or Los Angeles. For example, when Timbaland was introduced as the guest judge on the preliminary

round in LA in *SMTM5*, he was described as the "star producer in the U.S. hip-hop scene". Similarly, Toy Brown, the only African American female constant, was depicted as the only foreigner constant in *SMTM1* and the voiceover introduced her as "showing the American Hip-Hop Soul". In Hare and Baker's *Keepin' It Real: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Media in Korean Hip-Hop*, they recounted the interview with Toy who said, "Koreans often use black people to legitimize hip hop". She also felt she was "the token black person" in which her advancement in the show was simply for the fact of her being black rather because of her rapping talent. Hare and Baker argue that such racial authenticity is "where Korean hip hop departs from many other hip hop scenes as authenticity is not argued through race, but through the adaptation of U.S. hip hop's symbols" (Hare and Baker, 7). I argue that the avoidance of discussions on race is partly because the dominant conception of race and racial categorization in Korea was derived from the Japanese colonial rule in Korea and bears more similarities with the notion of ethnicity. Thus, the awareness of racial distinctions in the Western framework might not have been deeply ingrained in the Korean society. However, given the globalized era we currently live in, the avoidance of discussions on race in the television representation of hip-hop is mainly due to the desire to authenticate the localized Korean hip-hop on the premise that hip-hop has become a global art form, thus its musical form and visual aesthetics are open for adaptation by artists in other countries. It became problematic when hip-hop is discussed without its racial history and taken as a mere art form without its significance to the Black and Latino community.

The categorization of *Gukhip* and *Oehip* reflects the continuous de-blacking of hip-hop culture in the South Korean mediascape, and such generalizing categorization is not conducive to acknowledge the racial history and legacy of the genre and the culture. The usage of the term *Gukhip*, in contrast to that of the colorblind term *Oehip*, is more of a marketing tool utilized by

media companies to promote a particular imagery of South Korean hip-hop which retains the coolness of the music genre but deprived of the blackness to the national audience as well as the international ones.

The existing tendency to de-Black hip-hop as well as other African American cultural forms is also closely related to the commodification and hyper-commercialization of hip-hop culture. Kembrew McLeod's examination of authenticity in hip-hop culture includes the cultural dimension which he suggests "encompasses the discourse that addresses hip-hop's status as a culture that has deep and resonating traditions, rather than as a commodity" (McLeod, 172). When hip-hop culture is positioned as a road to financial success and fame on *Show Me the Money* instead of a culture whose roots require understanding and a cherished legacy, it is presented as a transient commodity for public consumption whose context and history can be bracketed.

Forging Koreanness in *Gukhip*

The term *Gukhip* was not consolidated and frequently used until the last two seasons of *Show Me the Money*. In previous seasons, *Show Me the Money* used terms such as the hip-hop scene in South Korea. *Gukhip*, with the word *Guk* evoking the meaning of nation or country, reflects the tendency to insert Koreanness onto the hip-hop scene and distinguish South Korean hip-hop from hip-hop in other countries. Without going into the argument whether national boundaries exist for cultural forms, I argue that explicitly using the terms such as *Gukhip* and *K-hip hop* in music competition TV shows sets the expectations for contestants that they should display or perform Koreanness. What Koreanness entails would be discussed in further details in the second chapter. When media companies, including broadcasting networks, magazines, and

even online sites use such terms, they are crafting and evoking at the same time an image of South Korean hip-hop that is uniquely Korean and associated with other Korean cultural forms such as K-pop and K-drama. All these cultural forms are in dialogue with each other and concomitantly define what Koreanness is. Hamilton receives a similar message from his discussions with Garion, a prominent South Korean rapper. Garion says, “K-rappers are on a quest to pave out a Koreanness through rap music” (Hamilton, 138). Hamilton argues that when “K-rappers elude discussions of race, they fail to adequately decouple Blackness from rap in ways that prime rap for creatively reconstructing Koreanness outside of racial effects” (Hamilton, 136). I take a step further and argue that the notion of Koreanness is highly fluid in the neoliberal mediascape and what it entails changes correspondingly with its context. The quest for locating a definitive notion of Koreanness through rap music would be arduous, if not impossible.

Chapter 2: Localization and Globalization

As discussed in the first chapter, hip-hop in South Korea has experienced the process of localization and is currently undergoing a phase of "cultural reterritorialization" (Um, 51). By reframing hip-hop culture in the South Korean context and situating *Gukhip* in the broader Korean music industry, musicians and media outlets cast Koreanness onto *K-hip hop* and reconstruct what Koreanness can entail in the transnational and globalized mediascape.

Although the term *Gukhip* and *K-hip hop* are used interchangeably by media outlets and individual users on social media to designate similar content, it is important to differentiate the specific audiences that use the specific term and the scope of each term. While the holistic term *K-hip hop* can be used to refer to any aspects of hip-hop culture in South Korea including break dancing, rap music, and DJing, *Gukhip* is more confined to hip-hop music. *Gukhip* is mainly used by domestic fans in South Korea whereas *K-hip hop* is more of a general term employed by international fans to designate hip-hop music from South Korea and differentiate the music from K-pop. In this thesis, I am using the two terms interchangeably given the focus on hip-hop music. But I am also intentional in using the term K-hip hop to give attention to its global impact and the international audience media companies are targeting when promoting Korean hip-hop content.

K-hip hop, promoted by nationally televised competition shows and circulated on social media platforms with YouTube being the biggest disseminator, has attracted a substantial number of international fans. A considerable number of international YouTubers such as NunReacts and Higher Faculty also engage with Korean hip-hop through reacting to and commenting on *K-hip hop* related contents which sometimes leads to further monetization. Mnet has also successfully exported the TV format of *Show Me the Money* to other Asian countries

including Thailand (2018) and Vietnam (2020). While *K-hip hop* enjoys international fame, media giants with Mnet taking the lead accelerate the agenda of inserting Koreanness onto *K-hip hop*. In this chapter, I will discuss how Koreanness is represented in *K-hip hop* through a close analysis of the music competition program *Show Me the Money*. By gleaning the complicated construct of Koreanness represented on TV, I argue that the standards regarding who should be categorized as a "K-rapper" and who is eligible to represent Korean hip hop are highly fluid and constantly changing depending on the respective context and the specific audience it is addressing. For the international audience *Show Me the Money* appeals to, Koreanness is an attribute that makes *K-hip hop* more desirable and accessible given the existing popularity of K-pop.

Before diving into the discussion of what Koreanness entails in *K-hip hop*, I find it necessary to discuss how hip-hop was localized in the first place and continues to transform itself in relationship to the wider Korean music scene. Such discussion entails the initial public reception of hip-hop in South Korea, artists' efforts in localizing the genre, and the motivation behind certain approaches to localize hip-hop.

Glocalization of Hip-Hop in South Korea

In *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the USA*, Tony Mitchell uses the framework of "glocalization" to situate the spread of hip-hop outside of USA by referring specifically to the hip-hop scene in Japan (Mitchell, 12). In *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction*, Victor Roudometof interprets glocalization as "globalization refracted through the local" (Roudometof, 65). Such a framework is conducive to understanding the dynamic between globalization of hip-hop as a universal music language and the localization of hip-hop realized through

appropriations of rap and hip-hop within "different social, cultural, and ethnic contexts" (Mitchell, 10). The globalization framework falls short of recognizing the local forces in appropriating and adapting global cultural forms. Applying the glocalization framework to understand the South Korean case is reasonable because hip-hop is localized there during the 1990s, the peak era of hip-hop globalization, and its localization process is heavily related to the then South Korean sociocultural context.

Hip-hop music was and continues to be localized in South Korea in terms of the language in which one raps, the lyrical content, its visual manifestations in performance and music videos, and its position in the wider music industry. Although the use of English words and Western cultural markers by groups in Korea are read as an effort to "demonstrate their authenticity" (Morelli, 253), the fusion of English and Korean lyrics, and moreover, the dominant usage of Korean lyrics, is a major step to localize the genre. Rappers such as Olltii go further to claim that "what makes Korean hip hop Korean is simply the language" (Song, 34). Although such a claim does not stand when examining Korean diaspora artists rapping in English and other languages, it reflects the importance of the Korean language as a marker of localization.

What also separates Korean hip-hop from hip-hop in other countries is the unique topics the sociocultural context prompts artists to address in their lyrics. Different from being a device for the marginalized to speak against oppression and racial inequality, the lyrics of hip-hop music in South Korea concern itself greatly with the societal stress the youth faces, "Confucian values and idioms," and stories of personal success (Song, 37). Although commercialized global hip-hop music also greatly influences the lyrical topics in the South Korean music scene such as sex, flexing, and dissing, there are certainly some topics that are either taboo or absent in the larger societal context that South Korean rap music does not address such as drugs and guns. The

circulation of hip-hop content in Korea is also not free from governmental regulations and censorship. Aside from the entrenched social taboos on swearing and tattoos that are still strictly banned on television, sensitive lyrics in rap songs are subject to censorship. Critique of government and social issues are not welcomed by the state, as evident from the censorship imposed on Seo Taiji and Boys' song *Sidaeyugam* (1995) and rapper Tablo's account of being censored for their lyrics that are critical of social issues (Anderson, 126).

Localization of hip-hop music in South Korea is a highly visual-oriented process as great emphasis is put on fashion and dance movements. Starting from the incorporation of hip-hop elements in Seo Taiji and Boys' musical performance, hip-hop fashion, hairstyles, and dance serve as both authenticators for artists and ways for the general audience to engage in hip-hop culture. Song cites rapper Naachal and the Quiett's answers in explaining that "Korea's acceptance of hip hop is largely tied to the circulation and consumption of hip hop as fashion" (Song, 16). It reflects how hip-hop culture is commercially localized and reduced to material signifiers for public consumption. More recently, hip-hop artists have also made conscious efforts to incorporate Asian, especially Korean, aesthetics and traditional iconography in music videos to further localize the genre even though the visual image is oftentimes completely irrelevant to or peripheral to the lyrical content. In this way, hip-hop is taken out from its racial iconographic history and used as a vehicle to celebrate Asian identity and Koreanness.

The complicated relationship between South Korean hip-hop and K-pop music also exemplifies how the media industry attempts to situate hip-hop in the wider music scene. Although the tension between the real underground hip-hop and hyper visible idol K-pop music persists, the distinctions between the two categories have grown increasingly blurry not only because the two music industries are co-dependent on each other in terms of collaboration and

sharing the same producers, but also because the South Korean hip-hop industry has adopted much of K-pop's industrial practice including televisional promotion, social media branding, and engagement with fans. It should be noted that both K-pop and K-hip hop cite and appropriate African American music elements as well as industrial practice of creating entertainment business.

The categorization of K-hip hop and K-pop is also dependent on the specific audience it is addressing. Noted by Hae-kyung Um in *The Poetics of Resistance and Politics of Crossing Borders: Korean Hip-Hop and 'Cultural Reterritorialisation'*, K-hip hop is situated under the K-pop umbrella when addressing the global audience as "the Korean music industry in collaboration with the state has been promoting hip-hop as part of K-pop globally" (Um, 61). Although hip-hop does not enjoy as much visible governmental support as K-pop does, government agencies such as Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) have initiated projects that "include the fusion of Korean hip-hop with other performing arts of Korea" (Um, 61). The Mu:CON, a global music convention hosted by KOCCA that focuses on "promoting K-pop to international markets" (John, 2021), and Hallyu CON, a concert hosted by the Korean Cultural Center UK to promote the Korean wave, have featured hip-hop artists such as Woo Jin Young and Moti. The Korea Tourism Organization has also collaborated with K-hip hop musicians on producing tourism advertising content. From the government perspective, Korean hip-hop is considered part of Korean creative content and should be promoted as part of *Hallyu*, the Korean Wave, alongside with K-pop, K-drama, and K-food. Non-governmental organizations such as Korea Hiphop Culture Association has also engaged in defining and promoting K-hip hop that is not rap music-oriented by hosting massive dance festivals including "K-hip hop Avengers".

Localization of hip-hop culture in South Korea is a multifaceted and complicated process that involves different players including the artists, audience, leaders in the music and broadcasting industry, and government agencies. In *Industrial Hip Hop against the Hip Hop Industry: The Critical Noise of XXX*, Pil Ho Kim and Wonseok Lee argue that hip hop in Korea is "localized within a national–or nationalist–framework" (Kim and Lee, 192). However, such claim neglects the nuanced motivations behind localization strategies deployed by different players. I argue that the national-or nationalist-framework is more of a recent cultural branding strategy adopted by the broadcasting industry and the government agencies to promote K-hip hop as a part of Korean creative content to the global audience. However, early efforts of localization led by individual artists in the hip-hop scene mainly aimed at adapting the foreign music genre for local audience taste. Since the start of the localization process, artists have been searching for a balance point between authenticating their music as hip-hop by appropriating Black aesthetics and locating Koreanness in hip-hop music to appeal to the local audience without being attached to negative perceptions of Black communities that has been circulated in the Korean society.

In Song's interview with rapper Naachal of Garion, we can gain a peek into how the Korean society perceived hip-hop in the 1990s when it first emerged. As told by Naachal, "this was right after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, so it was a time when Korean's perceptions of Black people were the worst", the existing stereotype of hip hop as "black-gangster-music" and the worsening perception of Black people due to the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest not only led to the mistreatment of hip-hop artists by other musicians in South Korea, but it also casted hip-hop in a negative light (Song, 15). Aside from the indirect impact on treatment of hip-hop artists located in Korea, the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest directly influenced rap music produced by

the Korean diaspora artists. As Mina Yang documents in *After Sa-i-ku: Korean American Hip-Hop since the Rodney King Uprising*, the music made by hip-hop artists of the Korean diaspora since 1992 "mirrors and expresses many of the tensions operative in the Rodney King uprising, the racial politics of hip-hop, and the coming of age of 1.5 and second-generation Korean Americans" (Yang, 126). Robert Hamilton also noticed the downplay of the role of the US military bases in influencing Korea's early rap scene as he argues that association of the influx of hip-hop culture with Black soldiers and US bases "might be a source of contention for the national psyche" (Hamilton, 131).

