

**Name:** Samukelisiwe Charmaine Dube

**Student Number:** 0703364E

**Course:** Masters in African Literature– Research Report

**Supervisor:** Prof. Pumla Gqola and Dr. Litheko Modisane

**The Faces of ‘Swag’ in South African Reality Television: Representations of ‘black’ Youth Masculinities in Running with the Reps**

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## Chapter One: An Introduction

This research project investigates the representations of black<sup>1</sup> youth males in the reality television series, Running with the Reps, in order to understand ideas of black masculinity within hip-hop culture in South Africa. It does this by analyzing hip-hop culture elements such as language, music, style, and bodily disposition, as portrayed in the show.

Running with the Reps is a reality television series based on the lives and personalities of a Johannesburg based dance crew of twelve black males between the ages of 17 and 25, known as The Repertoires/The Reps<sup>2</sup>. The series originally aired on Vuzu TV from 4 March 2011 to 27 May 2011. Although The Reps consists of twelve members, only nine are cast as protagonists in the series. These are Nthato Malete, Larry “Larryngitis” Mncube-Nhlane, Michael “Mike” Makwala, Senhle “T-Chama” Mazibuko, TJ, Makhosini “The Thundacats” (this duo is made up of Thato and Kea, the youngest members in the group) as well as Tejee “DJ Ellipsis” Mbuyamba. Larry and Nthato are the leaders of the group who co-founded it in 2006 as an initiative to pioneer and promote hip-hop dancing as a career in South Africa. The show is centered on the lives of the dancers, as they share their careers, their personal lives, their business and their singular style, all in the pursuit of becoming a central entity within the South African commercial entertainment industry.

Each episode follows the lives of The Reps as they task themselves with different entertainment projects, to get a step closer towards expanding their popularity as hip-hop dancers and personalities. Each member speaks through the form of “diary entries” in front of the camera. This style of filming in reality television is often referred to as “fly on the wall” or “factual television” (Hill 2005: 2-7). This enables each of the individual members to become an active agent in documenting and telling

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<sup>1</sup> In order to distinguish between the various meanings of B/blackness in South Africa, I use ‘black’ (in lower caps) to refer to the demographic group sometimes referred to as racially African, as opposed to using ‘Black’ (upper caps) to refer to Black as defined under Black Consciousness – an antithesis to white racism that is a solid black unity that includes ‘African’, ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’. This distinction is made in order to make clear reference to the subjects of the chosen case study and the demographic in hip-hop, which they represent.

<sup>2</sup> This is the term used to refer to the group collective, while Running with the Reps is the title of the reality television series.

their story, while constantly re-introducing their personality to the viewer. This type of shooting and footage editing gives the viewer the impression that they are passive observers following people going about their daily personal and professional activities. It therefore, reinforces that what is documented on screen is indeed “reality”. As The Reps reveal their personal lived experiences, the viewer is allowed to witness the different elements and hip-hop trends that are used by the group. These will be analyzed from the selected episodes. Elements of graffiti<sup>3</sup>, krump<sup>4</sup>, and stunting<sup>5</sup> are depicted in the show’s opening title sequence. The above elements make up some of the different forms of cultural expression within global hip-hop culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Graffiti is read as an expressive form of hip-hop culture and takes the form of the unsanctioned artworks, writing of names or crew logos on walls and other public surfaces (Forman 2002: 66). It is an expression both of subversion and a kind of power; the power to disfigure (Dick Hebdige 1979). As an attempt to challenge hegemony, graffiti in hip-hop culture can be read as a form of resistance, “to interrupt the process of normalization and contradict ‘the myth of consensus’” (Hebdige 1979: 18).

<sup>4</sup> Krump is a street dance popularized in the United States that is characterized by free, expressive, exaggerated, and highly energetic movement involving the arms, head, legs, chest, and feet. Megan Anne Todd (2009) offers an interesting study on krumping. She argues that it is a contemporary practice that speaks to and through other dance practices, and to the experience of identity and community. Todd (2009: 6) further argues that krump as a performance, “negotiates within and critiques the borders of the Euro-centered hegemony, even as it emerges into/through the realms of the public transcripts of popular culture”. Krump is a distinct form of dancing that has “moved from a relatively local and marginalized practice found in Los Angeles to global spaces, through popular culture” (Todd 2009: iii). The Reps incorporate this form of dance into their routines and are one of the first South African dance crews to gain local media popularity for representing this particular element in hip-hop dance culture. Implicit in the dance’s postures of challenge and aggression, is krump’s critique of social inequity and challenge as experienced by marginalized groups. Theorizing this notion, Todd (2009: 6) cites Hazzard-Donald who states; “Hip-hop dance permits and encourages a public (and private) male bonding that simultaneously protects the participants from and presents a challenge to the racist society that marginalized them...(the dance’s) movements establish immediate external boundaries while enacting an aggressive self-definition...” Todd further explains how krump asserts bodily presence and power through the physical articulations of chest pops, arms swings, footwork, and character embodiment.

<sup>5</sup> Stunting refers to the trend of staged conspicuous consumption, as is often depicted in commercial hip-hop videos. Antonia Randolph (2006: 210) develops an enquiry into the imagery that often highlights notions of consumption in commercial hip-hop songs by examining hip-hop lyrics; “...detailed descriptions of how to spend money including scenes of eating Spaghetti, fettuccini and veal and wearing pinkie-rings while riding in gondolas ...” Randolph (2006: 210) explains how these methods of consumption can be linked to non-hegemonic notions of masculinity. “The audience is being asked to imagine what it feels like to be on a gondola with a woman pressed against the listener’s body, what it feels like to eat an expensive meal. This focus on sensual pleasure is another non-hegemonic aspect of the embodiment promoted in playa rap”. Therefore, while traditional (hegemonic) masculinity holds that men should be ascetic- not overly concerned with the pleasures of the body (Thompson & Holt, 2004 cited in Randolph 2006), the type of masculinity promoted by commercial hip-hop defies this.

Episode one of 4 March 2011 shows the journey the group embarks on in finding a home for the group, which they have dubbed as “The Rep’s Mansion”. This house is represented as adhering to certain standards of financial success and social status, as often represented in hip-hop music videos by mainstream artists such as Drake, Lil’Wayne etc. These artists often use the term “bling-bling”, alluding to their lyrical fascination with signifiers of wealth such as gold jewelry, flashy cars, and mansion houses. Later in the same episode, The Reps are witnessed making an entrance into a popular Johannesburg nightclub. The group manager and leader, Mike, explains that The Reps have their own “VIP” section, demonstrating the group’s access to exclusive celebrity treatment. The camera shifts focus to the bottles of expensive branded alcohol, therefore in itself making a statement of opulence. As demonstrated in certain hip-hop videos, exorbitant bank balances, the drinking of expensive alcohol and sporting label attire, are status symbols that The Reps aspirationally adhere to.

One of the group’s co-founders and leader of The Reps, Nthato, is often portrayed as being the “diva” in the crew. Donning an eccentric braided hairstyle, he confesses in Episode Four of 25 March 2011, that he can never leave the house without fixing his braided hair and spending some fair time in front of the mirror. The other members of the group often make fun of his supposedly “feminine” and “diva” like theatrics, making constant reference to the “fringe” of his hairstyle. This demonstrates the group’s perception of Nthato as the feminized, thereby suggesting that the preoccupation with physical appearances is not seen as a macho/masculine trait.

In the same episode, we witness a fight between Nthato and TJ, although one can contest if this is indeed a fight, as Nthato instead chooses to not fight back. Before an outbreak of physical aggression, TJ informs the rest of the members that he plans to beat up Nthato and that Nthato will have to fight back “like a real man”. He goes on to say: “I will mess him...if we don’t put a ‘nigger’ in his place, he’ll never learn”. Nthato, on the contrary, covers his face in an attempt to avoid physical scarring from TJ’s punches. Without going into the slave historic connotations of the term, what I find interesting here is the use of ‘nigger’ as a self-definitional term imported from an American racist historical context. This demonstrates the degree of the group’s assimilation into American hip-hop culture. In both its use in the confrontation as well as in the contemporary US black popular culture, ‘nigger’ brings two conflictual

meanings into collision: a white supremacist meaning as well as how black subjects reclaimed and imbued the term with new meanings. The historic and original degrading, white supremacist meanings are echoed but not the focus of its subversive contemporary use by black subjects in popular culture. The use of this term stages what I discuss above about hip-hop's complex relationship to hegemony. Furthermore, this scene reveals the representation of contrasting understandings of manhood and masculine behaviour, where aggression is often associated with a certain type of masculinity. Episode Thirteen of 27 May 2011 follows the group to a team building exercise involving various challenges set out for all the members. One of these challenges involves canoeing and it is interesting to observe how some of the group members maintain a certain masculinist posture, as they attempt to still look appealing while canoeing. The adornment of designer sneakers and sunglasses, demonstrates the importance of one maintaining, swag under all conditions. This is what they refer to as "having the swag remain intact".

Drawing from a range of hip-hop culture elements, Running with the Reps foregrounds more than the musical influence of hip-hop. However, the group appropriates the hip-hop lifestyle to the extent of acting like the hip-hop male artists themselves. As a site of study, the show enables me to unpack the visual, sonic, and sartorial codes of hip-hop culture expression and its construction of male identity. It is through the analysis of the series that this research report seeks to widen the current scholarship on black youth masculinities in South Africa.

In the wake of significant democratic transformations within the post apartheid socio-political landscape, South Africa has been marked by an ongoing project of racial integration and gender equality. This socio-political transformation has had far-reaching results in drawing public and media attention to the subjects of race and gender. This new era of self-determination however, continues to be challenged by a backdrop characterized by hiking statistics in gender-based violence, which are linked to the highest HIV infection rates amongst black youth<sup>6</sup>. While race is still an

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert Morrell (2001), Kopano Ratele (2006), Brandon Hamber (2010). Furthermore, Adam Haupt (2004c) observes that the misogynist content found in music, especially hip-hop, can be linked to gender-based socialization and the sorts of compromises women are expected to make in heterosexual encounters that are meant to be consensual, making them vulnerable to HIV infection.



important social variable in the country, it is also discernibly compounded by gender and sexuality. This reality is not delinked from the country's colonial and apartheid historic preoccupation with race and gender as markers of identity and class categorization, which were often used extensively for purposes of codified discrimination. These social processes were centered mainly on the advantages and disadvantages of being either male or female, therefore creating an impact on how young people view themselves and construct their sexual identities. Due to race, gender and class being inextricably connected in the historical context of South Africa, this study focuses on young black males. As this study demonstrates, the contemporary constructions of young black masculinities evaluated are as much a product of their time as they are legacies of the past. I am particularly attracted to the study of young males because of what I see as their high visibility in conditions that both allow for their circulation and cultivation of heteronormative understandings of gender.

As noted by Currie and Markovitz (1993: 91), cultural representation in the media is an important issue as it often relates to the construction of identity. Especially for a country like South Africa, that is undergoing significant transformations in the post-apartheid socio-political landscape, the media becomes an influential space for cultural representation. Therefore, the significance of Running with the Reps as the chosen case study lies in the role it plays in media culture as a site for the construction of black identities. I see The Reps as one of the most visible expressions of masculine cultural expressivity in South African mainstream commercial media today, therefore allowing me the opportunity to think through questions of race and gender in an expanded global dimension. As an entertainment reality series aired on DStv's youth pay television channel, Vuzu TV, the show allows me to reflect critically about the range of choices that commercialized media enable for the construction of black youth masculine identity. This is because commercial media plays a significant role in informing and constructing identity by promoting certain ideals and social constructions as normative (Strinati 1995: 14). Although, dominant ideas do not

always come from hegemonic <sup>7</sup> or Western privileged thinking, this study problematizes the ideals circulated by commercial media as often being hegemonic, in that they uphold values that are patriarchal, capitalist, and perpetuate problematic gender stereotypes. (Haupt 2008, 2004a, 2004c, Forman 2002, Randolph 2006).