To make hip-hop culture culturally acceptable and relatable to the South Korean audience without evoking associations with racial stereotypes of African Americans, artists strategically modified hip-hop culture by focusing on its urban characteristics and fashionable visuals while avoiding explicit reference to the hip-hop's racial history. During the process, artists appropriate black aesthetics by wearing gold chains and stylish hip-hop garments. It is also noted that even hip-hop fashion was "adapted and mixed for local tastes to create what is termed a 'clean version' for middle-class clients" (Um,55). Aside from appropriating black urban aesthetics, artists filled the lyrics with students' rebellious stories against the education system, youth culture, and romantic love stories to attract local audiences. Preceding the incorporation of traditional Asian or South Korean iconography in music videos, earlier hip-hop labels such as Master Plan Production have used adaptions of traditional Korean folk paintings as their CD covers to experiment blending hip-hop aesthetics with South Korean traditional art.

Although negative perceptions of hip-hop music as unhealthy and inappropriate persist in the South Korean society, hip-hop culture has been gradually detached from its racial heritage as hip-hop artists avoid discussions on race and instead venture into locating Koreanness in their

music. At the same time, the broadcasting industry as well as other media forms such as webtoons and films have participated in shaping the discourse around what K-hip hop is and how hip-hop can fit into a "Korean" story. In the following section, I would examine the construction of Koreanness in *Show Me the Money* by looking into the portrayal of foreign and Korean diaspora contestants. I also analyze the narrative of *Sunset in My Hometown* to exemplify how hip-hop culture can be blended into a melodramatic story of Korean youth. Similar tactics are utilized in character development by producers in *Show Me the Money* to make the once-rebellious rappers appear more acceptable to the general audience as pious daughters or sons.

Reconstructing Koreanness in *Show Me the Money*

Show Me the Money has boasted its contribution to popularizing hip-hop culture in South Korea. Yet, despite the show being long-running and maintaining modest ratings as a cable network program, it has received backlash for misleading editing to attract viewership, unreasonable battle settings, and was even punished by the Korean Communication Standards Commission (KCSC) for its showing of swearing and obscene language.

Show Me the Money has a wide pool of contestants in terms of age, gender, and nationalities. However, its categorization of foreign contestants can be confusing. While the Korean diaspora could easily pass as "Korean" for their looks regardless of their nationalities, the "foreign-looking" contestants who come from U.S. and other foreign countries are collectively put into the category of "foreigners" and are oftentimes edited together to make an individual sequence. By emphasizing the presence of foreign-looking contestants, the producers consciously make a distinction between Korean hip-hop and hip-hop, while at the same time these contestants prove the global appeal of Korean hip-hop. For example, the first episode of the tenth season tried to show the diverse composition of the contestants by compiling scenes that

depict women, men, adults, children, contestants in costumes, and lastly foreigners. Although none of the foreign contestants explicitly said, “I love *Show Me the Money*”, such feature captioning was inserted in the scene with one female foreign contestant waving directly at the camera. It is important to distinguish feature caption in South Korean TV programs from regular subtitles that only serve to transcribe audio description. Feature captions are texts that pop, flow, or land on the image in specific moments. The content of the texts could be either direct transcription of important quotes made by casts on the show, or they could be descriptive or responsive messages inserted in post-production. The caption “I love *Show Me the Money*” belongs to the latter category. Captions generated in the post-production serve the function of emphasizing major themes or convey emotions, thus are important to incorporate into scene analysis.

Proficiency in Korean is oftentimes added as a factor of judging when it comes to foreign contestants. Incompetence in the language or unclear pronunciation leads to the immediate elimination of the contestant no matter how skillful their rapping is. For foreign contestants to transgress their foreign looks to perform Koreanness, they are expected to show language capability in Korean or at least willingness to learn the language. Koreanness, in this case, is mainly manifested in the usage of Korean language. On the other hand, Koreanness is more complicated to define and pinpoint when showcasing contestants of the Korean diaspora. It can be found in their Korean ethnicity, the physical place where rappers advance their music careers, and their Korean looks. They occupy a gray middle ground where they are expected to validate foreignness of their nationalities but also embody a greater extent of Koreanness than foreign-looking contestants.

When it comes to contestants of the Korean diaspora, mainly Korean Americans and Chosŏnjok (ethnic Koreans in China), *Show Me the Money* tames their otherness by either only showing where they come from or shifting the emphasis onto their other identities such as children, idol, or established rapper overseas. For example, in the first episode of *SMTM777*, D.Ark, a 15-year old Chosŏnjok contestant, is asked if he lived abroad before coming to Korea. His answer of having resided in China for an extended period without mentioning his Chinese citizenship minimizes the foreignness of his Chinese nationality. Rather, the selective depiction of his transnational experience shifts the focus onto his Korean ethnicity and his proficiency in three languages. Similarly, when it comes to introducing Nafla, a Korean American rapper who graduated from the University of South California and then became the champion of the season, *Show Me the Money* positions him as an ethnic Korean rapper from LA without mentioning his complete upbringing in the United States before coming to South Korea to compete on the show. It is interesting that one of the judges, Deepflow, says "He is the best K-rapper" while the subtitles appear as "He is the best rapper in *Show Me the Money*". This intentional change in post-production confined the scope of mainstream Korean hip-hop scene to the one shown through the *SMTM*, thus marking itself as the ultimate gatekeeper and arbiter of K-hip hop.

The designation of "Korean contestants" is also fluid and subject to change depending on how the show situates them. Junoflo, a Korean American contestant based in LA who participates in both the fifth season and the sixth seasons, is labelled as an American contestant in the fifth season but categorized as a Korean contestant in the following season. SMTM5 hosts its first global audition in LA and invites Timbaland to be on the judging panel. Junoflo, along with four other contestants, are selected to fly to Korea to compete with the Korean contestants. Although he gets eliminated after the first major round in Korea, his rapping skills are

acknowledged and praised by the Korean contestants as filled with American Hip-hop vibes. In the following season, *SMTM6* hosts the second global audition in New York and invites Swizz Beatz, a record producer and rapper from New York, to be the judge. Before Swizz Beatz judges the contestants in New York, he is asked to evaluate a few Korean contestants through watching their first preliminary round video. Junoflo, signed with a Korean records label after the fifth season and now located in Seoul, is the first contestant shown to Swizz Beatz. In such case, contestants are designated to be either an "American rapper" or a "Korean rapper" according to the physical place they attend the auditions regardless of other factors. Such categorization is reflective of the grouping of rappers in the broader music scene.

In the fifth season where Junoflo first appears, he is solely characterized as an "American" contestant who enjoys Korean hip hop and has some experience living in Korea because of his studying abroad in Yonsei University, one of the most prestigious universities in South Korea. Initially introduced to the Korean audience as a rapper from the United States, Junoflo embodies the freshness and attractiveness of the West Coast which Korean audiences previously had limited exposure. His constant shoutouts to the West Coast, the westside "W" hand symbol which later became popular among South Korean hip hop fandom, and even his *gyopo* (the Korean term to designate mainly Korean American) hairstyle are deemed as cool, fashionable, and desirable to imitate. Junoflo, similar to other Korean American contestants that appear in *Show Me the Money* such as Flowsik, Nafla, and pH-1, is able to authenticate himself as a rapper because of his upbringing in Los Angeles and early exposure to hip hop culture in the United States, where hip hop was born.

In the following season in which Junoflo has already garnered quite a following among the South Korean hip hop fandom and the wider audience because of his rapping skills and his

visual appeal, the producers of *Show Me the Money* and Junoflo himself make conscious efforts to orient his characterization around Koreanness or continuous efforts to "obtain" Koreanness. In the second episode of *SMTM6,* for example, Junoflo introduces himself to the judges as well as the audience as "from 714 (the area code of California where he was born), currently the representative of *Uijeongbu*", (a city north of Seoul where Junoflo now resides along with his Feel Ghood Music label) (Mnet TV, 2017). Right before the first major stage in SMTM6, Junoflo is asked by one of the judges, rapper Dok2, to fill in the song with as much Korean lyrics as possible. The adept usage of the Korean language in writing lyrics can help Korean American rappers like Junoflo better communicate the content of the song to the South Korean audience, thus attenuating his foreignness as well as winning compassion among the audience. To further close the gap between his Korean American identity and the Koreanness he is expected to perform or embody, the episode showcases him visiting his grandfather, who is a Korean national still living in South Korea. Such intentional introduction of Junoflo's family member is an act to locate Koreanness in his ethnic identity and portray him as a proud grandson of a Korean citizen succeeding in both California and Seoul. When scholar Ji-Hyun Ahn discusses the appeal of Daniel Henney, a transnational white (bi-racial) Korean American celebrity, she argues that his "metrosexual masculinity stands out in the transnational production and consumption of his image" (Ahn, 114). Metrosexual, first coined by Mark Simpson (2002), refers to "a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are" (Simpson, 2002). In a similar fashion, Junoflo's metrosexual attributes expressed through his educational background in both UC San Diego and Yonsei University, chic hip hop apparels, and attractive visual appearance are being magnified and even fetishized on TV. Such fetishizing attitudes of the

South Korean audience are confirmed in the display of netizens' comments on *Show Me the Money*, such as the comment on the charisma of his rap, voice, and even his mole.

Interestingly, the distinction between Korean hip-hop and foreign hip-hop is often brought up by contestants who are native Koreans to either set themselves apart from Korean American contestants or to call them out as inauthentic. In the third episode of Season 6, Simba Zawadi, a native Korean rapper, is matched with Korean American rapper Junoflo to compete against each other on the same track. Simba Zawadi claims that he would show what real Korean hip-hop is and asks Junoflo to get a flavor of Korean hip-hop. By making such statements, Simba Zawadi denies the Koreanness in Junoflo's rapping despite his ability to rap in Korean, at least partially. Korean American rappers are also discredited as inauthentic and imitative if they do not speak fluent or "correct" English. During the diss battle in Season 8, rapper Punchnello points out that Yunhway has grammar mistakes in her lyrics despite having worked as an English tutor and grown up in Portland. In Season 7's diss battle, South Korean rapper Superbee accuses Loopy, a LA-based Korean American rapper, of imitating a Korean American and ridicules on his inability to understand English. Superbee's denial of Loopy being a Korean American is mainly because Loopy was born in South Korea but immigrated to the States, and he is not as fluent in English as a South Korean would expect an American to be. It then raises the question of whether fluency in English is a prerequisite to be considered and accepted as American. It is certain that rappers tend to exaggerate facts in diss battle to deride their opponents, the tactics deployed by both Punchnello and Superbee reflect the common expectation that English language fluency should be one authenticator of being American. In Yunhway's case, her usage of African American vernacular English is considered grammatically incorrect by Punchnello, whose exposure to English is mainly through learning standard English in South Korean schools.

To draw a conclusion, Koreanness is a fluid construct when used to make contestants from foreign countries appear more approachable to the national audience. However, there are different degrees of Koreanness expected from the contestants depending on their looks and ethnic heritage. Thus, it is nearly impossible to define a clear-cut definition of Koreanness for *K-hip hop*, or *Gukhip*.

Telling a "Korean" story through hip-hop

In discussing the localization of hip-hop in Japan, Ian Condry argues that "in the effort to show that something like hip-hop in Japan 'really is Japanese' in some sense, [artists] risk underplaying the mutual construction of the global and the local" (Condry, 17). If locating Koreanness in K-hip hop is difficult to achieve because of the fluidity of Koreanness and the inherent hybridity of Korean hip-hop music in terms of its origin and production process, it presents creators in the media industry with another alternative of localization: telling a "Korean" story through hip-hop. Such strategy can manifest in different forms including creating tourism promotion music videos by incorporating Korean hip-hop music, using rappers as protagonists in Korean films and webtoons, and producing hip-hop themed variety shows. Through these media productions that selectively use hip-hop elements in storytelling, creatives outside of the immediate hip-hop community participate in the discourse of shaping Koreanness in K-hip hop and complicating the question of authenticity since hip-hop functions only as a peripheral component in the content creation. Although one may use the rhetoric of "cultural hybridization" to frame such usage of hip-hop elements in service of other media productions, I argue that such usage often runs the risk of taking hip-hop culture completely outside of its racial context, repeating stereotypes of hip-hop culture, and overgeneralizing or misrepresenting the

hip-hop scene in South Korea. In this section, I examine the narrative around hip-hop culture, particularly rappers of no fame, in the fictional film *Sunset in My Hometown*.

Aside from music competition shows, the appearance of hip-hop culture in South Korean mass media can be most frequently spotted in television dramas, films, and variety shows. *Hip Hop Teacher*, a mini-series drama aired on cable television JTBC in 2017, depicts how a former underground hip-hop artist Gong Seul Ki (*Lee Joo-young)* creates a hip-hop class in an elementary school along with a newly hired unconventional contract English teacher (*Yura*). *The King of Hip-Hop – Nassnagil*, a coming-of-age drama aired on terrestrial broadcaster SBS in 2019, tells a story of how an 18-year-old high school student Young Baek (*Hoya*) strives to become a rapper. Almost coincidently, both dramas cast K-pop idols (*Yura, Hoya*) who rap in their groups. The uncomfortable relationship between K-pop and hip hop has been pointed by Song in *Idol Rapper: K-Pop and the Production of Authenticity*, and one of the reasons behind such tension is because some idol rappers in K-pop groups "had no other choice than to take that position because they cannot sing or dance" (Song, 129). Thus, they sometimes refrain from labelling them as rappers, but instead they refer to themselves as "in charge of rapping". However, the question of authenticity seems to be suspended in fictional TV dramas when K-pop idols perform the role of rappers. Hip-hop culture debuts on big screens in South Korea through the feature film *The Beats Goes on* (Byun Sung-hyun, 2010) which centers around three friends who aspire to become rap stars by rising from the underground music scene. *Sunset in My Hometown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2018) tells the journey of an unsuccessful rapper Haksu (Park Jeong-min) returning to his hometown. Although both films starred actors that have no background in hip-hop, they invited and casted well-known hip-hop artists in the film such as Defconn, Dok2, The Quiett, and Mad Clown. In *Sunset in My Hometown*, the competition program *Show Me the*

Money is explicitly referenced and used as a pressing narrative drive. In hip-hop themed variety shows such as *The Tribe of Hip-Hop* (2016-2017, JTBC) and *Universe Hipsters* (2020, JTBC), well-known hip-hop artists are casted and invited to introduce non-rappers including grandmother figures and ballad singers to hip-hop culture and transform them into rappers. Although variety shows aim at providing light entertainment, they provide valuable insights to how South Korean media shape hip-hop culture in a localized way for a wider audience. I chose the film *Sunset in My Hometown* to examine how hip-hop functions in a Korean melodrama not only because the explicit reference to *Show Me the Money* reflects the societal response to television representation of hip-hop culture, but it also raises interesting questions about authenticating and reframing hip-hop music in a fictional story.

Centering Rap as a Creative Expression in *Sunset in My Hometown*

Sunset in My Hometown (Lee Joon-ik, 2018) tells the story of an aspiring rapper who struggles with his music career in Seoul, goes back to his hometown, and resolves his frustration with his shameful past, particularly with his dying father. As the last film in the director's youth trilogy, it is not random that the film chooses a rapper to be the occupation for the protagonist, Hak-su. In an interview with the director, Lee reveals that the choice of having Hak-su as a rapper aims to convey the story of youth in a more effortless but ebullient way, and it would be more relatable to the target audience of young people who are also struggling just like Hak-su. The story makes an implicit parallel between Hak-su's experience in poetry writing and writing rap lyrics as similar forms of creative expression to convey one's feelings and narrate personal stories.

At the beginning of the film, we hear a voice introducing Hak-su as a rapper under the MC name Simbuck before we even see Hak-su walking towards the club stage. Rather than introducing Hak-su with any of his songs as one would expect, he is described as the rapper who continuously auditions for the popular hip-hop competition program *Show Me the Money* despite that he never succeeds in making to the major round. Later in the film we also see Hak-su passing the first and second round of the audition, but unfortunately failed again at the third round as he could not suppress his own emotional burden when asked to perform with the keyword "mother". Throughout the film, *Show Me the Money* appears in conversations between Hak-su and his old hometown friends. The film also ends with Hak-su's special performance on the show as the most requested rapper via online poll.

The film's direct reference to *Show Me the Money* and the intentional replication of the show by casting well-known rappers who have served as judges on the show and creation of similar studio settings does not only add a realistic touch to the film, but it also reflects common struggles of being a rapper in South Korea. Rappers like Hak-su can be recognized on the streets in Seoul by the average audience member and even have a fan base, but they can barely make a living as a rapper and must work multiple side jobs to support their daily expenses and music career. During Hak-su's opening performance in the club, the film cuts back and forth between Hak-su disseminating business cards as a hip-hop instructor, working at the counter of a convenience store, and writing lyrics at a bus stop as well as in his tiny room in a *Goshiwon*, a kind of cheap dormitory in South Korea where students stay temporarily to study for exams. Hak-su's financial instability forms a sharp contrast with other contestants shown in the film who might be financially dependent on their families and are able to make music without worrying about the meager income as a rapper.

In the scene where Hak-su is teased for auditioning for the show for five years, the other two newbie rappers, wearing beats headphones and stylish accessories, are clearly more affluent than Hak-su, who moves to Seoul on his own to establish his music career. The film subtly points to the reality of the South Korean hip-hop scene where most rappers come from a middle-class background and are drawn to the genre for its seeming coolness. In the same scene, the new newbie rappers greet Hak-su in a cringy way by saying "Simbuck hyung, what up man" and attempting to do a shoulder bump which Hak-su rejects. While Hak-su neglects their pretentious insults, his friend in a gray hoodie and yellow cap responds with a mixture of hip-hop slangs and a Korean word that rhymes with "sucker". These superficial actions that rappers pick up to make themselves seem to have swag demonstrates how hip-hop culture is presented and circulated by media in the South Korean society. Hip-hop culture is reduced to slangs, gestures, and fashion that rappers and fans can pick up without knowing what meanings they entail.

While Hak-su clearly presents himself as a rapper regardless of the side jobs he works to pay the bill, people around him including his hometown friends reject the notion of rapper as an occupation. After Hak-su bumps into his three hometown friends in Seoul, they go to a restaurant to catch up. Right after the friend sitting across table says that he has seen Hak-su on TV, another friend expresses his disbelief that Hak-su is physically appealing enough to be on TV. Although the three friends have all seen *Show Me the Money*, they could not recall the name of the program and clearly have no idea what hip-hop is. When describing the show, they refer to rappers whose names they could not rightfully pronounce, and rapping is perceived as rambling in English with expressive hand gestures. Rather amused than annoyed, Hak-su chuckles at his friends' ignorance and continues to slurp the soup. Similarly, in the scene where Hak-su is asked for his occupation after being mistaken as the suspect of a phishing scam, the police officers are

not familiar with the word “rapper” and mistake it for “wrapper” due to the identical pronunciation. These scenes are reflections of the public perception (or a lack of knowledge) of rappers in the South Korean society.

Both demonstrated in the film and in the real-world music scene, hip-hop culture is dominantly attached with urban appeals. In South Korea, the hip-hop scene remains a Seoul-centric construct with hip-hop artists and studios clustering in the capital. In *Regional Hip Hop and the Seoul Metropole: A Case Study of Underground Hip Hop in Gwangju*, Amos Farooqi explains that “bereft of both educational and economic opportunities in provincial cities and heavily influenced by media institutions agglomerated in Seoul, Korean youth in provincial areas are instilled from a young age with ambitions of moving to the capital city” (Farooqi, 213). The economic and cultural divide between the metropolitan Seoul and provincial cities and counties is recognizable and implied in the film. Haksu’s hometown *Byeonsan* is located in Buan County, a rural area in North Jeolla Province where a lot of young people move north to Seoul for better economic opportunities. Although the democratization of technology and the prevalence of cable television across the country make hip-hop related content equally accessible to people residing in rural areas, claiming one’s occupation as a rapper is a novel and somewhat foreign idea confined in the metropolitan space of Seoul. That explains why Haksu’s hometown friends and the police officers in Byeon-san cannot fully understand what a rapper does and the financial prospect of becoming a rapper, whereas the average audience in Seoul can recognize Haksu on the street such as the middle-aged car owner at the beginning of the film. It is also interesting that the clothing Hak-su wears throughout the film also hints at his financial instability in the neo-liberalistic economic system. In a sharp contrast with his friends who wear clothes that are distinct to their occupations or white-collar attire such as shirts with tie, Hak-su is alienated from

the structured nine-to-five labor system. Ironically, the hip-hop fashion that Hak-su wears to authenticate himself as a rapper could be misunderstood and associated with illegal activities. Such reading into hip-hop fashion as depicted in the film is coherent with the stereotypical impressions of rappers being rebellious youngsters causing trouble to the society through illegal or tabooed behaviors such as acting violently, abusing drugs, and not conforming to societal norms.

Narrative metaphors and visual symbolism are intertwined throughout the film to convey emotions and signify major changes in character development. Hak-su's baseball cap does not only authenticate his identity as a rapper, but the intentional choices of either wearing it or taking it off in different scenes are symbolic of Hak-su's facing his shameful past and deciding to act "consistently" as his love interest Seon-mi encourages him. When Hak-su is in Seoul, his wearing of baseball cap is more of a performative authenticator in spaces such as the club and the studio where he auditions for *Show Me the Money*. In the same vein, most judges for the second round, who interestingly are actual judges in the competition show, use sunglasses, baseball caps, and bucket hats as elements of hip-hop fashion. After Hak-su returns to his hometown where he no longer needs to verify his rapper identity, the baseball cap serves more as a metaphor of a defense mechanism against his father and Yong-dae, a now member of Kkangpae (street gang in South Korea) who Hak-su who used to bully in school.

Loosely categorized as a drama film, *Sunset in My Hometown* incorporates various elements that are frequently spotted in melodrama films. Not to mention that the storyline revolves around nostalgic youth romance, the film is imbued with long takes of the sunset scenery in Byeonsan and slow-paced scenes with heightened emotions and both diegetic and non-diegetic music. Dissanayake notes the difference of positioning the self in relations to the

family between Western melodramas and their Asian counterparts by explaining that "in Western melodramas it is the individual self in relation to family that is explored, whereas in Asian melodramas it is the familial self that is the focus of interest" (Dissanayake, 4). Aligned with this claim, *Sunset in My Hometown* gives most spotlight of Haksu's struggling with his unhappy family history by showing how he comes to terms with his father and fulfills his familial responsibility by transforming into a pious son. In this way, his identity as a rapper is pushed to a peripheral attribute that only serves to progress the narrative and adds to his journey of becoming a pious son and a loving husband. In *Christmas in August and Korean Melodrama*, Darcy Paquet also explains the aesthetic choices deployed in Korean Melodrama films by referring to the cinematography in *Christmas in August* (Hur Jin-ho, 1998). "Suffused with a sort of warm glow", the film also insists on "minimal camera movements" which evoke "in many ways the stillness of photography" (Paquet, 50). Similar to *Christmas in August*, *Sunset in My Hometown* adopts soft lighting in most of its scenes and fills emotional scenes with stillness. For example, in the scene where Seon-mi and Haksu watch the sunset together, the camera refrains from showing the protagonists in the front but captures them from the back by focusing on the whole landscape with the glowing sun gradually sinking into the sea. The extended stillness of the shot almost resembles an oil painting without a definitive center. Fusing hip-hop music and such melodramatic cinematic style might seem incoherent and awkward, but it works well in this film as rap music with slow bpm serves as diegetic music in the scenes where Haksu moves with the camera closely following his movement on stage, in a car, down the stairs, and in a neighborhood. In this way, rap music functions similarly as cinematography to creatively express the mood of the film and the characters' interiority without explicitly putting them into dialogue.

The film's portrayal of rap music can be seen as an effort to localize the foreign genre in the South Korean society. As scholar Robert Hamilton points up in *Shadow Representations: 8-Mili' Identity and De-Blacking Rap Music*, the film "legitimate[s] and promote[s] a disregard of the Black man's burden that is embedded in rap music" by shifting the focus onto conditional blue-collar struggles of the young people in the South Korean society (Hamilton, 134). Considering the target audience of the film to be mainly South Koreans in their 20s and 30s, one might find such critique to be out of place. But I argue that such cinematic presentation of hip-hop is an extension of the colorblind TV producing and watching prevalent in South Korea, as well as a continuation of neglecting the racialized legacy of hip-hop which already permeates the South Korean hip-hop scene. Such neglect of racial history embedded in hip-hop culture and the plain characterization of rapping as a commercial product in the film results in the lack of motivation that drives Hak-su to choose rapper as his occupation. The association between Hak-su's poem writing experience and his identity as a rapper also appears forced and inauthentic given the void of character development, especially when the story falls short of Hak-su's own understanding of the genre and reasoning behind his continuous attempt of auditioning for *Show Me the Money*.

Globalizing K-hip hop Through Global Auditions and Social Media

Given CJ ENM's vision in promoting K-Culture throughout the world, it is no surprise that *Show Me the Money* ventures into the United States by holding global auditions in Los Angeles and New York in the fifth and sixth season. On CJ ENM's homepage, this process is described that "by broadcasting a variety of programs on the music channel Mnet", CJ ENM promotes K-Culture "transcending generations, genres, and languages". *Show Me the Money*

exemplifies how K-hip hop can be appreciated globally even without the ability to understand the Korean language. It is also shown on CJ ENM website that it is "working to accelerate the development of the Korean music industry and its global competitiveness through investment in music labels and planning and production for artists". By holding major shares in three leading hip-hop music labels AOMG, Amoeba Culture, and Higher Music, CJ ENM not only assures the annual music producers' line-up for its hip-hop competition shows, but it also fosters an incestuous circle of a music industry by scouting talents for the music labels, increasing televisual exposure of hip-hop artists, and producing hit songs through competition shows. Although *SMTM* has successfully held three global auditions and exported its television format to other Asian countries, its unwavering focus on monolingualism and one-sided fixation on commercial aspect of hip-hop music have impeded advancement of K-hip hop as a cultural product independent of its origins. In this aspect, I intend to unpack how monolingualism, manifested as the sole focus on Korean language and strategic rejection of English, in *SMTM* impacts the advancement of K-hip hop on the global stage.

Monolingualization, according to Chungjae Lee and Jerry Won Lee, was a technological innovation that "sacrifices the precision of hitherto untranslatable cross-cultural communicative nuance in exchange for the transposability across newly invented, even if imprecise, language categories". They also examine *SMTM* as "a site for the invention of Korean monolingualism" (Lee and Lee, 2021). In multiple rounds of auditions where foreign contestants are unable to speak Korean or demonstrate limited language fluency, they are asked if they would learn and practice rapping in Korean. Such gesture and demand for language fluency in Korean in order to compete in *SMTM* expose an underlying criterion for what can be considered as K-hip hop that one has to rap in Korean regardless of their native language and fluency in Korean. The program

also showcases a love-hate relationship between the usage of Korean and English. Although inappropriate overuse of English in one's rapping is considered inauthentic and faces elimination in auditions, *SMTM* uses popular English rap songs as its opening music sequence and frequent usage of English slangs and phrases in lyrics is accepted. The attempt to use English rap songs to authenticate Korean hip-hop competition shows while strategically rejecting English as being "un-Korean" and inauthentic reflects the strenuous task for *SMTM* and K-hip hop to achieve a balancing point between localizing hip-hop as a globalized cultural form and branding K-hip hop as a unique music entity. Monogualization through disciplining the usage of English and prioritizing Korean is understandable given the vision of Mnet to promote K-Culture. The Korean language is mostly representative of the Korean culture, but it alienates contestants that have limited language capability in Korean including overseas Koreans and foreign contestants. Additionally, it also overshadows people of multicultural families in Korea who may speak different languages than Korean.

As *SMTM* holds global auditions in America, it reaches transnational contestants and audiences by positioning itself as a site of "global hip hop battle". As Song notes, the idea of the "global" in SMTM remains "at introducing Korean American and non-Korean contestants to the show" (Song, 172). The global circulation of K-hip hop is rather mainly conducted through subtitled performance clips and music videos either automatically generated by Mnet's official YouTube channel or self-initiated fan subtitling. It is interesting that Mnet TV adds English subtitles for selective YouTube clips starting from *SMTM8* and onwards. Such gestures reflect an increased consciousness of transnational audience of the show and the need to make K-hip hop content more accessible to global audience in terms of language. While K-hip hop becomes increasingly popular among international audiences, it pushes Korean media outlets and

musicians to consider K-hip hop beyond a technical art form. Song quotes Keith Howard to explain that "Korean musicians would consider it unnecessary to discuss Appadurai's fifth '-scape,' the 'ethnoscape,' at least during the decade under discussion: pop music was Korean because it was produced, performed, and marketed in Korea" (Song, 172). However, as *SMTM* and other media outlets continue to brand K-hip hop as a separate music entity and categorize it as part of "K-Culture", the question of what makes K-hip hop Korean considering the historic origin of the genre and the participation of foreign producers must not be left unpondered.

Chapter 3: Negotiated Masculinity and Gender Representation

"Lady…Baby…"

아 인정 이건 인정 형님 그 비주얼

래퍼 욕한 건 나 인정 ("I admit, this I admit, I cursed you as a visual rapper,)

아니 형 근데 형

형 바른 BB 는 swag 이죠 그치 형 (but is the BB cream that you wear swag?")