In what follows, I show that The Reps as a local group of young black men have appropriated global hip-hop trends as a mode of their cultural and masculine identity expression. Although, the nature of hip-hop culture is robust and multi-layered, it can be defined as a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban societies (Rose 1994). This culture is composed of graffiti, breakdancing and rap music, originally articulating the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America (Rose 1994). I further observe that hip-hop culture as a mode of expression has transcended its origins to becoming a vanguard in global youth trends and popular culture. Looking at South Africa's socio-political historical context, we note how the youth has been able to use aspects of American popular culture, specifically hip-hop, as a way to provide themselves with new meaning and help them negotiate their landscape. Dipannita Basu and Sidney Lemelle (2006: 3) remind us that

thirty years since its inception in the South Bronx, New York City hip-hop's expressive cultures, language, music, sartorial styles, dance and art has migrated across racial, ideological and national boundaries to become one of the foremost forces in youth culture globally, resulting in a plethora of mass mediated and grassroots expressions the world over.

Scott Rosenberg's study Youth, Popular Culture, and Identity (2002) demonstrates the similarities between South Africa and Lesotho, in terms of how both countries' youth have mediated their identities through American culture. This study cites the

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<sup>7</sup> Hegemony refers to those 'dominant' ideologies that are normalized and made popular by their recurring circulation in the media. However, Antonio Gramsci problematizes an absolute understanding of hegemony and instead frames it as a process that is never complete therefore making 'dominance' a misleading description. Primarily, it is crucial to understand and acknowledge that in order for ideas or ideology to be regarded as dominant; requires for such ideas to be pervasive and accepted in society. Therefore, hegemonic forces exist in a constant pull and push struggle over power and dominance. (See Gramsci 1971)

similarities of the countries' past experiences of racial oppression, as being one of the major reasons behind America's cultural influence. What I find particularly useful in this study is the author's focus on the role of rap music and hip-hop culture in African-American identity, and how, as part of the larger penetration of American culture, it impacts youth in South Africa. Given that The Reps are cast on a commercial television channel targeted at the black youth market makes them an important part of urban black youth trends in commercial media. Furthermore, having youth cultures on commercial platforms raises the challenge of their commodification and the pervasiveness of US cultural imperialism<sup>8</sup>. In the context of this study, cultural imperialism relates to the cultural hegemony of influential societies and their manipulation of the media and popular culture, to determine and standardize general cultural values. At this stage, it is important to point out the contentions that surround the subject of cultural imperialism. As a founding figure of post-colonialism, Edward Said (1993: 282), proposes that imperialism did not suddenly become the "past", once decolonization had set in motion the dismantling of the classical empires, however a legacy of connections still binds countries. Thus, in contemporary global politics, American cultural imperialism is connected to the historical triumph of the United States as the last superpower. Offering somewhat of a counter-analysis to Said's view, John Tomlinson (1991) interrogates the role played by television, and other forms of media, as sites of cultural domination. In his contribution to the discourse, he offers a critical interpretation of cultural imperialism as a concept that is out of date and problematic due to its inability to explain what is happening in contemporary society and interpret the cultural meaning at a micro level.

Described as the "CNN of black people", by American rapper Chuck D, hip-hop was created by black youth as an art form that responded to poverty and oppression, unemployment and police brutality<sup>9</sup>. Hip-hop's ability to draw the attention of a global audience and following is a fascinating aspect of the culture's social power. Thus, the strength of the movement lies in its ability to globally serve as a mouthpiece and official voice for the marginalized. This further alludes to the role played by black

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<sup>8</sup> (For a useful overview on the globalization of hip-hop and American cultural imperialism, see introduction of Basu, D & Lemelle, S. (2006) )

<sup>9</sup> See Basu, D & Lemelle, S. (2006). The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture. London Pluto Press- for a useful overview on the origins and globalization of hip-hop.

cultural subversion in challenging the mainstream and “official truths” through social critique in music and performance. The global and transnational character that marks hip-hop now, is a result of the culture being embraced by other minority groups, globally, as a source of inspiration and liberation. However, gender in hip-hop has also proven to be an undeniably complicated terrain, given that hip-hop constitutes a powerful location for asserting what Imani Perry (2004: 118) describes as “the particularity of black male identity” (Perry 2004, hooks 2004, Rose 1994).

Given black men’s historical experience of racism and exploitation, masculinity in hip-hop reveals the complexity of black male identity. On the one hand it often reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity and, on the other, it sometimes does so at the expense of black female subjectivity. Filmmaker and activist, Byron Hurt, like other hip-hop culture critics, has explored this contradictory nature of hip-hop filled with pitfalls of violence, misogyny, and homophobia. In his noted documentary, Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes (2006), Hurt describes hip-hop music as an incarceration of macho expectations. My interpretation of this is that hip-hop creates a ‘box’ of prescriptive notions of what it is to be a man, such as, being tough, not showing vulnerability, having many sexual partners etc. Within this paradigm then, no man wants to exist outside of this framework as they might be seen as ‘docile’, ‘soft’, and essentially inferior. Living up to these expectations of a ‘macho’ identity therefore forces men to live in this ‘box’, essentially being incarcerated by expectations of such a macho identity. This idea is not different from Nghana Lewis’ assertion that masculinity in hip-hop often reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity by relying on “flat projections of black female sexuality alongside its image-rich projections of black male self-determination in a capitalist and still largely racist society” (Lewis 2006: 112). This reality has much to do with hip-hop’s identification with stereotypical masculine standards that involve the portrayal of a hard exterior and dominating women and other men who are seen as less masculine. In Lewis’ analysis, the layered meanings of black masculinity as powerful contrasts with the ‘flat’ casting of black female sexuality thus bringing into focus the hierarchy of gendered valuation in much hip-hop culture. In other words, it is not only the prioritization of black masculinity that her analysis draws attention to, but the ways in which it is constructed to ‘Other’ black gendered subjectivities.

In this study, black youth culture is understood as cultural production directed by young black subjects and forms that reference black youth experiences and imagination (Wallace 1998). This study draws on some noteworthy scholarship that explores black youth subcultures, such as kwaito and hip-hop, and engagements of what they view as the identity crises faced by young black males in the post-apartheid era (Peterson 2003, Haupt 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2008). Bhekizizwe Peterson (2003: 197) sees kwaito as an eloquent testimony of the agency of black youth, especially “their desires to create their own narratives and meanings in response to the harsh and hostile urban landscapes in which they find themselves”. Speaking directly to some of the ambiguities of kwaito as a form of cultural capital, Peterson (2003: 198) also points out that kwaito, as an expression of black youth masculine culture, is

often ambiguous, paradoxical and outright contradictory articulation with a range of social practices such as masculinity and consumption, as well as its relations with forms of authority and power such as big business and the state.

Similarly, Haupt assesses the role played by black youth subcultures in the process of democratization and black self-expression, and argues for the recognition of hip-hop in the role it has played in “smoothing the way for young black subjects’ access to the public sphere” (2004c: 20). In what follows, I demonstrate the ambivalence of black youth cultural expression as both a testimony of agency and a site of problematic discourse. This enables me to extend the conversation around the prevailing negative representations of masculine identities in commercial media. These are often marred by the negative characterization of violence and the abuse of other men and women.

Although, the scholarship adds considerable value in understanding the relationship between the South African commercial media and popular culture, I see the genre of reality television as a valuable site for considering contemporary ideas of black youth masculine identities. Reality television has become a colossal part of popular culture, based on its unwavering success in high viewership ratings on the commercial television medium (See Annette Hill 2005). This study notes the relevance of examining the types of black youth masculine identities that are currently enjoying increasing frequency within the changing landscape of popular culture in South

Africa. Moreover, this study traces its conversation from the scholarship (Haupt 2001; 2004, Watkins 2001; 2004, Marco 2009) that has recognized how the tidy binary between popular culture and dominant culture is often blurred in hip-hop. Thus, it becomes misleading to assume that popular culture simply expresses non-dominant ideas of selfhood and that the masculinities expressed in hip-hop are exclusively influenced by dominant culture.

Hip-hop studies have often explored hip-hop as an expression of black youth culture used to agitate mainstream and its dominant ideas. Within this context, mainstream is understood as those aspects of popular culture co-opted by commercial industries in order to promote capitalist and hegemonic ideals. However, as Haupt (2004a, 2004c) and Perry (2004) have spelt out, hip-hop has become a contentious terrain displaying both hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideas. Therefore, the terrain has been blurred on a number of occasions where hip-hop lyrics and videos portray a celebration of the white capitalist and patriarchal ethos of consumption.

The first chapter provides a general outline of this research project. This is the examination of the commercial media representations of black youth masculinities, in South African reality television. Focusing on content analysis (visual, verbal and sonic content) in Running with the Reps, this research examines the elements of hip-hop culture such as language, music, style, and bodily disposition as constitutive elements in the construction of masculine identity.

Locating itself within the terrains of popular culture, hegemony, black masculinities and global hip-hop culture trends, the second chapter is a critical examination of the treatment of these issues within the general literature on popular culture, masculinities and hip-hop. It also outlines the methodology that is used in this dissertation. In the light of the arguments by Dominic Strinati and Stuart Hall, the chapter demonstrates the contentious nature of popular culture and its constant tension between consent and resistance. It examines the tensions that are at play when popular culture becomes subsumed under a commercial media monopoly. Using Haupt's work as an entry into the discussion of hip-hop as a vehicle for the construction of masculinities, I further engage both local and global literature. This is to explore the extent to which the representations and understandings of black male identity in privatized commercial

television are often premised on hegemonic values that are patriarchal, capitalist, and perpetuate problematic gender stereotypes. The key conceptual tool employed is that of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the culturally idealized forms of being a “real man”. Thus, the media as a space for cultural representation plays an important role in the fashioning of black male selfhood and how sexual difference is constructed. Furthermore, I examine masculinities studies that are concerned with black men’s identities. Using the works of R. W. Connell, Morrell and Ratele, I consider the understandings of manhood as a social practice that manifests itself in many forms and show their significance in interpreting young black masculinities and the politics of how they are represented in commercial television media.

The third and fourth chapters focus on the analysis of the themes identified in this project’s case study. The themes that are the focal point of chapter three and four are taken from the episodes and title music of Running with the Reps. The third chapter provides a description of the themes explored in the series mentioned above. It does this by identifying each theme, describing its signifiers and how it finds its expression. This will be followed by the fourth chapter, which presents an analysis of the themes and what they reveal about masculinities and the relationship between popular culture and hegemony.

This study has four questions. These are:

What do the body styling choices of The Reps reveal?

What does the music chosen as the soundtrack for Running with the Reps represent?

How is language used as a tool for constructing ideas of selfhood?

What do the interpersonal relationships between The Reps and women reveal about their understanding of masculinity?

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter investigates the connections between young black masculinities and their representations within the framework of commercial media production- specifically reality television. It focuses on key discourses in studies of popular culture, hip-hop, black masculinities, and ideology and notions of media representation. This chapter will further examine the tensions that are at play when popular culture becomes subsumed under commercial media monopoly.