These were part of the verse that rapper Woo Wonjae wrote and directed at the opponent rapper Nucksal in the diss battle in *SMTM6*. Having his hair maintained at shoulder's length and curled, Nucksal was being dissed as too feminine on the stage. Prior to Wonjae's part, the female rapper Asol also dissed Nucksal as not manly. She even hinted at the waste of his having a penis by rapping "if you are not using it, give it to me". Throwing a pink and white bikini at Nucksal, Asol shamed Nucksal for having been mimicked as "a female rapper" after being active in the scene for over ten years. This is not the only time in *SMTM* that rappers are dissed as being not masculine or putting on too much emphasis on their appearance. In *SMTM5*, rapper Seo Chul Goo told his good-looking opponent One to participate in *Unpretty Rapstar*, a female hip-hop competition, rather than *SMTM*. In *SMTM9*, confronting rapper chillinhomie, who has his hair dyed blonde and wore stylish accessories, rapper MckDaddy dissed him as not having become a real man and more suitable to be a beauty YouTuber instead of a rapper.

SMTM is a male-dominated competition show without a single female judge after the first two seasons. The hip-hop scene in Korea as well as other countries is presented as a male-preferred playground where the attributes of hardness and aggressive self-expression are ascribed to male rappers. Rapper Since in *SMTM10* became the first female rapper that has ever made it to the final round, moreover, only three female rappers have reached semi-finals over the past ten

seasons. *SMTM* thus presents itself as an extension of the heteronormative society where manhood is defined through cultivating a tough character and grinding work ethic, displaying power through maturity and possession, and embracing one's role as the head of the family in the patriarchal society.

Tough Masculinity as a Constructed Performance

Masculinity, as a set of attributes that have been partially socially constructed, differs across cultures. Even in a homogonous society, manifestations of masculinity vary across age and should be manifold rather than static. However, there exists certain standards or common expectations for men to be socially accepted, especially by other men, such as showcasing strength, competitiveness, independence, and power. In the Korean context, manhood is further defined by serving in the compulsory military which is often described as the "rite of passage". Different from the soft masculinity that has been commonly attached to the image of flower boys in K-pop and K-dramas, and Asian men in general aside from a few like Bruce Lee, male rappers actively reject the female gaze and assert their power by acting cool and spitting out their desires, whether material or sexual ones. Sometimes, rappers boast their virility or show off their intimidating physique against their same-sex opponents.

In *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z,* Miles White argues that it is difficult to read masculinity as performance as "it has largely remained imagined as 'apparently unconstructed'" (White, 23). He also points out that masculinity in hip-hop is dominantly located in the body as "facial expressions are used to telegraph hypermasculinity and ideals of physical and psychic hardness" and rappers self-objectify themselves by wearing "ostentatious jewelry, including expensive chains, earrings, and 'grillz', tattoos, stylized athletic apparel or brand-name urban street wear, as

well as the display of the shirtless torso" (White, 25). For Korean rappers, when they wear grillz and dreadlocks, they are emulating a particular kind of urban black masculinity that they find appealing. By putting on culturally-appropriated hairstyles and accessories, Korean male rappers aspire to present a tougher and somewhat rebellious outlook that set themselves apart from the average white-collar man.

Although the society posits invisible restraints on how men should present themselves and express their emotions, as being sentimental is often labeled as sissified or feminine, rap music offers an arena for male rappers to at least perform their multifaceted masculinity outside of the conventional gender binary as the music itself operates upon emotive narration and self-expression. Given the premise that masculinity should be read as a performance, rap music maximizes the performativity of one's masculinity since it is as much self-directed as it is directed to the audience, if not more self-directed. The posturing, physical presentation, and lyrics delivery all reflect how the rapper wants to be seen. Male rappers in *SMTM* are expected to possess *meot*, a noun whose meaning spans beyond simply visual attractiveness. The term can be used to praise one's chic style, well-built physique, and even manners. When used in the hip-hop context, it is less attached to visual attractiveness as one would when describe a groomed idol but much more associated with one's rapping skills, manners on stage, and proper display of confidence. Although rap music encourages self-empowerment, a fine line still exists between superficial bragging and witty boasting. Such criteria are closely tied to social standards of work ethics that value humility, devotion, and self-improvement. Although humility might seem at odds with hip-hop music in which swag is given priority, it is more of a mindset that encourages open-mindedness, mutual respect, and willingness to challenge oneself. In multiple seasons of *SMTM*, prior judges returned to the show as contestants to either challenge themselves or prove

their abilities. Their courage to be vulnerable to criticism is also praised by the audience as possessing *meot* since it is nearly impossible for seniors to be openly criticized in the Korean hierarchical workplace where age and experience determine social order. Especially in competition shows, the existing hierarchical order of age and experience is replaced with one that is solely dependent on skills and performance.

Although profanity and sexually suggestive gestures are banned on television in Korea, rappers do not refrain from constantly spitting out profane curse words to either express their excitement or assert their dominance over opponents. Although the taboo over female profanity and female rappers' outward flaunting their sexuality have gradually decreased, cursing and hypersexuality are still associated with the male body in which aggressiveness and virility are culturally essentialized. In *SMTM*, male rappers are pushed to act aggressively and become confrontational in battles. Even before rap battles, the show will occasionally host sports competitions to evoke rappers' willingness to win or introduce the rappers to boxing practices to specifically train their mentality. It is in these battles that rappers are exposed to criticism of their characteristics unrelated to music skills. While rappers may still choose to attack their opponents' music ability, many male rappers resort to profane provocation through sexually suggestive gestures and a show of their strength by taking off their shirts or even violently throwing off their microphones. Competing against younger male counterparts, rappers also choose to pick on their cuteness, reliance on mothers, lack of experience in military service, and even unintimidating physique. Such attacks reflect what is ingrained in one's expectation of an ideal male: a young, physically strong, independent, and sexually attractive. He bears social responsibility and holds appropriate moral standards.

In *SMTM8*, the 21-year-old rapper Young B competes against 7-year-older rapper YunB. Young B starts by spraying a red cross on a pre-made plastic board that has an Instagram photo of YunB. Young B started the verse by dissing his decorative muscle that was a mere sham to look fashionable and him being too old to achieve success as a rapper at the age of 28. By addressing his original name instead of rap name, Young B asks his opponent to prepare for marriage. He finishes the rap by spitting out "YunB die" with a gun hand sign directed at Yun B's head in accordance with the gunshot sound in the track. YunB, unshaken by his opponent's provocation, wears a school uniform with the armband that indicates regulation of school discipline. By playing the role of a teacher in school who oversees students' behaviors, YunB implies that he is endowed with the mission to educate Young B, who was accused of school violence before participating in the show. He first walks up to Young B and raps close to Young B's left ear by saying "let's not get hurt". He continues by shaming Young B for pissing in a car after being heavily drunk. With YunB's teammate pulling out a piece of diaper and walking around to show it to the audience, he criticizes Young B's immaturity and improper behavior as an adult. As the audience gets heated up, YunB walks away from his opponent and reminds the audience of Young B's bragging in the last season where he claims that his worth has multiplied 100 times zero. YunB points to Young B and calls him as a stupid head for not knowing zero times 100 still equals zero. Next, YunB makes a pun of the crew name *Dickids* to belittle the size of Young B's reproductive organ. Such a move is to make fun of Young B's ridiculous profane provocation in the last season when he asked his older opponent rapper Ness to "suck his dick" by putting the microphone in between his thighs. Yun B finishes the diss track by throwing away his microphone and punching at a wooden breaking board commonly used in *taekwondo*, a Korean form of martial arts that most Korean boys learn to gain strength. Even after the track has

ended, Yun B takes off his school uniform and raises his fist near Young B's chin as a final provocation. In the uncut version, it is also seen that YunB not only throws the microphone and uniform away, but he also takes off the microphone belt on his waist and kicks the plastic board which Young B earlier sprays off the stage.

Although YunB won the diss battle and was even named "the Ultimate Fighting Champion in K-hip hop", he himself was not pleased with the hard image of a fighter that the audience gave him based on the battle. In a later interview YunB did with the YouTuber series *Show Me the Won*, he expressed that he was angrier at the audience than his opponent because they barely showed any support while cheering loudly for other contestants before the battle. The fact that he was positioned as the underdog and "the only way for him to shine in the show was to win the diss battle" irritated him and he was especially annoyed at the whole industry which places more emphasis on characterization on competition shows rather than one's authentic music (*Show Me the Won*, 2021). In the interview, YunB also comments on having to appeal to an image that the audience ascribes to him and acting almost like a puppet in the TV show. Similar sentiments are also conveyed through the collaboration song Young B and YunB performed right after the diss battle in *SMTM8*, "Truman Show". As Young B and YunB discussed their potential themes for the song, they expressed that the audience expectations for them to act harshly in the show were oppressive. The stereotypical association with appearing muscular and being tough in character can be traced back to popular images of soldiers that promote onefold masculinity that values aggressiveness and tolerates or ignores pain, whether physical or emotional. Such association is further magnified in the imagery of hip-hop which sometimes centers outward expression of intense emotions such as frustration and intimidation. Not only do the contestants feel pressured to perform a certain type of masculinity, but the show

also capitalizes on stereotypical imagery of hip-hop music by selective editing of malicious speech, showing close-ups of emotionless intimidating faces, and focusing on unpleasant interactions between rivals.

Male Relationships as Sites of Negotiating Masculinity

Although *SMTM* tends to capitalize on unfriendly and malicious rivalries between contestants, it is one of the few reality programs in South Korea in which male relationships, particularly cisgender, heterosexual men, are given spotlight. Unlike reality-variety shows such as *The Return of Superman* (2013 –) which positions men as fathers in the traditional familial structure or *2 Days & 1 Night* (2007 –) which brings six men together onto weekly trips, *SMTM* exclusively posits male rappers as individuals in relation to other males, including veteran rappers who occupy the roles of judge and team producer simultaneously as well as fellow contestants. According to the rules of *SMTM*, contestants can perform on stage individually only if they make it to the finals. Before they are given the opportunities to express their own stories in front of the audience, contestants face choosing mentors, team missions, and diss battles in which their performance is ultimately tied to that of the team. Although as previously discussed, the social hierarchy of age and experience in hip-hop competition shows are replaced with one by skills, the hierarchical and unequal relationships between contestants and music producers remained rigidly in place, and the uneasy tensions between seasoned producers and inexperienced contestants were even exaggerated through editing in the third and fifth season.

The mentor-mentee relationship in *SMTM* and *High School Rapper* is modeled after the senior-junior dynamic, oftentimes called as “Sunbae-Hoobae Culture” in South Korea. Although the senior might not be necessarily older than his or her junior, the seniority derives from having

more experience in a certain field. Based on the Confucian tradition of respecting one's elderly, the junior is expected to respect the senior through using honorifics, obeying the senior's instructions, and acting in well-behaved manners. The senior, on the other side, is expected to advise and take care of the junior.

In *SMTM3*, judge and music producer YDG was paired with rapper Iron who ended up winning second place. Iron chose YDG as his mentor out of long-time respect and affection for his music. The relationship between Iron and YDG started out as an affectious one until YDG refused to give supportive guidance before the finalist round. When Iron proposed the song that he would like to perform on stage, YDG complained about having a headache and asked Iron to prepare on his own. The camera cut to close-up of Iron's perplexed facial expressions while YDG's words "prepare on your own" were repeated. Later in the practice room, similar situations occurred when Iron was interrupted by YDG's signature line "prepare on your own" before he could ask for suggestions on the arrangement of the performance. The camera also caught Iron crying out of stress even after having defeated his opponent team. The editing undoubtedly threw shade on YDG by casting him as an unsupportive, aloof, and almost passive-aggressive mentor figure. YDG, not being aware of the emotional harm his behavior had on Iron, responded in the follow-up interview by rationalizing that he was also brought up in an independent way without much attention. His blatant comment that men needed to be nurtured in a tough way corresponds with the stereotypical thinking that men do not need emotional nurturing and toughness should be instilled in their education. YDG's management of Iron turned out to be a controlling one, as he scolded Iron for changing music style without having consulted with him during the preparation stage for semi-finals. Unable to confront YDG who is 13 years older than him, Iron adopted all his suggestions and rationalized YDG's actions in the

interview by speculating that YDG's tough instructions were for his good as excessive praise would otherwise fuel his arrogance.

Similarly, in *SMTM5*, music producer Kush and Zion.T were portrayed as the indifferent mentors in relations to the taciturn rapper Xitsuh who were among the few contestants not matched with any producers in the first-round team selection process. Kush's deliberate giving the cold shoulder to Xitsuh was magnified by the montage of him pouring Xitsuh champagne at last despite sitting closest to Xitsuh, his outward expression of his speculation that Xitsuh would be eliminated in the upcoming team mission, and his not giving Xitsuh any comments in the recording room. While Zion.T was shown comforting Xitsuh by the swimming pool after other team members were dismissed, Kush explained his aloofness to the show producers as his way of making Xitsuh stronger, in another sense, tougher by intentionally neglecting his presence in the team.

Crafting a villain is one of the common tactics used in reality television shows, and it remains unknown to the audience whether the uncomfortable tensions between the team producers and contestants was intentionally created. But YDG's comment on the necessary tough upbringing of men and Kush's reasoning that treating Xitsuh coldly leads to stronger character are reflective of the toxic masculinity that continues to oppress men and women. Both Iron and Xitsuh communicated self-doubt and deprivation of self-confidence to the show producers in individual interviews after being ignored by their team producers. The hierarchical power dynamic between team producers and contestants conjures up the image of aloof and uncaring father figures in Asian parenthood. Using Fraiman's perspective on modern Western masculinity, Sun Jung analyzes the protagonist Dae-Soo in the film *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003), "the social, physical, and psychological isolation that is imposed on Dae-Soo operates as

a driving force for him to construct his transgressive violent masculinity" (Jung, 151). The imposed male vulnerability through emotional distancing results in violent and aggressive masculinity, which is alternatively manifested as powerfulness in *SMTM* stage performance. In the case of YDG and Iron, obedience to older male figures in power without questioning mirrors the strict hierarchy by age and experience in South Korean society. Similarly, the emotional conflict between the father figure and son is also portrayed in *Sunset in My Hometown* in which the uneasy father-son relationship is the major narrative drive and plays a critical role in molding Haksu's passive-aggressive personality. Unlike how black masculine power is performed as a vehicle of resistance against an oppressive American society, masculinity in Korean hip-hop partly operates within in interpersonal relationships, especially relationships between heterosexual males. Even though the intentional emotional distancing is detrimental to one's self-esteem, such behavior is somehow tolerated and legitimized by evoking the ideal masculinity which emphasizes assertiveness and invulnerability.

Despite the overwhelming emphasis on strong and aggressive masculinity *SMTM* displays through creating cruel competitions and intensifying uneasy relationships through intentional editing, it showcases the non-aggressive masculinity through characterizing the male contestants as a filial son or/and a responsible father. By positioning them in relationships with family members and close friends, *SMTM* reinforces the social expectations imposed on men which include embracing the virtue of filial piety and the role of breadwinner in the household. While the contestant's prior endeavor in pursuing their music career could be read as rebellion against family members' expectations as most rappers give up schooling, stable jobs, and better economic prospects, their participation in *SMTM* suddenly becomes a potential alternative route to pay back to their parents, spouse, and children by appearing on television and rising to

stardom. Before semi-finals and final stages, the audience is introduced to intimate interactions between the contestants and their close family members through pre-recorded video, and oftentimes their lyrics center around ambitions of taking good care of the family through financial success. In *SMTM3*, the 35-year-old rapper veteran Vasco confessed his emotional burden as a single dad in the preliminary round. Before the second preliminary round, the show demonstrated his daily routine as a single dad through montages of him caressing his three-year-old son, washing his son's face, and hugging his son on the way to kindergarten. When asked by judge San E why he was participating in *SMTM3*, Vasco responded that his son was the biggest motivation for him to join the show. The same characterization of Vasco as the single dad who tried to win the competition just to buy more delicious food for his young son continued until the semi-final when he ended up winning the third place. Although another team producer, The Quiett called such a tactic an attempt to win the audience's empathy, he advised his mentee rapper Bobby who became the winner of the season to adopt a similar strategy by showing his strong will to bring his mother who was still in the U.S. back to Korea by winning the competition. Unable to meet his mother for over four years as an idol trainee and due to financial difficulties, Bobby counted on the show as the ultimate hope to reunite with his mother. In *SMTM* and other hip-hop competitions, the expression of sentimentality and heartfelt emotions was limited to family matters and their gentleness was exclusively tied to familial identities as father and son.

Even though disproportionate spotlight is given in *SMTM* to exaggerate tensions between male contestants, it should not be neglected nor denied that *SMTM* showcases alternative pathways for fostering healthy mentor-mentee relationships and demonstrating supportive brotherhood. It demonstrates that strength and powerfulness could be attained through

encouraging synergy in male sociality instead of at the cost of belittling women or asserting their patriarchal dominance over women. In *SMTM777*, two finalist stage performances exemplified how hip-hop performance can communicate non-oppressive masculinity through using lyrics as a rhetoric dialogue or incorporating dancing to promoting collaborative brotherhood.

Rapper OLNL performed a song called "Breaking Bad" featuring his team producer Giriboy. Narrating his painful experience as a victim of school violence and encounter with the bully in an Internet Café who now worked as a waiter, OLNL transformed the traumatic experience into a light-hearted song with the beat written by producer Giriboy. Personifying the bully, Giriboy acted almost as a doppelganger of OLNL on the stage by wearing a similar outfit and spitting out childish eight bars that repeated the same words "beat you" and onomatopoeia sounds that symbolized violent actions of beating and spitting. In the bridge of the song, Giriboy addressed OLNL as if he were the grown-up bully that OLNL met in an Internet Café by saying "you have really grown up a lot", implying both OLNL's mental growth as he overcame traumatic experience and his success as a rapper appearing on TV. OLNL responded with a verse affirming his maturity and strength when facing the past self by challenging his bully to witness his televisual presence and come to his live performance. Towards the end of the song, Giriboy was no longer personifying the bully, but rather changed into another version of OLNL by singing the melodic rap that conveyed OLNL's reconciliation with himself and the bully. In such a performance, rap operated as a conversational rhetoric device that offers imaginary catharsis and salvation by exploring one's interiority and manifesting it through role-playing on stage. The collaboration between Giriboy and OLNL in both song-producing and performance exemplified how past traumatic alienation could be transformed into powerful self-affirmation instead of aggressive insecurity by elevating one's painful past to an aesthetic form. It also proved that the

mentor-mentee relationship between males could transform into empathetic emotional connections instead of intentional neglect that aimed to induce independence.

As much as *SMTM* crowns itself as the show that popularizes hip-hop culture in Korea, it is evident that its representation of hip-hop is confined to rap music. It is understandable because the three other major elements of hip-hop, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti, remain mostly underground in the country. Tricia Rose points out in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, "Music is more easily commodified than graffiti, and music can be consumed away from the performance context" (Rose, 58). Greg Dimitriadis elaborates on the commercialization of hip-hop in "Hip-Hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative" by noting that "The majority of peoples now exposed to rap (including most artists) are receiving this exposure by way of an "institutional context" which has only commodified hip hop's musical discourse" (Dimitriadis, 584). Despite *SMTM*'s televisual advantage of showcasing hip-hop as a spectacular performance, it foregoes the potential of creating space for other elements of hip-hop culture mainly because it is an individual-focused competition and online streaming of the songs created in the show remains the most important commodifiable by-product. Thus, it is a common practice that either the contestants or the music producers invite well-known singers and rappers as featuring artists to increase the possibility of winning and ensure the popularity of the song once it is released across streaming platforms. Rapper EK broke the tradition by bringing his crew Most Badass Asian (abbr. M.B.A) onto his finalist stage. Instead of featuring famous rappers as his opponent rapper Kid Milli did, EK performed the song "GOD GOD GOD" with seven other members of the all-male crew M.B.A filling the stage as guest dancers. Different from being simply the back dancers, each member's name appeared in the performance credits as guests. Such positioning was also confirmed in their engagement with EK through both

expressive facial expressions and interactive dance movements. Instead of dancing at the back of the stage, M.B.A crew members danced in either horizontal alignment with EK or right behind him as if forming a half-round barrier. Back dancers would rather refrain from showing too much facial expressions and dress in either identical or similar uniforms that differ greatly from that of the performer. EK, wearing a Beanie hat and dressed in a black-and-white top and green cargo pants, was not especially dressed better than any of the other crew members, whose attires also followed black-and-white thematic colors but were finished off with unique variations such as a black scarf tie, bucket hat, and denim jacket. Several crew members were also given individual dance parts during the verses and a uniformly choreographed dance break was performed during the bridge when EK walked to the back of the stage with the camera giving total attention to other M.B.A members. Borrowing what team producer Swings metaphorically described the vibe of performance as if watching a group of monkeys in the wild forest, the toughness of masculinity in EK's performance was demonstrated through the immense synergy among crew members that enables one member to shine without sacrificing each member's individual stage presence. OLNL's and EK's finalist performance in *SMTM777* demonstrated alternative pathways to display positive masculinity that enabled self-empowerment through beneficial collaboration.

Misogyny and Ostracization of Female Audience Members

Hip-hop music has long been criticized for its hypersexualized lyrics and performance, and misogynist attitudes are commonly spotted in normalized objectification of females blatantly written in lyrics. Not to mention that most male rappers in the show write about women to flaunt their masculine attractiveness, *SMTM* is not free of criticisms on showcasing uncensored and

derogatory lyrics that objectify women. In the third round of *SMTM4*, idol-rapper Mino was caught under fire for rapping “Mino, attacking little girl, open your legs like you’re at the gynecologist”. Mino’s explicit sexual lyrics upset the audience, especially female audience members and people working in gynecology. The Korean Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists released an official statement to express their disappointment at Mino’s offensive lyrics. They stated that “OBGYN offices are places of healthcare, and not a place to be degraded as somewhere women spread their legs for men” (Soompi, 2015). Netizens also expressed their anger towards his ignorance of the pain and societal shame females face at the gynecologist. Korean women struggle with the common stereotype that “associates young women who visit gynecologists with pre-marital pregnancy”, and a survey conducted by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs in 2015 showed “56.9 percent of 699 Korean adult single women were reluctant to consult a doctor primarily because they believed it would damage their social reputation” (Tiger Times, 2015). Although the controversy was cooled down after Mino released a public apology and the $25000 dollar fine imposed on *SMTM4* by the Korean Communications Standards Commission, discussions over sexist messages in hip-hop music and whether *SMTM* should be held responsible for censoring offensive lyrics continued. The judges’ response to Mino’s offensive lyrics were caught on camera as Jinu and Zico burst into laughter, displaying zero sensitivity to the offensive content. In later episodes, it was evident that *SMTM* paid more attention to censoring offensive lyrics, such as beeping out the word “prostitutes” in Black Nut’s finalist stage and changing it to the word “beauties” in the lyric’s transcripts. Although the outward sexist comments can be filtered in post-production, the implicit ostracization of women both as listeners and contestants has been long-standing in *SMTM*.

Hip-hop, labeled as a masculine playground, is not entirely welcoming when it comes to female audiences. In *SMTM*, if a male rapper incorporates too many melodies or focuses on sentimental expressions in stage performance rather than showcasing hardcore "real" hip-hop, he is often called out for cheating by strategically appealing to the female audience. By singling out the female audience as unreal and whose taste is inferior to that of the male audience, the show reinforces the idea that hip-hop is a dominantly masculine and male-directed music genre. There were multiple times in different seasons of *SMTM* when the tactic of appealing to the female audience was frowned upon. For example, in *SMTM3*, when YDG was asked to comment on opponent team's idol-rapper B.I.'s rehearsal performance, he said that B.I. seemed to put a lot of efforts in writing sentimental lyrics, and female audiences would probably like it. After his voicing of speculative female audience's affections for B.I., YDG laughed at his own comment deridingly. Female audience's support for B.I. was deemed as worthless and invalid in determining his rapping skills because it was interpreted as a gesture of fangirling given B.I.'s identity as an idol. Moreover, female audience were seen as not endowed with capabilities to appreciate rap musically.

Although it was considered as betraying hip-hop if male rappers chose to target the female audience by demonstrating a caring and gentle image, oftentimes, through relaxing one's facial expressions, appearing well-groomed in chic attire, and singing love-themed melodic rap, the perception seemed to shift as female audiences started to make up most of the audience in live performance. In the majority of the performance clips in *SMTM*, female audience's reactions were given dominantly more screen time than that of male audience. Not only does female audiences' appreciative and affectionate gazes validate male rappers' charismatic appeal in the context of a heteronormative society, but female audiences' appraisal and dominant presence in

the show is much aligned with SMTM's agenda of popularizing hip-hop in Korea. No matter how much underground rappers diss mainstream rappers for writing too many love songs after signing contracts with record labels and how direct veteran rappers complain about the public's unrefined and immature music taste by comparing the average hip-hop audience to a 15-year-old female high-schooler (Justhis, Doppelgänger Freestyle, 2019), it is clear that either to perform well in voting in competition shows or to top music charts, one has to cater to the general public's music taste, which entails both female and male listeners. According to the survey results of 2020 Music Industry White Paper, "Men" comprise only 39.3% of the listeners in the most-listened time slot "18:00 to before 20:00" on weekdays (KOCCA, 2021). Although the findings did not specifically show the gender distribution of hip-hop music listeners, it did provide valuable insights into the sizable female listener population. As hip-hop music gets increasingly commercialized and the streaming index becomes a crucial indicator of rappers' success, female audience occupy at least an equal position compared to their male counterparts as consumes, although they are not the preferred ones. Similar attitudes are reflected in latest seasons of *SMTM* as contestants resorted to explicit love songs to win female audience's support. In *SMTM777*, rapper Superbee, previously known for his intimidating rap attack in diss battles and powerful stage presence, surprised everyone by performing a love song in the finalist stage.

Superbee's performance featuring team producer CHANGMO started off with two verses from their previously released song "Selfmade Orange" and was followed with a R&B infused rap song "Uck" which literally meant a hundred million Korean Won which equals $82,000 dollars. Self-evident in the song name, "Selfmade Orange" narrated the story of Superbee's and CHANGMO's road to success despite having started from the bottom. With CHANGMO starting the verse at the extended stage with only a backlight on his back followed by Superbee's

fast-paced rapping, the hardcore song served as a deceptive introduction that measured up to fellow producers' and contestants' speculation that they would perform an intense song that focuses on rapping skills. However, to everyone's surprise, the song came to a halt when all the glaring bright stage lights turned to warm yellow. Superbee walked towards the extended stage while asking the audience whether they had fun. As written in the song introduction, "Uck" expressed Superbee's emotional emptiness after having succeeded as a rapper at a young age. With the lyrics revolving around the regret of chasing after money in his career at the cost of neglecting his ex-girlfriend, Superbee addressed the female audience as the fictional ex-girlfriend with narration during the prelude indicating this was the first love song he made and was especially dedicated to all the female audience present on that day. Four female back dancers in identical white oversized shirts and black shorts performed to the melodic song. Towards the climax of the song, Superbee and CHANGMO picked up hidden flowers on the edge of the stage and walked up the stairs to present the flowers to two female audience members, one being Superbee's mother and the other a woman who was chosen by CHANGMO. All these orchestrated procedures during the performance along with CHANGMO's gentle smiling at the camera evoked fellow team producers' and contestants' dismissive laughter, contempt, and complaint that these ingratiating gestures were "too much". Judging from a strategic point of view, team producer Swings stated that such a move was rather clever.

To understand such contempt for flattering the female audience, one can refer to the argument of authenticity Kembrew McLeod makes in "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened Within Assimilation" as he mentioned that "selling out is associated with being soft, as opposed to hard" (McLeod, 171). He refers to LL Cool J to exemplify that making love songs that attract female audiences would be criticized as selling out by both critics and

fellow musicians. But this view derived from the discourse of a masculinist authenticity does not hold as one takes a closer look at the lyrics of "Uck". The narrative of the song was not necessarily soft but rather focused on bragging about Superbee's success in a subtle way. His approach of compensating the fictional ex-girlfriend in the song was to buy her luxurious bags which reinforced the masculine power determined by possession and wealth. In *"Things Done Changed": Recalibrating the Real in Hip-Hop*, Murray Forman's describes the new articulation of authenticity in hip-hop and rap music as "increasingly interiorized, shifting into the realm of intimate thought and feelings with a new emphasis on affective expression" (Forman, 470). Following such new parameter of authenticity on interior self-expression, the fictious lyrics in "Uck" could still stand the test of authenticity as it expressed Superbee's honest feelings of emptiness after success. Ultimately, it was the ingratiating gestures towards the female audience that male rappers deemed as unreal because acknowledging and regretting one's ill treatment of one's female lover is shameful and somehow hurts their self-esteem.