### **2.2 Popular culture and hegemony**

In the last few decades, globally there has been much study of ‘popular culture’, an area in which television programmes play an interesting role in providing a broad context for thinking about the ideological meaning of defining realities in the popular imagination. Television, as a symbol of global technological advancement, has become a part of the everyday reality regarding what may be seen as the “global village” community (Strinati 1995). Almost every household has direct access to this form of media and the programming circulated within it implies an interesting dynamic in terms of ideological and cultural consumption (ibid). Most scholarship (Hall 1993, Strinati 1995, Barber 1997, Fiske in Hinds, Motz & Nelson 2006) has drawn attention to the contentious nature of popular culture as a terrain in constant tension between consent and resistance.

The key to grasping popular culture and its intersection with corporate capitalism, in all its dynamism and complexity, lies with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in Selections from the Prison Notebooks (1971). An Italian Marxist of the 1920s and 1930s, Gramsci had developed the term to explain the idea of the contestation among conflicting forces on the ideological terrain in which elites impose their views and establish the legitimacy of their power and privilege over non-elites. This concept developed the notion within cultural studies that culture was an apparatus within a large system of domination. In offering a critique of culture’s hegemonic effects theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the essay The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, denounced the culture industry for its role in producing standardized products for the benefit of the capitalist economy, therefore resulting in the loss of true freedom and individuality. In the 1970s a form



of structuralism emerged within cultural studies, where Louis Althusser's approach to the question of ideology refused to be confined by conventional Marxist doctrine. For Althusser, ideology was not a passive relation between the economic base and superstructure, but a pervasive set of dynamic conditions where individuals were constructs of ideology. Ideology in this instance refers to the set of discourses and images, which constitute the most widespread knowledge and values. This means that the process of producing popular culture is one that is social but is also formed by being based on certain ideologies. This is drawn from the socialist perspective based around the Marxist theories of 'ideology' and 'hegemony'. Both these concepts are used as a way of understanding how the dominant groups of any society maintain and retain their power over subordinate groups (women, racially oppressed/marginal groups, the working class, and so on).

This study utilizes Gramsci's theory of dominant ideology to examine the role played by commercial media as a site generating normative understandings of gendered identities. This research report understands the notion of normative as being inscribed by dominant ideology. Therefore, using Gramsci's theory of hegemony allows me to interrogate how popular culture can be used to indoctrinate society or is sometimes available for purposes of promoting dominant ideas and values, which ensure the continued dominance of those in more privileged positions. Problematizing the notion of hegemony, Gramsci sees this as a battle to exercise moral and intellectual leadership therefore, it is not only about dominance but it involves the marginal as well. The latter is proven by the fact that hip-hop culture was appropriated by mainstream after those who existed in marginal spaces started it. This demonstrates that hegemony is indeed a process that is never complete therefore, making "dominance" a misleading description. It is also crucial to understand and acknowledge that in order for ideas or ideology to be regarded as dominant; they have to be pervasive or appear to be generally accepted in society.

Major developments were made on this critique when Hall (1993) critically analyzed the value and developments of cultural studies to cover issues of identity, race, the notion of the Other and representation in media. His critical analysis of the ambivalent nature of popular culture is a worthy contribution to this report, as it sees

the popular in a constant struggle for hegemony and consent. Hall (1993:3) asserts that:

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that's not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it.

Hall's analysis of 'hegemony' recognizes the role of the subordinate groups in producing ways of 'making sense' of the world and in producing meaning. This suggests that the 'hegemony' or power of the dominant groups can only be maintained through a struggle and tension between dominant and subordinate groups. As opposed to the view that holds popular culture as a form of dominant ideology, the notion of hegemony requires one to consider the agency of subordinate groups (young black audiences) in making sense of black male selfhood. This is helpful in helping me articulate the ways in which The Reqs engage dominant constructions of identity with specific reference to masculinity representations of black identities in hip-hop culture. The ideologies that inform The Reqs representations of black masculinity are examined in this study, with results illustrating whether these representations support the ideologies that make up popular culture, or whether they are alternative to them. In so doing, Running with the Reqs in its representational work falls into the category of popular culture.

Since my study is concerned with reading the images of young black male representations in Running with the Reqs, I find it useful to use Hall's encoding and decoding theoretical account of how messages are produced and disseminated in television. It is in Encoding, Decoding (1990) that Hall challenges the linear model of looking at how meaning is created from media texts by defining it as a "complex structure in dominance". He asserts that it is useful to think of the process in terms of "a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments - production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (1990: 51). Within the context of this study, Running with the Reqs is a product of commercial media however, based on the fact that it is a reality show, this means one has to consider The Reqs own agency in reproducing meaning, since the storyline is

determined by the experiences they share and how they choose to articulate them. This enables each of the individual members to become an active agent in documenting and telling their story therefore, reinforcing that what is documented on screen is indeed “reality” and not a construct of fictitious characters.

All the stages in producing meaning from media texts, although autonomous from each other, have an impact on how images are finally interpreted and reproduced by audiences. Therefore, Hall’s argument is that “messages have a complex structure of dominance because at each stage they are imprinted by institutional power-relations” (1990: 51). This means that the production of meaning, through circulated media texts, requires that once the text is distributed to audiences it needs to be consumed and interpreted into social practices for it to mean something. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, Hall asserts; it has no effect. Therefore, this approach complicates the process of how discourse is created through media production and consumption. How Hall (1990: 53) explains this is that:

Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole. At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be ‘realized’. This initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance. Before this message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use’, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which, have an effect, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences.

What Hall is suggesting here is that through popular culture, publics are able to defy and confront dominant power structures. In this case, socio-cultural ideas that are circulated and normalized are questioned and challenged by those who engage with them. The usefulness of Hall’s contribution comes into play when we unpack the

complicated terrain of the television sign, constituted by visual and aural elements. Therefore, Hall's theory of encoding and decoding allows me to lucidly unpack the visual and aural elements in hip-hop, as engaged by The reps in their construction of masculine identities. Since ideology is inscribed and communicated through implicit meanings, in texts and practices, I also seek to examine the ideologies that inform The Reps' construction of black masculine identity. The results will help in illustrating whether these constructions support the ideologies that make up popular culture, or whether they are alternative to them.

In order to understand the colliding spaces between popular culture and media, this study places popular culture within the larger framework of media as a public space, "especially in view of how popular culture today is so closely bound up with the mass media" (Strinati 1995: xv). Strinati critiques the commercial need to make a profit as having a corrupting influence on the culture produced. Thus, I see The Reps as playing an interesting role, based on the fact that they subscribe to certain elements of the hip-hop culture whilst they are also representatives of a commercial media platform. I find this useful as a point of entry in discussing the role played by The Reps, within the collapsing spaces of commercial media and popular culture. Placing the group within those communities that are influenced by global hip-hop trends, Hall's discussion of hegemony and representation will help me examine the group's engagement with normative masculinities in hip-hop. The commercial television media in this instance becomes one of the most crucial sites for the construction of black masculine identity, through which ideologies are produced, and by which hegemony is entrenched/reinforced.

Therefore, in deconstructing the popular, black popular culture like all popular cultures in the contemporary world is not exempt from being contradictory. The terrain of popular culture, including black popular culture is one

of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur (Hall 1993: 4).

Hall theorizes representation as an act of reconstruction rather than reflection, for when we decode the images circulated in commercial television, there stands an entire world of beliefs, ideas, and values. This view implies that the way in which images are represented is an intentional exercise of power in constructing meaning. Thus, a critical approach to cultural studies recognizes representation as an act of ideological recreation that serves the specific interests of those who control the media (Hall 1993). Therefore, it is important to determine normative understandings of gender within the collapsing spaces of commercial media and popular culture.

Placing the contentious nature of popular culture within the African context, Barber critiques the European model of popular culture and its ambiguities. Given the hybridity of the popular cultural productivity in Africa, Barber opts to use the term “arts” instead of a superseding Western definition. This definition is superseding in that it homogenizes the experiences of “culture”. Barber observes that; “The concept of popular arts in Africa has yet to be theoretically constructed, and that popular arts is a category that seems to be characterized by its inclusiveness, and its apparently infinite elasticity” (1987: 6). Thus, the concept of “popular” is one that has a legacy of difficulties and ambiguities, especially within the context of Africa’s shifting heterogeneity in culture. Further demonstrating the contentious nature of popular culture, Barber (1997: 3) observes:

Popular culture in many discourses occupies a self-evidently positive position, and the task then becomes one of distinguishing between what is ‘truly’ popular, and what is contaminated by hegemonic ideological infiltrations from above...that which truly serves the interests of the people by opening their eyes to the historical conditions of their existence- and peoples culture, that which emanates from the people but which is a form of false consciousness, working against their true interests by fostering acceptance of the status quo.

### **2.3 Representing black masculinities**

This research also draws on masculinities studies that are concerned with black masculinities and defines the concept of masculinity as the engendering of both the male and female physical bodies, in accordance with certain expectations (Connell 2005, Morrell 1998; 2001; 2005, Ratele 2008; 2013). This is directly linked to Judith Butler's (1993) notion of gender as a cultural construct that describes how bodies should perform according to the social constructions of maleness and femininity. Connell, who has become associated mostly with the development of masculinity studies, took an interest in both Marxist and Gramscian ideas, and the notions of hegemony and ruling class. This development in studies of gender made a link between masculinity and the notion of hegemony, explaining that there are several masculinities, which operate in any one arena. This was a more complex model of gender hierarchy that recognized the agency of subordinated groups. The development of scholarly views on gender and masculinities are in themselves a demonstration of the notion that masculinities are in constant evolution as a process informed by cultural, social, political, and personal values and expectations. Furthermore, this will help in understanding how heteronormative modes of masculinity get to be enforced as normative, while suppressing alternative understandings of male identity.

The key conceptual tool employed in this report's analysis of masculinity is that of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the "culturally idealized" (Connell 2005: 83) forms of being "a real man" and sees patriarchy as often resulting in the subordination of both women and other men (Morrell 2001: 3). This model is seen as more encompassing by helping one understand the double jeopardy faced by black males, since the patriarchal dividend of masculinity only considers that all men, by virtue of being men, have a social advantage over women. Therefore, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful because it allows for the differentiation between groups of men who have more or less power in relation to each other and a dominant group. Scholarship on masculinities, formulated three decades ago, has considerably influenced recent thinking about men, gender, and social hierarchy. It also provides a link between the growing research field of men's studies, feminist accounts of patriarchy, and sociological models of gender (Connell 2005: 829). The year 1985 marks a major development in gender studies, as scholarship extensively critiqued the

literature informed by notions of the “male sex role”, and proposed a model of multiple masculinities and power relations.

Looking at Morrell’s study on African Masculinities (2005) as a departure from masculinities studies that have only focused on patriarchal privilege, this report contests the notion which asserts that all men are the same or that they benefit the same from gender privileging. Shifting towards black masculinities focused framework, Morrell (2005: 4) suggests that by discarding an essentialist views of manhood “allows one to distinguish meaningfully among different collective constructions of masculinity and to identify power inequalities among these constructions”. In as much as this research focuses on the contemporary constructions of black masculinities, it also takes into cognizance that black men have to contend with both the legacy of colonialism and the current impact of globalization. Morrell (2005: 7-8) adds that another factor that black men have to contend with is their complex positioning as “other”. This means that our understanding of how black masculinities, black male bodies, subjectivities, and experiences are constituted depends on specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. Morrell’s analysis is productive in urging the reader to question and locate the gaze offered by commercial media (which remains white owned) and what normative political implications come with how it represents black men. He explains how

[t]his process of Othering the discursive creation of the white man’s Other, described and pathologized the African male in order to define the European as inherently different and superior (Morrell 2005: 10).

Placing Morrell’s question of the othering gaze within the context of this research is important in helping me unpack some of the normative representations of black masculinities in Running with the Reps. The manner in which race and masculinity is determined occurs through institutionalizing specific notions and ideologies about black male identity. These ideas are then performed by subjects and are strictly controlled and monitored through the ideologies of those in power. Thus, masculinity should be thought of as a performance of identity and it is important to understand how specific ideologies constitute and construct black bodies. This then forces one to interrogate the gaze through which Vuzu, as a private white male owned medium,

represents young black men, their bodies and their experiences.

Similarly to Morrell, Kopano Ratele's study Masculinity and Male Mortality in South Africa (2008) considers masculinity as heterogeneous, fluid and multiple in its nature. His study assesses how certain modes of masculinity get to be enforced as hegemonic, while suppressing alternative understandings of male identity and simultaneously perpetuating the subordination of females. These prevailing ideas of masculinity are often characterized by a culture of violence and abuse inflicted by men against other men and women. Accordingly, Ratele's study is underpinned by the concern that a ruling idea of masculinity can be closely associated with the causes of male death and their increasing invisibility in the country's population statistics.

Ratele (2008: 20) places his study within the framework of masculinities studies stating that; "masculinities are subjected to historical change, cultural dynamics, local and active intra-male group rivalry, inter-gender struggles, and psychic ambivalence" (Ratele 2008: 21). This approach is helpful in helping me determine the different types of masculinities represented in the case study, Running with the Reps and the ways in which these masculinities are organized in a hierarchy, where the most valued masculinity is situated as dominant. Ratele (2008: 21) asserts that

ruling masculinity seeks to encapsulate and emphasize how the specificities of highly inequitable economic relations, political arrangements, culturally embedded relations and colonial histories observable in countries such as South Africa, shape how men behave, think and relate to others. Ruling masculinity is taken up as a practicable, ideological position shaped primarily by the dynamics of history, the weight of socio-economic structures and group-based power and resistance.

This research report understands Ratele's (2008: 21) notion of "ruling masculinity" as being synonymous with normative/hegemonic masculinity, which indicates

a design of practices, relations, and supportive cognitive and affective discourses that seek to have us believe in the naturalness of men's power over women, other men, and children (Ratele: 2006).



This definition will prove valuable for my analysis of the representations of normative masculinities, as engaged by The Reps. These representations are considered normative by the standards of the hip-culture appropriated by the group. Ratele further explains, that the normative ideas of a ruling masculinity often encourage the culture of violence and abuse inflicted by men against other men and women. He also links the consequence of violence to other positions of power, which men try to achieve or fortify their control of the material and discursive environment around themselves. Illustrating this point Ratele (2008: 22) states,

[f]or example, the action of a male who insults, slaps, or points a gun at another can be explained as showing his dominance over others, but also as underlining a certain form of masculinity.

Violence appears as a recurring theme in Running with the Reps, therefore citing Ratele becomes a preliminary discussion in helping me situate the links made between violence and masculinity as seen in the show. This will be further unpacked in the discussions in chapters three and four

Expanding on the notion of “ruling masculinity”, Ratele further argues against the idea that men are naturally heterosexual and “masculine” in the study Ruling Masculinity and Sexuality. Here Ratele draws from pro-feminist studies of men and masculinity to connect a link between Jacob Zuma’s rape trial and the notions of public morality in South Africa. Ratele (2006: 49) sees the trial as a site that tells us about sexualities, gender and, in particular, masculinities in contemporary South Africa. Detailing the facts of the trial and their link to certain notions of sexualities and ruling masculinity, Ratele explains:

A range of moments from the rape trial of Zuma point to the links between sexualities and a ruling masculinity. These moments include the fact that Zuma, who was at one time tasked with leading the anti-HIV and Aids campaign, knowingly had unprotected sex with a woman he knew to be HIV positive; that he stated in court that he had sex even though no condoms were available because in his culture, a man could be accused of rape for leaving a

woman sexually aroused; and that he testified that he had taken a shower after the incident because he believed this would reduce the risk of infection.

The above quotation draws us to the jarring contradiction of Zuma being in the forefront of a national media campaign set to encourage people to talk openly about sexuality as part of the larger project to stem the spread of HIV/Aids. Furthermore, Ratele perceives Zuma's past refusal to speak openly about oral sex as constituting "a psychology, politics and culture unsupportive of sexual practices other than those acceptable to what can be called a historically ruling masculinity" (Ratele 2006: 51). This ruling masculinity is described as having

some of its constituent elements assert heterosexuality, control of economic decisions within (and outside) the home, political authority, cultural ascendancy, and support for male promiscuity (Ratele 2006: 51).

Therefore, Zuma by virtue of his privileged social and political positioning can be easily viewed as the embodiment of the true masculine. This is also anchored by how ruling masculinity has the powerful ability of organizing ideas on sexuality and human rights, since it is not only about what a male says or does about sex, but equally about the techniques of power. Thus, the notion of a ruling heterosexual masculinity is not only tacitly implied but also championed in the public dialogues headed by those with social and political influence. Placing this within my study's context is helpful in ascertaining how commercial media formulates popular understandings of masculinity and how The Reps as subjects of popularity embody these ideas. Therefore, the construct of masculinities supported by dominant power, aggressively reassert their ascendancy over other forms and subsequently sexuality becomes a site of contestation and the ground whereon a nation or culture fashions and reforms itself (Ratele 2006: 59).

Another study by Ratele entitled Of What Value is Feminism to Black Men (2013) makes an interesting departure from the existing scholarship on black men and masculinities. Ratele (2013: 256) argues that a critical enquiry on black masculinities ought to go beyond merely observing that men's genders are "culturally constructed, multiple, changeable and historically contingent". This critical engagement with

masculinities studies, made by Ratele challenges us to start being more imaginative in the ways we understand men's identities. Thus, the study is an effort at contributing to the development of progressive masculinities. Ratele (2013: 257) sees this development as "(re)engaging particularly black and African feminisms 'for' black men, alongside critical black thought...to liberate black masculinities". The study goes on to critique a strand of the black radical thought - specifically, black consciousness philosophy. Ratele critiques the view that perceives black man's troubles as emerging out of the historical white racist order, by asserting that it underemphasizes black men's complicity with hetero-patriarchy<sup>10</sup>. This analysis enables this research to consider some of the ways in which the types of black masculinities that are represented and constructed in Running with the Reps may not merely be reconstructions of the white capitalist and consumerist values championed in commercial hip-hop. This research also considers the ways in which the subjects of the show demonstrate a level of agency in constructing their own ideas of black male selfhood. However, this is not to discount the fact that patriarchal capitalist domination is a force that continues to weigh down black masculinities.

## **2.4 Representing masculinities in hip-hop**

The aforementioned discussions of popular culture and black masculinities, leads me to the key discussion of hip-hop as a vehicle for the construction of masculinities. The use of hip-hop studies allows me to examine the ways in which commercial hip-hop speaks to certain ideas about masculinity and although these are at times hegemonic, its conceptions of power are not always linear and uncomplicated. By using hip-hop studies as a framework, I am able to raise questions about the extent to which The Reps are able to construct their identities within commercial media. As a local group that has appropriated global hip-hop trends in their own enactments of male identity, my interest is the extent to which the group displays normative/hegemonic constructions of masculinity, based on their relations to women and displaying capitalistic modes of consumption. Therefore, the literature review now turns its attention to the representations of black masculine identity/s through the use of hip-hop elements such as language, bodily styling, and music in Running with the Reps.

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<sup>10</sup> Hetero-patriarchy refers to the problematic normative thinking that encourages the dominance of men and the subordination of women. This means that what men assert as their right 'to access' women, is ensured by the ideology that woman is for man.

The last two decades have heralded a growth of academic literature analyzing hip-hop music and the culture that emerged along side the music (Haupt 2001; 2004; 2008, Forman 2002, Marco 2009, Perry 2004, Rose 1994, Watkins 2001; 2004). The genre of music was born in the late 1960s and began to gain popularity in America during the 1980s. Four forms of expression were all interconnected within the broader framework of hip-hop culture: break dancing, graffiti art, rapping (rhyming over a beat) and Deejaying. A number of studies on hip-hop read it as a genre of music but also as a form of contestation to mainstream media; contesting mainstream ideas about gender and masculinity (Rose 1994, Forman 2002). This position on hip-hop is linked to what the culture signified during the course of its inception. At the time, hip-hop culture signified a creative movement formed to reflect and comment on the adverse social conditions experienced by black youths. However, over time hip-hop music grew in popularity and became a global financial commodity, giving young black people a voice for cultural expression (Forman 2002).

The initial literature on hip-hop, primarily focused on the genre as an American phenomenon and Rose (1994) was one of the first hip-hop scholars that began to reflect on the depth of hip-hop culture as a space used for the negotiation of meaning relating to politics, identity and other social issues. More recently however, hip-hop, as a form of black youth cultural expression, has become a focal point for research that has been conducted from a variety of different disciplines and in different contexts. The development of hip-hop culture in countries outside of America has created much debate around the adoption of the cultural behavior or global trends. At the core of these debates is the concern that the global community may be headed towards a state of becoming 'homogenized' or 'Americanized' (Basu & Lemelle 2006). Rosenberg (2002) alternatively, argues that by having incorporated aspects of American culture into their own identity, this was a means by South African youth to reject apartheid's racial hierarchy. Therefore, the ways in which youth appropriate global cultural trends becomes in itself a way of rejecting hegemony.

Hip-hop, as an object of study also enables me to look at the complex intersections between culture, commerce, and gender. Feminist scholars such as Perry (2004) have contributed to the development of the hip-hop studies field by bringing attention to

gender and sexual politics within the genre. In Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop (2004), Perry uses hip-hop to provide a magnifying lens to the study of black masculinities, which she defines as a study that excises the assumption of patriarchy, as a discussion of sexual politics in the black community. This suggests that the efficacy in studying black masculinities is that it enables a more encompassing investigation of the intersections between class, social power, and economic market places. Perry explains that the black male's privilege within the terrain of patriarchy is ambivalent, asserting that

The white male patriarch describes powerful and resonant social role. The black male patriarch, where he exists, lives a fragile existence, mediated by his own encounters with white male patriarchy (2004: 119).

Therefore, black men as gendered and racial beings occupy a specific, constructed and oppressed role in society, one from which they must be liberated with a sophisticated political understanding of the grounds of their oppression (Perry 2004).

Black masculinities constructed in hip-hop are further complicated by what Perry explains as the mass production and co-optation by the mainstream in hip-hop subcultures, which do more than serve the interests of power structures over communities. In my analysis of Running with the Reps, the themes of consumerism and conspicuous consumption touch on the subjects of male desire and pleasure derived from the adornment of the self. Perry (2004: 197) further explains how

these ideas are rooted in a long tradition of black sartorial expression, where style proves important...status is attached to the goods, not in mimicry of white privilege, but rather in an effort to recast status...

Additionally, Marco provides a feminist study of hip-hop in post-apartheid South Africa. This literary contribution by feminist scholars has allowed hip-hop scholarship to start dealing with the ways in which hip-hop tropes exert a defining influence on young male aspirations and behavior, also seeing rappers as ambivalent cultural exemplars of black masculine performance.

In this part of the report, I move towards a discussion of South African hip-hop scholarship. Similar to its western counterparts, local scholarship on hip-hop also largely links hip-hop with discourses on identity and race in the country. Lee Watkins in “Simunye, We Are Not One”: Ethnicity, Difference and the Hip-Hoppers of Cape Town (2004) writes about South African hip-hop’s association with race and class consciousness, as well as political mobilization. Given the country’s apartheid history, the notion of race in hip-hop is highly contentious and the category of ‘blackness’ is spoken of as one of heterogeneity and difference. Watkins explains that,

During apartheid, identities were monolithic, prescribed and simple. Now, however, they are contested, ambivalent and re-invented, even if this means having to identify with others outside the borders of the country (2004: 32).