Female Rappers as Outliers

Unfortunately, in the male-centered South Korean hip-hop scene, female rappers continue to be ostracized and socially pressured to constrain their feminist voices. In Myoung-Sun Song's self-reflection as a female scholar studying hip-hop, she also points out that "while the consumers of Korean hip hop are predominantly female, its gatekeepers–those who determine who counts as a 'real' or 'serious' listener–seemed to be male" (Song, 149). When she was interviewing Korean hip-hop artists, her gender came across as a surprise to male artists. The male-dominant Korean hip-hop scene not only grants male artists, TV producers, and audiences the gatekeeping power to judge who are "real" hip-hop fans, but it also indirectly gives them

control to judge female artists' music capabilities and frame them on television at their disposal. From her interviews with Korean hip-hop artists, Song identifies the major three setbacks for female rappers to succeed compared to their male counterparts which include lack of skill, unique style, and community support among female rappers. Using the female-only competition show *Unpretty Rapstar* as a case study, Song argues that female rappers are constantly framed as "pretty dutiful daughters" on the show and subjected to double-standards of physical appearance.

Scholar Iljung Kim also argues that confronted with a misogynist and male-centered Korean society, contemporary female rappers tend to refrain from directly addressing gender inequality, but rather engage in "various approaches to expressing issues related to gender" (Kim, 230). Fearful of damaging effects on their music careers if they speak up against gender inequality, Korean female rappers rather adopt an individualistic and oftentimes a non-direct approach to assert their female power without triggering their male audience. Rather than directly criticizing the sexist society and the gender issues in the hip-hop scene, female rappers adopt "a more moderate tactic to express their gender identity" such as portraying "themselves a successful, self-made individuals who overpower other men" (Kim, 239). Other approaches that are commonly adopted by female rappers in *SMTM* as their rap centers around aspiring to become financially successful and positioning themselves as pious daughters. Through analyzing the characterization of female contestants in *SMTM* including Yunhway, Mirani, and Since, as well as their framing as opposed to or in relationship to male contestants, I argue that in addition to the challenges Song and Kim identify, the intentional framing of female rappers as potential love interests of their male counterparts shifts the focus away from the female contestants' rapping skills, rather subjecting them to their femininity in a heteronormative societal context. Even though female rappers seem to have overcome the stereotypical image of females as

decorative and constantly jealous of each other as competition shows gradually turn away from exaggerating catfights, female rappers are faced with a new form of masculine domination that lessens their "threats" to the male-normative hip-hop scene by positing them as a love interest rather than an equal opponent. What is making such challenge even more invisibly oppressive for female rappers is that the fabricated illusion of heterosexual romantic attraction, initially disguised by the showrunners as a marketing tactic to hype up individual rappers, becomes itself a consumable by-product that gets propagated by commercial YouTube channels that create hip-hop related content, fans, and even rappers themselves.

The outright positioning of female rappers as love interests instead of equal rivals in *SMTM* can be traced back to the third-round audition of the fourth season when male rapper Black Nut chose female rapper Ahn Soo Min as his rival. Contrary to everyone's speculation that Black Nut would choose idol-rapper Mino who he constantly dissed as incompetent, he chose Ahn Soo Min. When asked by the host of his reasons behind the choice, Black Nut explicitly answered because she was pretty. Rather than focusing on how Black Nut and Ahn Soo Min musically prepared their individual parts for the battle, the show edited together scenes of Ahn Soo Min's fixing her makeup, her interactions with another male constant rapper Andup, and Black Nut's jealous response. Both coincidentally dressed in gray tops and black trousers, the pair was joked by judge San E as wearing couple outfits. After winning the battle, Black Nut was caught on camera backstage of being rejected by Ahn Soo Min when he intended to hug her. The obvious discomfort displayed by Ahn Soo Min through taking steps back when Black Nut spread his arms is reflective of the disrespectful treatment of female rappers as merely objects, and how ridiculously insensitive the male judge and the show itself are. One may argue Black Nut's and San E's behaviors should only be read as individual cases given that Black Nut was later sued by

another female rapper KittiB for lyrical sexual harassment and San E was caught in controversy over his attack on feminism in the country. But one can barely deny the insensitive and unfair treatment of female rappers demonstrated through *SMTM*'s intentional editing that disturbingly positions female rappers as romantic interests. In *SMTM8,* both invited as guest judges, rapper Basick quizzically asked Junoflo in the interview if the female rapper Yunhway was his cup of tea, suggesting potential romantic interest, although Junoflo intended to comment on her performance. During discussions of strategies for diss battles against Yunhway, male rappers suggested that seducing would be an optimal way to beat female rappers, implying that women are sentimental and even vulnerable in the face of masculine power. In *SMTM9,* male rapper Mushvenom and female rapper Mirani's collaboration was described by judge Gaeko as if they were a married couple. In the latest season *SMTM10,* female rapper Since and male rapper Gwangil Jo were even rumored to be in relationship in fake news reporting, mainly because of the exaggerated interactions between the two achieved in editing. Another male rapper Geegooin also adopted the tactic of pretending to confess his romantic love for Since in a diss battle. The fictious love triangle remained hyped even after the season ended, as YouTube channel *Dingo Freestyle* created an episode of the three and both pairs were nominated as "Best Couple" in the spin-off *SMTM 10* festival sponsored by KOCCA. Certainly, the framing of contestants as potential lovebirds could bring popularity to both the show and the individual rappers, but I contend that one should not take such framing as light entertainment without questioning its implicit logic that purports the normalized male dominance and encourages heteronormative consumptions of hip-hop related content. Such framing takes away female rappers' subjectivity in performing their own sexuality and is dangerous in possibly reducing female rappers into stereotypical attributes, as decorative and submissive. It is ironic that male rappers' expression of

their romantic desires through performing melodic rap songs succeed in winning the audience's favor while female rappers are often left with the limited choice of fitting into the "successful, self-made strong sister" category (Kim, 239). Instead of repeating the same repertoire by forcefully associating a female rapper with a male colleague, *SMTM* and other media platforms alike should provide space for female rappers to freely express their own sexualities and feminist ideals.

The representation of masculinity in South Korean hip-hop on TV and film comes from the normalized expectations for men in South Korea including toughness, restrained emotional expressions, fulfilling military service, and embracing their familial responsibilities as breadwinner. Although some representations of male mentor-mentee relationship or father-son relationship replicate the toxic mentality that masculine power could be cultivated from emotional alienation that ultimately leads to one's maturity, it should be acknowledged that *SMTM* also demonstrates alternative pathways to demonstrate masculine power through non-confrontational, supportive, and collaborative relationships among men. Given the male-dominant nature of the hip-hop scene in South Korea and the inevitable misogyny in the wider societal context, female hip-hop listeners and rappers are further ostracized and face increasing difficulties in freely expressing their sexualities and claiming their subjectivities.

Chapter 4 Professionalization and Commercialization

In Gaeko's newly released song "Cheap Talk" featuring JUSTHIS which also appears in *SMTM10*'s producers' cypher, Gaeko raps "Just because I shake hands with the sugar company, my rap ain't sweet", referring to the once sugar company CJ ENM's investment in his music label Amoeba Culture. While Gaeko satirically criticizes the current money-oriented art scene, JUSTHIS speaks more poignantly to the young's blind worshipping of US brands such as Nike and Adidas as he raps "They sell media, muscles, all imported to Korea, we are slaves to America forever. Cultural colony, you wear Nike, Adidas. Fashion slave, camping, limited edition, new release" (Amoeba Culture, 2021). JUSTHIS's lyrics could be interpreted solely as targeting at the materialistic worshipping prevalent in the South Korean society, but his lyrics have a specific weight to the hip-hop scene in the country.

The two sportswear brands mentioned in the lyrics have long been the earliest sponsors and collaborators that recognize the commercial potential of Korean hip-hop. Adidas sponsored the sixth, seventh, and eighth season of *SMTM*, and it even collaborated with the competition show in releasing the Ultra Boost series with the stamp of *SMTM* inside the shoes. Nike Air Max collaborated with the online music channel *Dingo* in 2017 through releasing performance videos featuring famous hip-hop artists including nafla, loopy, and the underground hip hop duo XXX. In the following year, Nike invited Jay Park, Woo, and Jessi to collaborate on a theme brand song RUN IT. Other notable examples of US companies using or collaborating with Korea hip-hop artists in promotion include YouTube's adoption of the viral Eung Freestyle clip in their promotional video for YouTube Music in 2016, Monster Beverage's endorsement of The Quiett in 2021, Air Jordan's commercial-themed song released in 2022 produced by AOMG's

renowned producer Gray and featuring six rappers, two female R&B singers, and members from popular dance crews.

It is obvious that today's mainstream *Gukhip* market is money-driven judging from the lyrics flooded with materialistic bragging and the flex culture magnified by media companies. This chapter aims to unravel the industrial aspect of hip-hop music in South Korea by examining the major venues of rappers' revenue, the professionalization of hip-hop music making, and the dominant public image of hip-hop outside of music competition shows.

How Rappers in Korea Make a Living

Rappers in South Korea mostly earn money through music streaming, copyrights royalties, commercial performance, concerts, endorsement from brands, and their own apparel or food chain entrepreneurship. While music streaming occupies a small portion of their income as the revenue acquired per stream is relatively slim compared to the production cost, rappers still benefit from diversifying their music distribution on various music platforms and such strategy enables the artists to attract listeners. Especially after Spotify was launched in Korea in March 2021, artists gained access to a wider pool of international listeners. Compared to K-pop artists whose songs were manufactured in a more streamlined fashion, rappers have more autonomy over their songs including producing their own songs thus having higher shares of their streaming revenues. As multiple rappers have contested, commercial performance and concerts occupy a large portion of their regular income, particularly for newbie rappers who acquired immediate fame after appearing on TV. Commercial performance includes invitations to perform at university festivals, company celebrations, and hip-hop festivals. While not disclosed, it can be inferred from one of the episodes from the online hip-hop variety show *Nuckmills'*

Wonderland, where rappers Nucksal and Don Mills tried to figure out who made the most money in today's Korean hip-hop scene, that rappers whose names are listed in larger fonts and in the front of the lineup are paid more in hip-hop festivals.

In terms of concerts, it is fairly common for labels to host concerts featuring multiple artists, thus maximizing the possible attendee numbers. It is characteristic of the South Korean hip-hop scene that promotional activities as well as concerts are arranged far more often in terms of labels than individuals. For example, producers and rappers from the same record label team together as judges on *SMTM* and *High School Rapper*, and they would automatically fail their labelmate contestants to ensure fair judging. Hip-hop artists in the scene are also expected to represent their labels when appearing on TV and embody the signature styles or characteristics of their labels in music production. Dingo Freestyle, a popular hip-hop YouTube channel which belongs to Makeus Entertainment, has collaborated with major labels including Ambition Musik, Yng&Rich Records, and Hi-Lite Records to create mini-series short original content that mirrors the form of reality television. Such original content benefit both the labels and Dingo Freestyle in that labels are provided a platform to showcase the cordial relationships among their artists and promote their music, at the same time Dingo Freestyle profits from producing and distributing songs made in collaboration with the labels' artists. According to *Namuwiki*, there are 33 hip-hop music record labels currently active in South Korea, and the majority of them are lead or founded by rappers, DJs, and producers. Given that the number of hip-hop musicians in each label throughout its lifetime varies between only two (OUTLIVE) to twenty (Soul Company), the total number of rappers signed to a record label is incomparable to the number of participants for one season of *SMTM* which amounted to over 27,000 in the latest season.

It would be unfair to simply deem the label rappers as the only professional ones in the music scene although belonging to a record label provides multifaceted benefits including advanced production equipment, systematic artist management, existing connections, and even access to TV network personnel. In November 2021, rapper Mommy Son responded to rapper Yumdda's accusation of making his previous label artists sign "slavery contracts" which prevented younger rappers from releasing songs and took up an unfair share of their income. In the response video uploaded onto Mommy Son's YouTube channel, he clarified that the reason why the label takes up 70% of the two young rappers' income was that they lacked experience in music production at the time they signed, their music required significant close mentoring, and the label was not even expecting them to generate profits in the first few years. Mommy Son disclosed that his label made much more efforts in promoting the two young rappers than the rappers themselves realized, including trying "numerous times to let them appear nicely on *High School Rapper*", referring to utilizing personal connections to ask TV personnel in CJ ENM for a favor (Mommy Son, 2021). He also added that there were few labels that could make such efforts. Mommy Son's disclosure of how labels actively try to optimize their artists' appearance on hip-hop competition shows given that some rappers' participation in the show are often altogether deleted in editing process reflects the importance of such shows as a route to gain popularity. It also shows potential hip-hop labels' intervention in the production of popular hip-hop competition shows.

In *Beyond the Crew: Hip-Hop and Professionalization in Mexico City*, Andrew Green argues that the notion of professional could be interpreted as the "object-forming" professionalization in improving the music quality in the digitalization era and the "subject-forming" professionalization, manifested through the institutional pedagogy of hip-hop through

workshops and courses. He also claims that professional "cannot be understood in a functionalist sense, nor may the hip-hop 'professional' be conceptualized as a straightforward antonym of 'amateur'" (Green, 1). Using Green's perspective on hip-hop pedagogy, one can also perceive the existing industry of rap teaching in South Korea as a manifestation of hip-hop professionalization. The existence of rap teaching is also demonstrated in *Sunset in My Hometown* in the montage scene near the beginning of the film where Hak-su disseminates his business card when commuting through the neighborhood on his motorcycle. On the business card which promotes his rap tutoring appears his MC name Simbuck and Hak-su's photo holding the goldchain he received in *SMTM3 and SMTM4*. Despite the prevalence of rap lessons, its legitimacy has remained a controversial topic in the music scene as taking rap lessons has been frowned upon as inauthentic if one aspires to be a real rapper. The notion of being trained to rap is oftentimes deemed as inauthentic in the South Korean scene because the image of a "real rapper" is predominately associated with someone who organically encounters hip-hop, self-teaches, and practices rap on his or her own. Being institutionally trained to rap is also negatively linked with the streamlined K-pop industry where idols are systematically trained to perform rapping. Rappers also tended to hide the fact of having taken lessons once they became famous. In *SMTM5*, rapper #Gun revealed to the audience that Superbee asked him to not mention his history of taking lessons from rapper Swings in the diss battle. It is understandable why rappers feel ashamed for being known about their taking rap lessons because it tarnishes their perceived talent. In 2018, HiphopLE, the Korean-based online music magazine with focuses on hip-hop and R&B, created a three-part documentary of rap lessons in Seoul. Tracing the development of rap lessons starting from its inception at Haja Center taught by veteran rapper MC Meta, HiphopLE interviewed rappers who taught rap lessons including MC Meta, rapper SUDA, JJK,

P-Type, and many more as well as students of these rappers, demonstrating how rap lessons benefited both the instructors and the students. Extending a period between four months and two years, veteran rappers teach the "semi-professional" students about rap techniques, recording knowledge, and the history of the genre. According to the survey HiphopLe conducted in 2017 and whose results were shown in the documentary, students wanted to learn most about comprehensive knowledge of hip-hop music, followed by rap technique, lyrics writing, and "professional consciousness" as a pro-rapper (HiphopLe, 2018). Rappers such as MC Meta and Naachal regarded hosting rap lessons as a way to make a living and they admitted that there existed times when their income as rap instructors surpassed the income generated from music production.