Therefore, hip-hop as a form of black youth cultural expression has been able to transcend global borders and act as a voice for the marginalized. Contesting Watkins’ analysis however, one can argue that black identities were never monolithic or simple and they were never only prescribed. This is based on a long history of identification with people beyond South African borders whether politically or culturally, e.g. SA jazz and urban masculine dress styles throughout the last two centuries.

Watkins traces the roots of South-African hip-hop to the Cape in the 1980s where it emerged as a response to the oppressive and racist regime of the apartheid government (2004: 30). The importance of the study lies in its ability to demonstrate the hip-hop subjects’ agency in actively constructing their identities and mediating ways of countering dominance. Watkins also explains that

through the media of song, dance and spray-painting, hip-hoppers address the feeling of being politically marginalized. The discourse of ethnicity is central to their interpretations of relations of power (2004: 31).

Power relations in this instance, play a role in how hip-hop is able to subvert “official” narratives of history through recreating and redefining notions of ‘blackness’ and race. This can be related to The Reps engagement with hip-hop culture trends such as break dancing and krumping. Their appropriation of these

cultural elements also becomes a site demonstrating both agency and the subversion of dominance. It is in this light that hip-hop music can be seen as a space of critical contestation of hegemonic racial discourses in South Africa. While this account of hip-hop's relationship with race and politics of dominance is one that adds considerable value to scholarship, it remains silent on hip-hop's engagement with gender.

It is in trying to give voice to these silences that Haupt (2004a) emerges as one of the few scholars in South Africa to write extensively on hip-hop and the ways in which subjects are able to engage critically with hegemony, as active agents or producers within the context of global capitalism. In his text entitled Hip-Hop in the Age of Empire: Cape Flats Style (2004a), Haupt (2004a: 3) draws a distinction between conscious hip-hop and hip-hop subsumed in commercial media. Haupt defines the latter, gangsta rap, as a commercial and politically diluted spin-off of conscious hip-hop. 'Gangsta/Playa' rap is a type of hip-hop that is characterized by its promotion of young black male artists' financial success, exemplified by exhibitions of opulence and consumptive practices in the form of jewelry, sports cars, lavish property and female sexual attention as seen in many of the genre's music videos. This is useful in unpacking how The Reps engage with hip-hop culture trends such as the conspicuous consumption exhibited their body styling choices, their access to exclusive nightclubs, their use of hip-hop slang and how they relate to women.

Explaining the space occupied by commercial hip-hop in constructing problematic notions of selfhood, Haupt (2004a: 5) asserts:

Much gangsta rap (with the possible exception of Tupac Shakur) has, to date, displayed very little evidence of the hip-hop concept of knowledge of self and certainly makes no real attempt to engage critically with structures of domination. Many gangsta rap lyrics centre around the accumulation of wealth, male sexual conquests, drug abuse and misogyny.

Haupt argues that, the ascendance of gangsta rap has not been by chance, but rather deliberate since its sexist and misogynist ways of thinking are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society. He further contends that these values are created and

sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It is no surprise that “one key aspect of hip-hop - rap music, albeit gangsta rap has been co-opted by the mainstream, thereby diluting rap’s subversive potential” (Haupt 2004a: 7). Similarly, hip-hop fashion and graffiti have been co-opted into the mainstream culture thus delegitimizing the subversive power of both forms. The importance of hip-hop and rap consequently lies in the fact that it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local forms of identification all over the world. The major anxiety expressed by hip-hop scholars around the uncritical consumption of hip-hop as American popular culture, is based on the values that it promotes (Basu & Lemelle 2006, Pennycook 2007, Haupt 2004a; 2004c).

Another major development within hip-hop studies lies in the article Globalization and Gangster Rap: Hip-Hop in the Post Apartheid City (2006). Here, Zine Magubane illustrates the complex nature of adopting cultural behavior and global trends through the consumption of hip-hop by local black youth. She begins by explaining how

music has been one of the primary mechanisms through which black South Africans have accessed African-American culture and used it as a vehicle for formulating and articulating critiques of and responses to the social forces that structure their lives(2006: 208).

Taking this into account, it is evident that the global spread of hip-hop culture follows an existing terrain of African-American culture’s global influence.

When assessing the impact of a globalized economic system on local lived experience, there are those who argue that globalization inevitably means ‘Americanization and/or cultural homogenization’. Alternatively, some scholars insist that

local cultures exhibit a great deal of resilience in the face of cultural imperialism and are able to assimilate and indigenize significant elements of Western culture, while still retaining a sense of cultural integrity (Magubane 2006: 209).



Magubane critiques the linear approach that views globalization as a project of cultural homogenization. She argues that it has the tendency to homogenize both 'the West' and 'the Rest', thereby discounting the complexity of the world and power relations. Slavery's historical legacy has convoluted the experiences of black people with the world and how they are assimilated or positioned within the global context. Illuminating this point, Magubane (2006: 210) asserts:

Although African Americans dominate the American culture industry, and the export of American culture is often tantamount to the export of African-American culture, the sometimes liminal status of African-American culture with respect to modernity and 'the West' complicates any simple definition of what we mean by the globalization of 'Western' or 'American' culture.

Hip-hop exhibits an array of contradictions in its ability to critique Western imperialism while simultaneously celebrating misogyny, sexual dominance, consumerism, and capitalism. "As a result, when it is 'indigenized' both elements become available for interpretation and incorporation" (Magubane 2006: 210). On the imbalance of commercial media power-relations, Magubane raises a salient point explaining that since African-American artists have no control over the domestic distribution of their music, it is the white media owners who determine which African-American products enter the global arena. Although this demonstrates a major imbalance in the scale of power, there are still spaces of agency that we see being exercised by black South African hip-hop artists. Language is a distinct way in which local black youth exercise their self-representational power through the use of vernacular terms.

Magubane also argues that transnational corporations operate on the principle that "the quickest way to access South African black youth is through subcultures" (2006: 220). Therefore, through the circulation of commercial hip-hop and its inherent capitalist characteristics, it is easier and more impactful to perpetuate ideals of consumerism. This argument reiterates the notion that "transnational corporations are much less interested in homogenizing or Americanizing the 'Other' than they are interested in assessing whether local attitudes towards consumption are in line with American attitudes" (Magubane 2006: 220). Notions of pleasure and consumption are

well-staged themes in commercial hip-hop lyrics and videos. Closely linked to the performance and construction of certain types of masculine identities, I observe how consumerism influences hip-hop culture.

Further elaborating on the manifestation of subordinate men's masculinity in popular culture, Antonia Randolph examines the construction of black masculinity in rap music. In his study; "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful": Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music (2006), Randolph is able to demonstrate the alternative views of masculinity as represented in playa rap. He explains:

rap's promotion of an alternative form of masculine embodiment points to the limitations of hegemonic masculinity as a lens for understanding subordinated men. Some argue that while playa rap may seem at first glance to endorse non-hegemonic modes of embodiment, others argue that its lyrics actually promote an embodiment that is in service of the hegemonic goals of controlling women and displaying capitalistic success (Randolph 2006: 200).

The above analysis is useful in providing us with an understanding of how the appropriation of hip-hop as a form of popular culture, can produce certain types of masculinities, which can resemble a normative understanding of masculinity constituting an ideal to which men outside of hip-hop aspire.

Randolph broadens his argument and asserts that there is a level of agency demonstrated by black men, as they have some control over the masculinities they construct. This control is demonstrated in how "...rappers change their construction of masculinity not just to exert dominance over competing masculinities, but to reap the rewards of a dominant culture that they do not control" (Randolph 2006: 204). However, this is conditioned by the institutional power of dominant men and/hegemonic masculinity. In this regard, Randolph makes an interesting departure from the orthodoxy that rappers constantly seek to assert male dominance. He further observes that many analyses of identity formation in rap are couched either as studies of blackness, not of black masculinity, or merely note the dominance of men in hip-hop but do not analyze it (Randolph 2006: 205). He also explains how commercial viability plays a role in determining popular culture trends. Thus, the trends that enjoy

more mainstream representation and success are those financially supported by the corporate companies. This is witnessed in the evolution of hip-hop, moving from political towards gangsta rap and a more contemporary example being playa rap. Randolph's analysis is very useful in helping me understand the category of masculinity The Reps fall under. By appropriating his definition of normative masculinity, I am able to locate The Reps within the specific intersections of blackness and maleness while also being at the center of popular culture.

In order to elucidate the discussion of hip-hop trends as markers of black masculine identity, this report turns to Greg Dimitriadis' text entitled Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip-Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice (2001). In the aforementioned study, Dimitriadis uses an ethnographic approach in order to theorize the interplay between notions of self, as identified by black youth, and the normative understandings circulated in popular culture. Illustrating how popular culture is able to provide the narratives that young people draw on to deal with the issues and concerns most pressing in their lives, Dimitriadis states:

A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities (2001: 35).

In this text, Dimitriadis looks at some of the striking ways in which black youth use hip-hop media texts. Discussing 'black popular culture', from its production to its reception, he asserts that; "young people today are using contemporary media to define themselves and to map their daily lives in ways that often confound adults" (Dimitriadis 2001: 35). He further, notes the complexity of the role of popular media on the lives of the youth who are the object of his research. Dimitriadis also looks at how the youth's relations with the opposite sex form part of their self-fashioning. He observes how;

Playing was a construct that many teens- boys as well as girls- used to talk about romantic relationships, in which manipulation for sex and money and affection was the seeming ultimate ideal and hurt and loss were at risk (Dimitriadis 2001: 46).

These ideas were adopted from the lyrics of the hip-hop music listened to by the black youths. Thus, in examining the media as a site for the self-fashioning of black youth, Dimitriadis' study is useful to my discussion on the hip-hop culture trends engaged by the young black males in Running with the Reps. The media's power in defining young people's identity constructions is problematized by Dimitriadis, as the expressive forms circulated in popular culture, often reproduce racial and gendered stereotypes.

In order to understand the media's impact in reproducing problematic racial and gendered images of black men, I draw on Miles White's text entitled; From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity (2011). This text examines the ways in which, objectified, fetishized, and commodified representations of black males and the projections of masculinity associated with them have been adopted and co-opted as performative tropes that have exerted a defining influence on young male constructions of identity. Primarily, White is concerned with the ways in which the black male body has been objectified and circulated in popular culture. Explaining the ways in which popular culture has used hip-hop to reconstruct colonial perceptions of black male identity, White asserts:

The mainstreaming of hip-hop culture and the idea of the hard man-a revisitation of the black brute who is immune to physical and emotional pain-have had a transfiguring effect on contemporary constructions of masculine performance over the last twenty-five or so years for males of all racial and ethnic groups (White 2011: 4).

The image and idea of the hard black man has been exploited and sold by commercial media, without any explanation or recognition of its history of resistance to oppression that is so central to its genesis. Therefore, although black men have become more visible within media spaces, their contemporary images do little to

address their history of segregation and displacement. More so, black men's legacies of oppression means that historically they belonged within unprivileged hierarchal structures of masculinities. Due to the popularity of the urban gangsta figure, which was developed largely as a result of the commodification of hip-hop culture, the representation of black men in popular culture is often at the expense of exploiting their negative images. Therefore, hip-hop's commercial success has been at the expense of exploiting negative images of black men. White explains this process as one where, "Commodity culture replaces people with objects and their histories with hegemonic narratives that obfuscate colonial oppression so that consumption becomes guiltless" (White 2011: 20). White further draws our attention to the critical role played by the body, as a text, in hip-hop. He argues that

the body has been as critical in the construction of the hip-hop community as have words and music. The body may be seen to represent another kind of constructed text that has, over the course of the culture's move from the periphery to the mainstream, been the nexus of all manner of cultural information critical in the construction of community and communal practices (White 2011: 20).

Illustrating how the black male body is often posed as an appealing figure representing a desirable masculinity to be emulated, White (2011: 25) explains that

[r]epresentations of masculinity in hip-hop also focus on "body-ism" in the same way that the body is prioritized in sexual objectification. The wearing of ostentatious jewelry, including expensive chains, earrings, and "grillz" (full-frontal dental overlays, often made of gold and encrusted with diamonds), tattoos, stylized athletic apparel or brand-name urban street wear, as well as the display of the shirtless torso are ways that visually display masculine power and sexuality by privileging the objectified and spectacularized body.

The aforementioned concept of "body-ism" in hip-hop, as described by White (2011) exposes the social constructedness of black male identity in hip-hop culture. Black men's visibility appears to depend on their objectification and the privileging of the body as a spectacle. White critiques the representations of the black body and black

masculinity, mediated through popular culture media, as being socially constructed kinds of racial and gender performance that are historically marked by notions around criminality, stereotypes of deviance, misogyny and excess. It is also crucial to note that the hyper-masculine representations in hip-hop narratives are also a direct response to a repressive culture and a response to a perceived loss of power, potency, or manhood in the wake of the real or perceived power that controls their worlds. The ostentatious symbols of material success, described by White, are not only drawn from capitalist ideals of success but they are also linked to the historical racist treatment of black bodies, marked by a tendency to over-sexualize and spectacularize the black body. Therefore, black men's visibility in popular culture continues to perpetuate notions of imperial patriarchal masculinity. These are notions informed by white, capitalist, and normative understandings of masculinity.

In hip-hop culture, uniqueness and the expression of individual identity are prioritized through behaviour, modes of dress, language, and other ways. These styles are often conveyed by cultural trendsetters, thus in the context of this research, The Reps are seen as an important part of commercial mainstream culture. They have also appropriated a major part of American hip-hop trends through their body styling choices, language etc. The appropriation of these styles of behaviour, either in mannerism, dress, speech, or attitude, becomes an important cultural signifier for The Reps, as those who are a part of the expressive culture. White (2011: 33) observes that, the meanings associated with the cultural signifiers of hip-hop, constitute to them being largely internalized by youth worldwide to form a community of practice that identifies with hip-hop as a social and cultural movement. Since hip-hop trends are globally consumed and appropriated, black youth in virtually any geographical location can construct "personal identity and localized meaning around hip-hop music and cultural practices, including the performance of masculinity derived from the mass-mediated posturings of black males" (White 2011: 33).

## **2.5 Methodology**

### **2.5.1 Introduction**

Semiotic analysis, as explained below, is the singular research technique that is employed to analyze linguistic, sonic and visual texts in the reality television series Running with the Reps in order to render results of their representations of black

masculinities. This chapter explains how the data, namely, Season One of Running with the Reps is gathered for analysis and also describes why the use of language, clothing style and bodily disposition, are selected for analysis in this study. This programme provides us with sonic and visual texts in order to identify and unpack the recurring themes embedded in the ways The Reps perform and represent their masculinities, discuss their bodies, including the sites of desire and pleasure in consumption. The show's title sequence music is also analyzed as a subtext that reveals and informs some of the nuances of the hip-hop trends used by The Reps. In addition, the secondary sources that are utilized, refer to existing work on the topic of hip-hop and representations of masculinity in the media. The media here refers to commercial television the ideas and messages it promote.

### **2.5.2 Data collection and selection**

For this research I analyze four episodes from Season One (2011) from the reality television series; Running with the Reps. The episodes that are selected are Episode 1 of 4 March 2011, Episode 4 of 25 March 2011, Episode 8 of 22 April 2011 and Episode 13 of 27 May 2011. These are selected in the order of the first episode, two middle episodes and the season finale, in order to trace how the show's narrative develops over time. I focus on the music used as the show's soundtrack, the language used by The Reps, and the visual texts and images represented through clothing and bodily postures. The episodes are accessed for analysis from the production company New Vision Pictures, that produced and shot the reality show. Due to the material having been shot for Vuzu TV's commercial purposes, I could not access all episodes from the season but in the form of a dvd disk, I was granted four episodes. The reality show was broadcasted on DStv's pay channel Vuzu TV, which is a youth entertainment channel. Since its inception in 2009, the channel has managed to play a dynamic role in connecting with South African urban youth culture and trends in black youth television. As a reality television show broadcast on the commercial medium that is pay television, Running with the Reps plays an interesting role related to their accessibility to youth consciousness and communicating messages and ideologies to audiences. Thus, the role played by the medium is worth investigating and understanding, in terms of its contribution to influencing ideas of black male selfhood.

### **2.5.3 Techniques and procedures of analysis**

When analyzing the episodes, I look at the manifest content. The manifest content refers to that which was visible and on the surface, meaning, those things which can be understood by their mere appearance. Therefore the particular use of language, clothing style, bodily disposition and the music could be described as manifest content (see Neuman 1994: 264). I draw the themes from the content and these will be discussed in the findings. I further use semiotic analysis as a method that applies to language, visual and non-verbal cues. The underlying premise of this approach is that all cultural objects convey meaning and are focused on the meaning that signs convey (Hall 1997: 36). Semiology broadly defined is “a science that studies the life of signs within society” (Bauer & Gaskell 2000: 229). Semiology provides the analyst with a conceptual toolkit for approaching sign systems systematically in order to discover how they produce meaning. Thus, primarily semiotics is concerned with the meaning of signs and symbols in language. The essential idea is that words/signs can be assigned to primary conceptual categories, and these categories represent important aspects of the theory to be tested. The importance of an idea is revealed in the frequency with which it appears in the text. Therefore, those images that appear frequently in our case study, will be read as falling under the major themes of the storyline.

Semiotics further allows us to move away from a very narrow linguistic level, to a wider, cultural level in which many cultural objects and practices may be analyzed (Hall 1997: 36). This feature in semiotics is useful in helping me analyze the masculinities represented by The Reps since they engage with a range of hip-hop culture trends over and above the linguistic level. Initially semiotics seemed to confine the process of representation to language therefore subsequent developments became more concerned with representation as a source for the production of social knowledge (Hall 1997: 42). Saussure’s book A Course in General Linguistics (1966) is an important development in the study of representation and the production of meaning. In this text, Saussure (1966: 66-67) divides the sign into two components, the signifier (or “sound-image”) and the signified (or “concept”), suggesting that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. By looking at these aspects, an examination of how they relate to one another to create meaning can be achieved. I



have chosen the method of semiotics since it is best suited for studying themes expressed in cultural forms such as magazines, television, newspapers, and music (Randolph 2006). In order to understand the meanings communicated through the reality show and what they represent, analysis needs to be carried out with the specific intention of looking at themes of race, gender, and masculine representations within the sonic and visual texts, in order to render appropriate results. Saussure (1966: 67) theorizes this by explaining that

[o]bjects and artifacts—the things that make up what is known as “material culture”—also serve as signs and can convey a great deal of information. When we “read” people, either in real life or in mass-mediated texts such as advertisements, commercials, and films, we pay a great deal of attention to things like their hairstyles, the clothing and the shoes they wear, and their body ornaments. All of these objects are signs meant to convey certain notions about what these people are like.

Due to the small screen and the nature of the television image, television is regarded as a “close-up” medium, which is one of the effective ways to revealing character. Therefore, “in applying semiotics to television, then, it makes sense for us to concern ourselves with aspects of the medium that ‘function’ as signs, as distinguished from ‘carrying’ signs” (Berger 2005: 33). In this regard, the camera shots employed function as signifiers, through their ability to reveal what it is that the camera prioritizes for the construction of meaning to audiences. Semiotics facilitates the analysis of the relationship between signs and the conventions that are embedded in them and it can ultimately give a greater understanding to the meaning produced in the texts and how these produced meanings influence society.

Through the use of a semiotic analysis of texts, the procedure of analysis too needs to be designed in order to yield results that answer the research questions of this project. “Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted” (Hall 1997: 19). Analyzing the visual signs in Running with the Reps is also focused on specific features within the episodes, in order to understand the meaning communicated in these. Visual signs are referred to as iconic signs, as they bear in

their form, a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer. The episodes are analyzed using semiotic analysis focused on the show's storyline as a whole, and also on specific features such as music, language, clothing and bodily dispositions, all of which relate and speak to themes of blackness and masculine identities. For example, analyzing clothing as a signifier is important since clothes also double up as signs that construct meaning and carry messages. These specific features within the visual signs to be semiotically analyzed focus on the aesthetic expressions and physical representations in the episodes. These important elements communicating specific meanings are applied to The Reps, as an essential site of analysis. In order to make meaning of the cultural modes of expression in the show, we have to unpack the codes that fix the relationships between signs and concepts. Codes tell us which concepts are being referred to when we hear or see certain signs, therefore

[b]y arbitrarily fixing the relationships between our conceptual system and our linguistic systems, codes make it possible for us to speak and to hear intelligibly, and establish the translatability between our concepts and our languages which enables meaning to pass from speaker to hearer and be effectively communicated within a culture (Hall 1997: 22).

The meanings of signs are not 'fixed by nature' or 'given by the gods', however they are a result of social conventions. Thus, through media consumption, cultural subjects learn the conventions of hip-hop representations and the codes of its culture. Barthes (1960) brings clarity to this process of semiotic analysis by explaining that signs are always linked to a set of signifieds -the broad ideological themes.

The music and sound effects used in the television programme of this study also play an important role in conveying messages to the audience. These are to be analyzed as whole texts, focusing on the narratives and denotative meaning as well as the discourses and connotative meanings established through analysis. The effect that the music generates is largely based on "culturally acknowledged associations between given sounds and certain emotions. A musical phrase or a sound, we must remember, is a signifier, and the emotion it generates is the signified; as is true for all signs, the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and based on convention"

(Berger 2005: 12). Therefore, the music of the show is a helpful site for analyzing the messages conveyed in the show. The features are analyzed within the musical composition, in order to add to understanding of the songs meaning are focused on the beat; rhythm and tempo; tone of music and the exterior sounds/ background effects (Berger 2005: 12).

Using techniques of semiotic analysis to analyze the soundtrack lyrics, the message or word is broken into a signifier, signified and the collective of the two and the meaning produced, the sign. This is applied to each line within each of the songs and then individually to specific words within the line. Through this semiotic analysis, the signs reveal the prominent discourses communicated in the songs that are connotative and not as obvious. The meanings produced from the signs are then to be discussed specifically in terms of how they represent black youth masculine identities, which is the focus of this study.

Other than as ‘the study of signs’ there is relatively little agreement amongst semioticians themselves as to the scope and methodology of semiotics thus, this method of research is still a relatively loosely defined critical practice rather than a unified, fully-fledged analytical method or theory (Chandler 2002). The fluid and incomplete nature of semiotics is often criticized as ‘imperialistic’, since some semioticians appear to regard it as concerned with, and applicable to, anything and everything, trespassing on almost every academic discipline. Therefore, the empirical testing of semiotic claims requires other methods in order to make detailed sense of ideological codes (Chandler 2002). One of the major critiques of semiotics is that it is heavily dependent upon the skill of the individual analyst, therefore presenting subjective interpretations as opposed to objective ‘scientific’ accounts. Berger (2005: 35) also raises another critical limitation with semiotic analysis, especially of television and televised texts, and that being; “a strong theoretical foundation is lacking that would facilitate work in this area. Most of the work done in semiotics in recent years has been concerned with film, not television”.