In the last episode, veteran rappers expressed their positive views on the legitimacy of rap lessons given that hip-hop or rap making has been incorporated as a curriculum in art academies and conservatories. Hip-hop and rap music production exist as part of the Applied Music division in the Institute for Future Talents at Hanyang University and notable rappers such as Koonta, Yun B, and Naachal have been appointed as professors. Similar to the format of online classes such as MasterClass, numerous well-known rappers such as Paloalto and Nucksal have opened paid online classes such as Class101 through either platform or entertainment companies such as NAK-ENT. Similarly, producers such as Toil and MINT have started exclusive online classes through the platform Wonderwall. While the increasing institutionalization of rap tutoring and hip-hop music production reflects the ongoing trend of professionalization from Green's "subject-forming" perspective, it also confirms the reduction of rap music to a learned technical art to accrue wealth rather than a lived lifestyle in South Korea as multiple aspects of hip-hop become commodified.

The Money-Oriented *Gukhip* Market

In *Keepin' It Real: Authenticity, Commercialization, and the Media in Korean Hip Hop*, Sarah Hare and Andrea Baker stressed that it was the "commodified and not ideologically rebellious form that Korea was first exposed to" and "Korean hip hop's grounding in fashion suggests an inauthentic and commodity-based appropriation of the hip hop subculture" (Hare and Baker, 8). It is poignantly true that even today's circulation of hip-hop in Korea revolves significantly around the consumption of hip-hop fashion. As one searches for the keyword "hip-hop" in Naver, "the Google of South Korea" and most frequently used search engine in the country, the third and fifth related search words are "hip-hop fashion" and "hip-hop clothing". Many rappers start their own clothing brand, and notable examples would be athletic leisure clothing brand "IAB-Studio" created by rapper Beenzino and "LIBILLY" by rapper CHANGMO and his childhood friends. These clothing brands have gradually been coded as outward fashion statements in support of particular rappers among fans, and rappers themselves do not shy away from wearing them on television shows, online interviews, and during concerts as a promotional strategy.

Although it is common for competition shows to have a cash reward as the final prize for the winner, hip-hop competition shows emphasize on the cash reward more than any other competition shows by either directly incorporating the financial reward in the program's name such as *Show Me the Money* and *Drop the Bit* with the latter referring to bitcoins or giving out cash rewards to the winner at every round throughout the show such as *Do You Know Hiphop?* and *Good Girl*. The cash prize of winning *SMTM* has grown increasingly big throughout its progression, starting from around $4,100 Dollars in the first season to $250,000 in the tenth season. Not to mention the business support and other awards that come along with the package

including a premium Mini Cooper, and a one-month free pass to live in a luxurious hotel. Although these are all product placements to advertise the automobile brand and the hotel in the show, the generous prize package is indicative of how the market size of hip-hop music in Korea has grown tremendously over the past ten years.

Good Girl, a female-only competition show created by Mnet in 2021 featuring hip-hop and R&B artists, gave winners at each round of competition a cash reward ranging from $4100 dollars to $8200. Given the considerable amount of cash prizes and numbers of competition rounds, the program's subtitle is called *Who Robbed the Broadcasting Network*. It should be noted here that Mnet's intentional appeal to the imagery of criminals by using eye-catching wording such as "rob". At the beginning of the program, it even showed a promotional clip where the ten members acted as suspects being interrogated under the charge of robbing the broadcasting network and being locked in jail cells. Such usage of criminal imagery might have been taken lightly as having a cool aesthetic, but it capitalized on the stereotypical negative association of hip-hop music with crimes.

Good Girl also filmed how the winners flex their prize money for each round. The members spent their flexing money purchasing luxurious bags, Apple products, clothing, and renting recording studio time. In Song's discussion on consumption and identity in Korea, she points out that "Korean's attitude toward consumption remains ambivalent in that while *gwasobi* (excessive consumption) is still frowned upon; materialistic wealth is deemed an invaluable symbol of success" (Song, 98). *Good Girl*'s demonstration of artists spending flex money in a short period of time might seem undisciplined and irrational, but the program's borrowing of hip-hop culture somehow legitimizes and casts such consumption behavior in a positive light as an alternative way to affirm one's self-actualization and achievement. Flexing one's achievement

in the form of purchasing should not be problematic as long as one truly earns the achievement. However, the blind pursuit of flexing for its own sake rather than improving one's music results in disingenuous interest in pursuing a rap career, especially among fledgling rappers. The media, which tends to capitalize on the hottest and most trendy rappers in the scene, concurrently gives off the false impression that most of hip-hop music consists of materialistic flexing, thus normalizing money bragging as the standard in today's hip-hop scene and leaving narrow spaces for other themes to thrive through the language of hip-hop.

In HiphopLe's interview with rapper DPR Live in 2020, when asked about his opinions on flex culture in recent Korean hip-hop scene, DPR Live answered that "it could sometimes be cool, but it would be better if one can realize following the trend is not always the answer" (HiphopLe, 2020). He criticized rappers' adoption of fake measures to cater to the audience's expectation through recounting the DM he received from students whose lyrics only talked about watches, money, and flex. Not only were student rappers faking their lyrics by bragging material wealth they did not even achieve, rappers active in the scene were also wearing counterfeit apparel and jewelry to appeal to the audience and "flex". In the third episode of *Universe Hipsters* where two singers learned lyric writing from rapper Dindin, Dindin revealed that some rappers would even flex about their diamond watches even though the diamonds were actually artificial jewels.

The prevailing trend of flexing even at the cost of faking is reflective of the trend following mindset among rappers, the narrow definition of success, and the focal point of media spotlight when it comes to portraying hip-hop. Drawing from Song's interview with veteran rappers, she concluded that Dok2 and The Quiett's success "has fundamentally changed how money is talked about amongst rappers and within the hip hop scene" (Song, 114). Dok2 and The

Quiett's financial success communicated through their materialistic showing-off in their lyrics and music videos evoked imitation by newbie rappers and defined success in a limited economic sense. In Song's interview with rappers such as Ignito and Defconn, they expressed skeptical and unagreeable attitudes towards the prevalent pursuit of monetary success in the scene. Ignito refers to the desire for success among Korean hip-hop artists as "success in a very limited sense" and "a very Koreanized version of superficial success" (Song, 111). Although the flex culture in the Korean hip-hop scene started as an imitation of U.S. based hip-hop and authenticating one's rap music as Dok2 and The Quiett's approaches of "staying true" were manifested as "aligning their music with American hip hop and not Hanguk hip hop" (Song, 102), materialistic bragging has somehow become the expectation and the standard of success for Korean rappers to meet. What Ignito meant by "Koreanized version of success" was the unrealistic narrow sense of success that is age-specific and strictly coded in accordance with the societal context in Korea. Applicable to fields other than hip-hop, the socially agreed notion of success in Korea is to own an apartment, have a stable job, and most importantly, achieve these goals before turning forty. Thus, the manifestation of flex culture in Korean hip-hop should also be read as an agreement to the "Koreanized version of success" and active expression of such ideals through hip-hop music and performance. In today's South Korean hip-hop scene, lyrics filled with Rollie, Lamborghini, and money are still common, expressing rappers' already-achieved monetary success or the success constrained in the existing industrial and societal framework in which they aspire. The media is affirming and encouraging such money-oriented mindsets through associating rappers' flex with virtues of filial piety or utilizing flex as an aesthetics.

In The Quiett and Paloalto's performance on the 2018 Mnet Asian Music Awards held in Hong Kong, the stage setting was blatantly decorated with paper money. The performance

started with The Quiett and Paloalto sitting on the edge of two sofa chairs surrounded by stacks of bundled paper money. The LED screen behind them showed an array of four currency signs in neon lights, from the left to the right being US dollars, Chinese Yuan, euro, and pound. Performing in front of a Hong Kong audience who might not understand Korean, the stage setting was the most effective visual lyric to convey the meaning of the song "Prime Time" by The Quiett, affirming his own prime time in music career. In this case, flex was adopted as an aesthetics to affirm The Quiett's dominance in the hip-hop scene and visualize his achievement in his rap career.

Rappers' flexing of their monetary success has also been magnified in reality television shows where they reveal their daily life. In *I Live Alone*, a reality TV show programmed by MBC and airs every Friday night, rapper DOK2 and Simon Dominic were casted to show their daily routine. In Dok2's episode filmed in 2016, it began with close-ups on his luxurious home décor, display of watches and car keys, and collections of newly-released shoes in boxes. In *I Live Alone*, guests were invited to the studio to watch their episode along with other cast members and give commentaries. As the episode progressed to show Dok2's fancy dressing room filled with gold chains, belts with brand icons, and deluxe accessories, the cast members could not help but express their amazement and respect for Dok2's success. Although the whole episode revolved around revealing how Dok2 started making music after his family went bankrupt in his childhood and how Dok2 managed to achieve such sensational monetary success, it managed to characterize Dok2 as an upright and frugal average person who would purchase products on sale, eat cup ramen, dye his own hair, and lick the remaining yogurt on the lid. While the episode exaggeratedly showed his luxurious lifestyle as a rapper, his flexing was rationalized as an affirmation of self-actualization given his humble background and casted in a

favorable light as he revealed he gave his mother 30% of the income, emphasizing his filial piety.

Similarly in Simon Dominic's episode, his motivation to hustle and earn more money even as a veteran rapper was justified when he referred to his family as the drive. In his episode filmed in 2021, he flexed by buying his niece a deluxe toy car which was hard to purchase, giving his father a red pocket filled with cash, and gifting his mother a Rolex watch. Song wrote that Dok2's fulfilling his filial piety as dutiful "can also be translated and recoded as success in Korean society" (Song,111). Such recoding of materialistic flexing as success through virtuous behaviors of paying back to one's parents makes excessive consumption, once frowned upon in the Korean society, acceptable or even praised today. However, one should also realize how this money-oriented mindset has taken a toll on the positioning of music in the hip-hop scene. Its value and role in community building has diminished as existing hip-hop artists and newbie rappers began to view music as a sole means to make money and become opulent.

Flexing as Both Conforming and Counter-hegemonic Performance

Started off as a genre embraced by young, urban, working-class African Americans and Afro-Caribbean communities, hip-hop has attracted considerable numbers of suburban, white American male listeners once it was commercialized, especially with gangsta rap, even though the majority of rap songs started off rejecting "white middle class values". Used by African American youth as a vehicle of speaking out against oppression, hip-hop pays a premium on the discourse of authenticity when it comes to rightfully performing one's class identity. Although the prevalent trend of flexing in Black artists' rap music has been criticized as affirming capitalistic ideals, it can still be read as one's signaling of "having made it" compared to his or

her humble background and the disadvantaged socioeconomic situations one is subject to suffer in a racist society. However, when hip-hop travels to South Korea where its performers and audience are mostly made up of middle or even upper-middle class, the rhetoric of "started from the bottom" and "ghetto life" Korean rappers take up should be examined for its truthfulness. Certainly, there exist rappers that came from humble economic backgrounds in South Korea, but most of them, if not all, are free from racism and systematic oppression African American artists face. Given the fact that K-hip hop targeted at middle-class consumers at its inception and continued to, flexing in its current manifestations in both lyrics and performances should be interpreted as more than a gesture of signaling one's monetary success or a mere imitation of American hip-hop in the case of Dok2 and The Quiett. By analyzing CHANGMO (Birth name: Ku Chang-mo)'s song "TAIJI" (Ambition Musik, 2021) and related interviews with the artist, I argue that flexing in the South Korean context should be also read as a performance rappers undertake to conform to the public's conception of a successful celebrity and a persona that rappers project publicly which is not necessarily consistent with their own beliefs of success in personal life, thus complicating the notion of authenticity in their music. By examining the discourse around a legitimate "South Korean middle class" and how rappers' success fails to fit neatly with this categorization, I argue that while flexing is conforming to the public's expectation of a successful rapper, it is also a performance where rappers challenge hegemonic class classification in the highly state-conscious Korean society.

Released in November 2021, CHANGMO's album UNDERGROUND ROCKSTAR has won him multiple awards including Hip Hop Album of the Year, Artist of the Year, and the title track "TAIJI" winning Music Video of the Year, Hip Hop Track of the Year in the 2022 Korean Hip-hop Awards and Best Rap & Hip Hop Song in the 2022 Korean Music Awards. As

CHANGMO's second studio album, UNDERGROUND ROCKSTAR metaphorically documents the change in his state of mind after the immediate success of his hit song "METEOR" and shows his determination to start a new chapter as an underground Rockstar, a self-contradictory category that CHANGMO finds himself in, both in terms of his fame and wealth (HiphopLE, 2021). Even before rising to sudden fame two years ago through "METEOR", CHANGMO has been filling his songs with lyrics that can both be categorized as aspirational materialistic flexing and self-referential braggadocio, such as listing Versace, Maserati, and other like brand names in "Maestro" (Luminant, 2017) and boasting his musicality by comparing himself to Mozart in "Mozart" (Luminant, 2017). The question of authenticity was more tied to CHANGMO's musical ability than his materialistic possessions though because it was rather clear that he was painting an imaginary picture of his aspirational success.