#### **2.5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines discussions explaining how data is gathered and selected, as well as how texts are analyzed and engaged with by the researcher, in order to produce results that answer this study's main research questions. The importance of this chapter lies within its understanding of the results and findings produced in the study. The research design carried out in this study is regarded as appropriate and valid in this research project, and as such, its application is expected to produce reliable and suitable results.

## **Chapter Three: Thematic Lenses on Running with the Reps**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a close reading of my central study Running with the Reps by appropriating the theoretical framework set up in **Chapter Two**. I examine the representations of black youth males by looking at the hip-hop trends that are engaged in the television series, through language, the title sequence music, interpersonal relationships with women, style and bodily disposition. This chapter also discusses the main themes found within the title sequence music and the episodes from Season One of the television series. The selected episodes from the show are included in the Appendix in the form of a dvd disc, in order to provide the reader a complete context for understanding the show and its analysis.

### **3.2 Playa/ Casanova Identity**

This section serves to present a description of the title sequence music selected for analysis from the reality television series Running with the Reps. It also develops the ideas introduced in the report's first chapter, by discussing the main themes explored within the opening and closing title sequence songs in the show. The narrative of the title music focuses on Casanova/playa identity and the general attitudes of hip-hop towards "baby mommas" (term is explained later in the discussion). The title sequence serves as rich site for understanding the texture and tone of a programme, as it serves as somewhat of a preliminary discussion of the main text's thematic concerns. It is also the method by which films or television programmes present their title, key production and cast members, by utilizing conceptual visuals and sound. This music is played at the beginning of every episode and at the end when the credits of the show are presented, helping convey the tone and mood of the programme. In an initial discussion of lyrics and visual texts, it is important to theme out the narrative and surface level meaning of the title sequence music. These meanings are considered as a general understanding of the song, leading up to a more specific analysis. The narrative of the sequence music is established partly by considering the "signifieds" as well as the signifiers themselves. The signifiers in this instance are the words of the title song and the images that accompany them. In so doing, the title music is described and explained on a level which provides the reader with a background understanding of what the show title sequence represents, as read and interpreted by the researcher. The meaning that is established here is important for examining the

ideological function of the sequence music, in terms of the messages it contains around issues of race, gender and masculine identity.

In explaining the role of signifying in hip-hop, Perry (2004: 61) states that

signifying is a way of saying one thing and meaning another; it is reinterpretation, a metaphor for revision of previous texts and figures; it is tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning- all to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier.

This process of signifying in hip-hop becomes an important site for contesting hegemonic ideologies and understandings of selfhood. Through the display of bodily aesthetics, consumption and pleasure, signifying complicates normative understandings of race and masculinity. Therefore, the intentional double meaning in hip-hop lyrics and the reinterpretation of subjects serves as a method of obscuring hegemonic notions of power and the expression of subjectivity. This tradition of signifying forms the origins of hip-hop music therefore, interpreting its meaning becomes important in determining if the lyrical content of the title song affirms or dismantles normative understandings of race and masculine identity. Signifying in hip-hop also extends beyond the arena of music to “clothing styles, colloquial speech, spoken word, and the like, all in conversation with rap and the rappers” (Perry 2004: 61). Similarly, the title music follows this pattern as all hip-hop elements are used to create meaning through the beat, the lyrics of the title song, the body movement of the cast and the images that make up the backdrop of the title sequence.

In Season One, the title music is accompanied by the images of the different group members who each introduce themselves through a series of swift arm and leg moves. The highly stylized arm and leg swings suggests that the dancers are in full control of each motion and the complexity of the moves also reiterate the exclusivity of those performing them. This captures the essence of ‘stunting’, which refers to the act of showing off through dance. The highly animated and dramatic poses performed by each member, in their introduction, also serves to communicate the show’s assertion of its own performativity. This is closely linked to the show’s title, which is spelt out

in bold bright letters. The insertion of the group's name in the title also strongly affirms that the characters are indeed the storytellers of the series. Colour also plays a significant role in terms of the programme's introduction as it represents the graffiti art element in hip-hop and most importantly captures the youthful and boisterous nature of the show. Seeing that the reps are hip-hop dancers already assumes a level of confidence and strong personality from each member therefore, this appears to be captured through the title's use of bright colours. One can also argue that the nature of black youth cultures are signified by the act of being 'loud' and 'proud', which essentially marks the act of refusing to be silenced by authority. The aforementioned images capture the show's thematic concerns, as it is essentially based on the lives of young hip-hop dancers.

This section proceeds to a descriptive discussion of the actual title music. The lyrics of the song are very repetitive, and are almost overpowered by the prominence of the song's instrumentals. This suggests that speech is not the primary form of communication however, it is the use of the body through dance which communicates and serves as the group's introduction to audiences. This is different from the rap element of hip-hop where words are the primary tools for conveying messages, hence lyrics become a richer site for signifying.

### **Opening Title Sequence:**

Just clap, everybody move a man  
Just groove, playas gotta do ya dance  
Now breathe ladies gotta choose a man  
Let's go, let's go, let's go x3

The above lyrics make up the opening sequence of the show and are accompanied by a fast paced hip-hop instrumental (in hip-hop this is referred to as a beat) prompting its subjects to dance along to the beat. Since the show is essentially based on the lives of a hip-hop dance crew, the lyrics of the title sequence describe the call to dance. The body in this regard, is privileged through robust motion and gestures, to express the sonic elements of the hip-hop beat. The motion and visual elements seen here, become a part of the composite musical experience. Thus, the body in itself becomes a tool used to communicate a wide variety of emotions and messages. These

movements communicate a sense of control and power over the body thereby asserting a masculine posture. The call-response structure that is adopted in the above song forms part of the hip-hop composition. Audience participation is a central method in hip-hop culture and the “call-and-response patterns offer directions for various parts of the crowd to say different things, according to location, gender, place of origin, or some such defining characteristic” (Perry 2004: 72). More importantly however, call and response in hip-hop is not limited to verbal response but might also manifest itself in body movements. Therefore, when the dancers respond to the rhythm of the song, the motion and the visual become part of the composite musical experience.

The language used in the title sequence music is distinctively hip-hop slang and the word ‘playa’ becomes a direct reference to the playa-rap genre. This is the portrayal of a smooth Casanova who takes pride in the swift movements performed by his body.

### **3.3 “Crazy Baby Momma Drama”: General Sexist Attitudes Towards Women**

Another important narrative in the show is found within the closing sequence music played during the credits of the show.

#### **Closing Title Sequence:**

Yeah, I see you holding me down as well  
That’s why I always stick around  
I’m sorry for all the pain I caused you  
Can’t you hold me down?  
It’s been a long day baby, I know I’m driving you crazy  
But you gotta stick with me  
You know I’m going through some thangs  
Baby momma is still trippin’

What is interesting about the narrative in the above lyrics, is the switch from the previous smooth Casanova image to one of softness and vulnerability in tone. Even the beat that accompanies these lyrics becomes softer and more soulful, suggesting a sense of sincerity in emotion. This is confirmed by the voice of the male singer who is



pleading both forgiveness and understanding towards his personal afflictions of having to deal with a dramatic baby momma. Nthato's own narrative subverts this, as he is portrayed as a responsible father and has a healthy relationship with the mother of the child. However, the title song's narrative alongside prevailing ideas in sexist hip-hop culture, often cite the woman as a source of both comfort and emotional affliction. Evidently, the storyline here reveals the sexist character of black heterosexual relations. As much as the undertones shy away from hyper-masculine nuances, the tone remains sexist towards its portrayal of the female role. This is a binarized role where; a woman, can either be the source of joy or the opposite extreme, being pain.

The "crazy and bitter black woman" motif is not only limited to baby mommas but it is generally extended to most black women as they are often represented as being defensive for no reason or generally exhibiting a bad attitude. This theme is further emphasized in Episode 1 of 4 May 2011, following the group's search for a house. In one of their house viewings, The Reps are assisted by a black woman and it is interesting to unpack the group's treatment and perception of her. Mike explains his disdain towards the woman's attitude by stating:

There's this midget chick right, and she's tryna be all attitude. You know what I mean, giving us all attitude and stuff. You know how black chicks get, all bopping head snapping fingers...

Mike's observation is noteworthy, given that it is typical of the negative stereotyping of black women as always having a bad attitude for no reason. This is somewhat to suggest that most reactions by women are often driven by irrational emotions.

Larry's observation of the same woman has him saying:

This chick who comes in, she also looks like she just stepped out of jail break you know what I mean? And she comes in and she's just yapping and she's yapping...we walk into this bathroom and there's no sense of technology throughout the whole house. Now we step up in this bathroom and there's like this shower. This shower is amazing, it's a blue shower and it looks like

if you walk into it you can transform. I wanted to take that girl, put her in there and switch on a button so she can come out looking fresh...

In the above statement, Larry's account of the woman conforms to a sexist and stereotypical view that portrays women as often making very little sense in their worthless murmurs. This is confirmed by the use of the word "yapping" which is a direct reference to one uttering sound or noise without depth or sense. Clearly, whatever the woman has to say is not worth serious attention. What makes this woman even more forgettable to Larry is the fact that she appears to be unkempt hence his reference to how he wishes to throw her into a shower so that she may be transformed. This statement becomes a clear indication of the woman not fitting into his perceived standard of female etiquette and hygiene.

### **3.4 Honeys Versus Wifeys: The Reps' Interpersonal Relationships with Women**

From the above description it is interesting to witness a shift in Larry's attitude towards his own girlfriend. Larry is portrayed as being under the rigorous control of his girlfriend and he is often teased by other members for being emasculated by the nature of his relationship. In Episode 1 of 4 March 2011 the group announces their trip to Durban, however the problem as stated by Mike is that "Other people such as Larry are not allowed to go as they have a curfew". The dynamic of Larry's relationship as revealed here is that in as much as he is a leader in the group, his leadership position does not extend towards his relationship with his girlfriend. The rest of the group members tease him for this and they have given his girlfriend nicknames such as "parole officer" and "sergeant". The power dynamics within Larry's relationship play themselves out as he has to ask permission from the girlfriend to go away on the group tour. Commenting on this, Mike teases:

Larry wants to go but he's under a ball and chain situation right now, you know what I mean, where his master is telling him he cannot leave. We don't know what's gonna happen because when he's saying goodbye, she's gonna be like uh-uh. And that girl swings, you know what I mean. I've seen her swinging and she swings better than Tiger Woods sometimes.

Mike's reference to the girlfriend swinging better than Tiger Woods, suggests that she might be violent. The references made by all the members also demonstrate that in as much as Larry holds a leadership position in the group, his submissive nature within his romantic relationship compromises his masculine bravado. This reveals a lot in terms of the group's understanding of masculinity, meaning that being under the control of a woman falls outside of what is regarded as "masculine" behaviour.

What I find interesting is how Larry's attitude towards his own girlfriend is almost a sharp contrast to his earlier response towards the woman assisting the group in their house search. This contrast in attitudes towards different women is further demonstrated in the group meeting that is unfolded in Episode 4 of 25 March 2011. The call for this meeting as explained by Mike, is that the group believes that Nthato is compromising the brotherhood due to his behaviour. All the members have complained about Nthato as they have all felt disrespected by him. At the top of everyone's list of grievances is the fact that Nthato has "hollered at every guy's chick". This term is used in reference to Nthato making inappropriate advances towards the member's girlfriends. This behaviour is regarded to be the ultimate form of disrespect, which is very telling of what is regarded to be an act of emasculating another. Thus, for another man to make advances towards 'your' woman is seen as a sign of disrespect and an attempt to emasculate one's sense of manhood. This further suggests a sense of entitlement by men towards the ownership of women. Makhosini explains an incident which involves Nthato inappropriately texting his girlfriend. Larry responds by asking, "Was he macking on your honey?" and Makhosini states; "Wifey son". Wifey is derived from the noun "wife", and it is used "to identify one's girlfriend (either signifying her potential as a wife, implying the presence of spousal attributes..." (www.urbandictionary.com). This obvious binary between "honey" and "wifey" reveals the different categories used to rank a woman's level of importance. Also sharing an incident of being disrespected by Nthato the youngest member states; "When you're 26 hollering at a 16 year old like that, it makes you a bitch nigga". This is a term that is used to refer to a male, who reacts to situations in a "female" way (www.urbandictionary.com). There are severe sexist undertones to this statement that reveal The Reps' understanding of gender roles and what can be associated to their general perceptions of women. Therefore, the implication is that certain behavioural traits that are plagued with negativity can be easily associated with women.