The table has been turned by the time CHANGMO released "TAIJI", whose name self-evidently indicated that this song was a homage to Seo Taiji, the leading figure in the 90s who first incorporated hip-hop elements in Korean pop songs. The homage to Seo Taiji was manifested through multiple dimensions, including sampling from Seo Taiji and Boys' song "Come Back Home" (1995), lyrically using the same opening line from the song, projecting a clip of the original music video on an old-fashioned television set in the music video of "TAIJI", and CHANGMO's actual moving of his residency to the same neighborhood Seo Taiji used to live in which was also mentioned in the song. Following the same vein as his previous songs, CHANGMO utilizes materialistic bragging and rhetoric of self-referential braggadocio in "TAIJI" by naming himself the new Seo Taiji and boasting his purchase of a house worth billions of Won in a lavish neighborhood, an Audemars Piguet diamond watch, and a painting just for the sake of its high price. Such materialistic flexing was also magnified in the music

video visually through blatant display of numerous sports cars that surrounded CHANGMO, close-ups of his diamond jewelry, and his wearing a Gucci jacket. Given the apparent lyrical reference and visual demonstrating of flexing, CHANGMO seemed to be self-contradictory when he spit out “F*ck flex, F*ck drip. I am a trendsetter, follow me”. Judging from the lyrics blatantly loaded with luxury brand names and the music video filled with sports cars, it is ironic that CHANGMO shows disdain for flex and drip in that specific line. Analyzed in combination with the prior track “MORAESIGYE” and CHANGMO’s interviews, these lyrics show rather his self-distancing from his public persona as a self-made Rap star who is expected or even pushed to perform flexing as an indicator of his success. Using CHANGMO’s own words “real life” which was repeated throughout the album, flexing is also the real life or reality that rappers partake in where possessions and monetary wealth are the dominant societal standards to evaluate one’s success.

Tricia Rose argues that as hip-hop is commercialized and distributed through mainstream outlets for the wider audience in America, it “has become a breeding ground for the most explicitly exploitative and increasingly one-dimensional narratives of black ghetto life” (Rose,3). Similarly in the South Korean case where hip-hop was heavily influenced by commercialized American hip-hop mediated through mainstream outlets and targeted at middle-class audience since its inception, the “one-dimensional” materialistic and misogynist narrative of hip-hop has been deeply ingrained in the local audience’s perception of hip-hop. Thus, artists like CHANGMO who enjoy mainstream popularity are inclined to adopt such narrative implicitly imposed by the cultural industry.

In Kosmonoise Studio’s interview with CHANGMO back in 2019, he confessed the emptiness and loss of meaning he felt after achieving success. He said, “I just feel like throwing

[expensive watches, jewelry, the $3000 dollar jacket in his closet] all out" (Kosmonoise, 2019). Similar sentiments were echoed in the interview he did with the R&B singer Hoody just before the release of the album UNDERGROUND ROCKSTAR. While CHANGMO acknowledged it was cool to wear jewelry as a rapper, he said his "personal happiness comes rather from small things" such as riding the subway and going for a walk in the park (AOMGOFFICIAL, 2021). Reflecting on CHANGMO's intentional self-distancing from his rapper identity in the interviews and viewing the music video of "MORAESIGYE" and "TAIJI" in light of his comments, his lyrical and visual flexing in "TAIJI" can be read as a counter-hegemonic performance that critiques the highly status-conscious Korean society where his unstable profession as a rapper and lack of college degree preclude him from the traditionally legitimate category of upper middle-class despite his enormous wealth.

The theme of performing, referring to CHANGMO's exhibiting different public personas, has been recurrently mentioned by CHANGMO himself in interviews when he referred to his taking up a gentleman persona in competition shows and purposefully bragging about his wealth in Dingo Freestyle as intentional and based on the specific media context. His purchase of the apartment and luxury goods can even be read as an orchestrated music performance as he revealed in the UNDERGROUND ROCKSTAR documentary that his purchase of his Ferrari car and the apartment in the neighborhood which Seo Taiji used to live was solely for the purpose of making the album. The act of performing was also visualized in the music video of "TAIJI" through wearing a silver mask, both by CHANGMO himself and other cast members wearing the hoodies from his clothing brand "LIBILLY". Their masking during the scenes where they violently smash a car and ultimately burn it down after spraying the metallic red letters "UGRS" onto the car symbolizes the farewell to his past self and the rebirth into the successful Rap star,

now occupying the top of the hip-hop scene. However, later in another scene where CHANGMO sits alone in a dark room with the silver mask monitoring numerous television sets showing blurred images in glaringly bright colors, the camera only captures a glimpse of his profile shot from the back. This exceptionally short scene is a dialectical portrayal of the collapse of reality and the constant opposition between CHANGMO's rapper and non-rapper identities. The blurred images projected through the television sets are representative of the multiple personas CHANGMO takes up on different media platforms. Faced with this distorted reality where the public is only accessible to his performed personas, CHANGMO himself is also lost when searching what reality actually is for him as an integrated person comprised of both identities. Thus, masking here conveys confusion and loss of orientation in reality. It is critical to understand what the phrase "real life" is referring to, given its prevalence in the music video of "MORAESIGYE" and the track itself, where CHANGMO repeats the line "Real Life" continuously four times towards the end of the track followed by The Quiett's voice echoing "One, one, one, just one life to live".

Different from the common connotation of the mundane we associate with the phrase "real life", the "real life" CHANGMO uses refers to the Korean society with slim chances of upward mobility and the rigidly defined success people are pressured to achieve. This interpretation is confirmed in CHANGMO's HiphopLE interview when he explains the creative background of "MORAESIGYE". He explained that after achieving success through "METEOR", he found that his previous definition of success in the hip-hop scene was rather incomparable to the actual [upper-class] out of the scene. He wrote the lyrics after realizing "there is even higher [status in the society] to strive for" and he compared the story of "MORAESIGYE" to a cruel fairytale (HiphopLE, 2021). Both the lyrics and the music video tell

a sorrowful story of the once poor CHANGMO being cheated by his former lover who belonged to the upper echelon because she looked down on CHANGMO's low social status. The cruelty of the song was also directly conveyed through the disturbing visuals in the music video where the pianist CHANGMO set a bomb at the wedding of his former lover and drove away in a sports car while the castle collapsed to ashes in the fire. Towards the end of the music video, CHANGMO's driving in the same sports car he drove in the music video of "TAIJI" released a month later indicated his determination to leave the things he once deemed valuable such as relationships and love behind and embrace the societal expectations for a Rap star in the "real life". Flexing, in this way, is a performance that successful rappers such as CHANGMO adopt to conform to the standardized notion of success that audience use to evaluate the achievement of hip-hop artists. Although CHANGMO did purchase the luxurious goods and the apartment he mentioned in the lyrics, the action of flexing itself is only consistent with the persona of the underground Rockstar rapper CHANGMO undertakes, but not the person Ku Chang-mo outside of his public appearance.

While the flexing narrative of "TAIJI" conforms to the audience assumptions of the materialistic hip-hop, it could also be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic performance that disrupts of the tradition notion of legitimate "middle-class" in the Korean society. In the UNDERGROUND ROCKSTAR documentary, CHANGMO expresses how he thinks the modern society is a continuation of the status system in which young people at his age is given less and less mobility to move up the social ladder (Dingo Freestyle, 2022). In *In Pursuit of Status: The Making of South Korea's "New" Urban Middle Class*, Denis Potrzeba Lett argues that "Korea's middle-class aspirations and ideals permeate all levels of South Korean society today" and "the sociocultural realm members of the middle class have become the historical

successors to the yangban elite". *Yangban*, the highest social class of the Chosŏn dynasty, "enjoyed an elite position recognized as legitimate by other members of society". The contemporary attributes of middle-class ideals and ways to assert one's social status are emulated after the yangban tradition as one's social status is determined by "occupation, family, lifestyle, education, and marriage" (Lett, 227). CHANGMO himself was precluded from the category of "middle-class" before attaining fame and wealth because his profession as a rapper, unlike doctors and lawyers, was not a legitimate middle-class occupation that could entitle him to social respect, and his lack of college experience further alienates him from attaining the social status through education. Although CHANGMO was accepted into the prestigious Berklee College of Music twice, he did not attend because he did not have financial means to support his study. Thus, his success and acquisition of social respect are unconventional and challenge the hegemonic notion of "middle-class" which is dominantly determined by lineage, occupation, and education in the South Korean society. We can now view the line "F*ck flex, F*ck drip. I am a trendsetter, follow me" in "TAIJI" as a critique of the rigid class system and a hopeful message to CHANGMO's contemporaries that one can also become successful through unconventional routes that are oftentimes deemed as illegitimate.

Judging from the success of the album UNDERGOUND ROCKSTAR and the wide acclaim "TAIJI" enjoys among the critics and the audience, narrating one's success of a rap career has been equated with materializing it through actively boasting of one's purchase through both music and public appearance. But it is at odds with the actual market size of the hip-hop scene in South Korea because however mainstream a rapper can become through topping the music charts, the fan base and record sales are incomparable to the matured K-pop industry. However, rappers are expected to brag about their wealth and conform to the "one-dimensional"

materialistic image of rap music, and they internalize such expectations in music production and public appearance although they seem not to care much about their public reception.

There is no doubt that the market size and potential of South Korean hip-hop will continue to grow as evident from the commercial collaboration between artists and well-known brands. However, as JUSTHIS rapped in “Cheap Talk” and what veteran rappers have criticized about the blind imitation of money bragging, it is critical for musicians, listeners, and the media to reflect upon how flex culture became equated with the sole standard of success when it comes to evaluating hip-hop artists’ music careers.

Conclusion

Early in February 2022, the Korean American rapper Loopy questioned the legitimacy of Korean Hip-hop Awards on his Instagram story with the image that shows the composition of judges of the awards which include personnel from the music industry, media industry, and Artists & Repertoire division. By captioning “I dont see any HIPHOP here”, Loopy expressed his frustration at the non-presence of hip-hop related experts in the judging process. His claim that there is no hip-hop in Korea ignited a furious backlash from the rappers in the music scene including veteran rappers who were once Loopy’s mentors in *SMTM777*. Rapper Khundi Panda released a diss track named “Banana Split”, discrediting Loopy’s authority to speak on Korean hip-hop because of his identity as Korean American and his unfamiliarity with the local Korean hip-hop scene.

While Loopy invited Khundi Panda to an Instagram Live debate to discuss Korean hip-hop, Khundi Panda refused. The beef ended with a Instgram Live between Loopy and another rapper Son Simba who disagreed with Loopy’s view. In the Instagram Live debate which lasted over an hour, Loopy stressed the necessity for the OGs in the scene to go to the U.S. to learn about hip-hop music and culture in order to improve Korean hip-hop. He claimed that he would aim to better the live performance environment for Korean rappers after his trip to the U.S. scheduled in April. On the contrary, Son Simba argued, echoing Khundi Panda and other veteran rappers such as Paloalto and Deepflow, that given the difference in capital investment and market size between the U.S. and Korea, there was no need to learn from the U.S. model and even the education would not be applicable to the Korean case. Both Khundi Panda and Son Simba’s argument neglected the fact that Korean Americans were the trailblazers localizing hip-hop in the country, and Korean rappers have been appropriating and imitating Black culture

starting from its inception. The Korean hip-hop scene has reached a critical moment where both the artists and the media should reflect on what Koreanness in K-hip hop refers to and the possible paths for it to sustainably develop into a culture instead of a lucrative occupation that anyone could capitalize on without genuine and sincere passion.

Although Son Simba claims there is no need to learn from the U.S. model when it comes to improving the industrial aspect of Korean hip-hop, it should be noted that Korean hip-hop continued to be influenced by music trends in the U.S. hip-hop scene such as the popularization of alternative rap, oftentimes referred to as emo rap, and the flex culture. The continued emulation of the American hip-hop scene and the paucity of originality are explicitly critiqued in JUSTHIS' producer cypher from *SMTM10* when he raps "No creativity, just copying America. They fight over who is more "original". But nobody can suggest a lifestyle that the public can follow" (Mnet TV, 2021).

The lack of hip-hop culture in the South Korean case despite the growing scene is also related to its lopsided commercialization. As discussed in the last chapter "Professionalization and Commercialization", South Korean mainstream media continues to capitalize on the one-dimensional materialistic image of hip-hop although the market size of hip-hop music in the country is fairly small compared to that of K-pop, either domestically or internationally. While hip-hop and R&B music clearly dominates the U.S. market by claiming a 30.7% of all on-demand plays in 2020 according to the industry monitor MRC Data compiled with Billboard (Ingham, 2021), hip-hop is the fourth favorite genre in the Korean case with ballad continuing to occupy the lead (KOCCA, 6). It is evident that the market of Korean hip-hop will continue to grow domestically, but the question of how it can be musically exported to its international audience given the existing dominance of K-pop exported internationally and the more difficult

language barrier to overcome when it comes to understanding rap lyrics in Korean, remains. Further research should focus on the interactions between the K-pop and K-hip hop industry as well as aspects of audience reception including what attracts international audience to K-hip hop the most, be it musically, visually, or how individual artists are presented through mass media.

In this thesis, I have examined the representation of South Korean hip-hop on TV and film through close readings of different media objects ranging from the hip-hop competition series *Show Me the Money*, the film *Sunset in My Hometown*, and other peripheral media such as Mnet Asian Music Awards stage performance and episodes from the Reality TV program *I Live Alone*. Through engaging with existing scholarship and analyzing how artists and media platforms in South Korea have taken hip-hop, a culture with its own racial legacy, to tell their own stories in the Korean way, I demonstrate how the development of Korean hip-hop undergoes a constant process between trying to authenticate the genre by utilizing formative elements and localizing hip-hop for its domestic audience. Critically deconstructing the representation of South Korean hip-hop through the lens of localization, gender, and commercialization, I reveal how the once negatively looked down rap music has grown tremendously in its market size and popularity.

Although the thesis grapples with the representation of South Korean hip-hop on TV and film, there exists more to explore outside of the TV and cinema mediascape. As hip-hop in Korea gradually transitions from a scene-based genre to an industry-based one (Lena, 10), further research could identify the diverse roles different media play in shaping the image of the Korean hip-hop scene, how they financially invest in developing the industry, and how they serve as gatekeepers to define what mainstream hip-hop is. I also realize that I have been using the term "hip-hop" interchangeably with rap music because it has been the most visible element circulated

on mass media in the past decades. With the popularity of other hip-hop programs such as *Street Woman Fighter* (Mnet, 2021) that showcase hip-hop dance crews, it would also be critical to expand the scope of Korean hip-hop studies to incorporate other elements of hip-hop such as DJing and breakdancing. I hope this work provides pertinent insights into the South Korean hip-hop scene and encourages media leaders, artists, and the audience to use hip-hop as a gateway to give voice to a more racially/ethnically inclusive and gender-inclusive society.

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