Promiscuity is often represented as an expression of masculine desire. Although the negative consequences of this behaviour are shunned, it appears that the act in itself (of being sexually available to several women) is almost celebrated. Episode 8 of 22 April 2011 reveals a diary entry from Mike who states; “I’m a bit worried though about Chama because he gets with a lot of girls and with all this attention and stuff, I think he need to get an Aids test”. After this we see Chama outside a clinic and his response is that; “Today is a big day for me. I’m a bit scared. I’m going for my HIV test”. His mother responds to this statement by saying; “It means you guys are doing wrong things. You’re a bad example to the youth”. Although this scene raises issues related to risky sexual behaviour demonstrated by some of the group members, it does little in condemning the act of promiscuity. The Reps are represented as young men who are seen to be at their prime through the fame and popularity that comes with being dancers. Therefore, parties, alcohol and girls are seen as the natural results of their lifestyle. This behaviour is further demonstrated by DJ Ellipsis (in Episode 4 of 25 March 2011) who explains that his main motivations for becoming a deejay were that he would benefit through partying for free and having access to female “groupies”. Groupie is defined as

the individual, or group of individuals, involved in obsessive adoration of entertainers such as musicians, actors, athletes, and even political figures. Behaviors are juvenile and influenced oftentimes by crush-like emotions or lustful sentiments, and often infringe the rights of the figure experiencing the attentions of a frenzied fanatic.

This is a term often associated with female “fans” who are often seen as a form of validating the artists success and fame. The glorification of sex and alcohol is a predominant theme in hip-hop music and the culture often promotes male promiscuity as a symbol of macho success. The more women one is seen as having access to, the more he is celebrated by his peers. This also has a lot to do with the male libido often being closely associated to a man’s testosterone levels, therefore the higher his sex drive the more “manly” he is seen according to normative understandings of masculinity. Thus, the use and imagery of women in here reflects the ways in which hip-hop often represents the sexual consumption and fantasy life of men. The Reps

general perception of women becomes an interesting site for exploring how hip-hop attitudes towards gender are often marred by careless sexism. Different accounts throughout the show reveal the ways in which The Reps relate differently towards women depending on how they define their relationships with these women.

### **3.5 “Mafia Brotherhood”: Relationships between Men**

Brotherhood is an important theme for understanding the nature of the relationship that The Reps have among themselves. This theme is often demonstrated by the group’s organizational structure and how different members are separated according to different hierarchal categories. Mike is the group manager and he often takes on the responsibilities of protecting and taking care of the group members. Thus, he is described as the paternal figure in the group. It is also interesting to note how his muscular form is closely associated to masculine strength therefore, earning him the nickname; “bodyguard”. He is often responsible for organizing what the group has termed; the “mafia meetings”. These meetings afford each member the opportunity to express some of their grievances within the group. Mike explains that the group identifies itself as a ‘mafia’ clan and the “leaders of the new school”. The ‘mafia’ are originally known as a hierarchically structured international body of criminals. Movies often explore this culture and glorify the mafia as a symbol for highly respected criminals who lead extravagant lifestyles. The group’s self-reference as the mafia relates to the structure of what they refer to as a brotherhood.

Nthato is portrayed as having compromised the brotherhood by betraying the other members (Episode 4 of 25 March 2011). In order to confront him about this behaviour, the group organizes an intervention. Once all the members have assembled and Nthato is present, it becomes evident to everyone that TJ is slowly approaching an enraged state. Standing up to address Nthato about his issues with him he states; “You had no right telling her about that pregnancy shit. I came to you looking for advice and you went behind my back and told her I was fucking around...” It becomes clear that TJ feels betrayed by the fact that Nthato went behind his back to alert his girlfriend about his promiscuous ways. It also appears that TJ may not regret nor see anything wrong with this behaviour but he is angered by the fact that Nthato betrayed his trust by telling his girlfriend the truth. This incident in itself is revealing

of what TJ's understanding of a "brotherhood" entails. This being, that brothers never tell on each other, especially to the member of the opposite sex as this is seen as a betrayal of the fraternity. This is in direct reference to the terms "homies over hoes" or "bros before hoes", which are widely used in hip-hop culture as a general understanding that friends or brothers should always be a priority over women. Once again here, the assumption made by The Reps is that Nthato's disloyalty has betrayed the brotherhood through what they deem to be his "female ways". Consequently, in an outbreak of anger, TJ beats up Nthato who only covers his face but does not retaliate. None of the members reprimand TJ for this violent act but only defuse the fight once it has escalated to its peak. In between the scene, in the form of diary entries, each member shares their reaction to the fight. It appears that Makhosini is the only one who addresses the issue with a level of sensitivity as he demonstrates his sincerity by asking if Nthato is okay. Larry however, makes fun of the situation and accounts for Nthato's reaction by stating; "He fixes up his fringe, jumps straight back into place and then he chills there and just says "I'm leaving". He just walked out." As much as the other group members appear taken aback by the level that the fight escalated to, their behaviour also suggests that they see TJ's reaction as being normal, especially given what they regard as Nthato's betrayal towards everyone. When asked by what appears to be the show producer, if he has anything to say, TJ responds by saying

I've got nothing to say but I can promise you that this is not the last because the guys stopped me obviously. The guy is really disrespectful and I've been telling the guys that this guy needs to learn to be put in his place. Because, obviously after this shit he'll carry on doing the same shit over and over again. And I felt really disrespected because I've taken so much from him from a young age because he's older than me.

What is clear from the above statement is that TJ believes that his actions are justified and that he sees violence as the most effective means to teach Nthato a lesson. TJ's resort to violence as a solution to resolve the tension in his relationship with Nthato is a demonstration of what Ratele (2008: 21) regards to be a tendency by normative ideas of a ruling masculinity to encourage the culture of violence and abuse inflicted by men not only against other men but as well as women.

Another example demonstrating how The Reps use their relationships with other men as a site to assert masculinity is played out by a volatile altercation between Larry and Andza (Episode 13 of 27 May 2011). Larry is upset by the fact that Andza has not communicated with him directly about his unhappiness with certain boot-camp rules set out by the leaders. Andza is of the belief that there is a degree of favouritism in the group and the unfair treatment of those who are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The evidence revealed in this scene is that Andza is the person who appears to be the least confrontational out of the group members. In response to this trait, Larry shouts directly at Andza stating:

He must come to me if he has a problem. I said guys if you have any issues you must bring them up. He's acting like a bitch now. So I'm telling him, you're acting like a bitch. Come talk to me like a man.

Embarrassingly bowing his head down, Andza timidly responds; "Its cool bra". This scene plays itself out as a representation of two opposing ideas of how men deal with confrontation. While Larry is boisterous and threatening in his posture, Andza projects a more docile demeanor, as he would rather not get into a fight.

### **3.6 Bodily Aesthetics and Masculinity**

Running with the Reps often reveals some of the ways in which masculinity is performed and asserted through the body and its aesthetics. It is often clear that The Reps have very specific ideas of what they consider to be the embodiment of masculinity. The references to Mike as "the buff guy" and "the bodyguard" are directly linked to his muscular build. As a result we often see Mike either topless or clothed in attire that accentuates his chiseled form (Episode 1 of 4 May 2011), clearly demonstrating his pride for his body. The body and its posturing therefore plays a role in how masculinity is represented. Styling choices also reflect ideas on how masculinity is staged. Interestingly, those masculinities, which are perceived as the alternative to heteronormative understandings of masculinity ultimately, become the feminized.

From the onset, the series often represents Nthato as exhibiting, what is viewed by the other members as, ‘feminine’ behaviour. This is demonstrated through his attachment to his hair and his inability to physically defend himself in a fight with TJ, as illustrated in Episode 4 of 25 March 2011. It is the same episode that takes a closer look at Nthato as an individual navigating his way through his daily routines. Before leaving his apartment, it is interesting to note how he reminds himself that he has to “fix his hair and wash the dishes”. This image of Nthato appears to be very different from the “suave” and outwardly cool demeanor portrayed by other members (e.g. TJ and Mike). Interestingly, both the abovementioned tasks are often closely associated with “femininity” as most men are not expected to be attached to their aesthetic image nor the concept of being domesticated. However, as unpacked earlier in this study, the mainstreaming of hip-hop culture often objectifies and sexualizes the black male body through excessive adornment and often defies traditional masculine notions of how men relate to their bodies and the images thereof.

During a team-building getaway, we are introduced to the group’s photographer, “Andza”, who is ridiculed for wearing a pink t-shirt (Episode 13 of 27 May 2011). All the members burst out in laughter as they go on to tease him about the colour of his t-shirt. It is evident that this is a colour that The Reps associate with femininity therefore, making it a point to ridicule Andza’s masculinity. It is ironic that Andza in his “pink” top appears to also be the shortest person in the group thus the group goes on to say he needs to occupy the “baby seat” during their game drive. This act of infantilizing someone based on their height and choice of clothing colour reveals The Reps’ normative understanding of what constitutes a masculine body. This is further demonstrated by the comments made by Larry during the group’s boot-camp activity. Making fun of the physical attributes of some of the members Larry states:

Ok cool, I’m down to run you know what I’m sayin’? Now the next thing, the buff guys start taking off their t-shirts. After that everyone has to take off their shirts...Yo, it turned from ab into flab...then the skinny niggas start to take off their t-shirts and some of these guys were lucky that there were no dogs around because it was just all bone, skeleton...



This statement is very telling of how body image and form play an important role in terms of how one's masculine identity is portrayed. Most importantly, we see how the body becomes a site for representing what is considered a desirable masculinity. Since The Reps are a group of dancers, the use of their bodies through dance becomes an interesting site for the expression of selfhood.

### **3.7 Self-representation and Consumption**

Hip-hop is often represented as over-projecting images of material success that are often very removed from the reality of its subjects. These nuances are often referenced in Running with the Reps and the viewer is left to question how much of what is projected by The Reps is a real reflection of their own individual and material accomplishments. From sporting designer attire, to projecting a VIP lifestyle of exclusive access to clubs and drinking expensive liquor, The Reps often project a lifestyle that is identical to the glamour portrayed in hip-hop music videos. Episode 8 of 22 April 2011 follows the group as they organize a club event to launch their clothing label entitled, Guys Lifestyle Collections. This event is hosted in an exclusive club located in the plush suburbs of Sandton, however their outfits from the label that they are launching, are made from shabby offices located in the Joburg CBD. We are let in on the shabby state of these offices as the boys enter the elevator and immediately state, "The offices are a bit dingy. There are probably rats that come out of this thing...". Larry immediately interjects by saying; "It all starts somewhere you know and we want to make sure that we move onto greater heights..." However, this gradual progression towards success is not always celebrated in hip-hop. Instead, overnight success is always portrayed as an attainable dream in most hip-hop lyrics.

Rapid success is often represented as attainable through the means of "hustling". The urban dictionary defines the word hustle as; "Anything you need to do to make money... be it selling cars, drugs, [your] body. If you making money, you hustling" ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)). Basically this refers to any activity done by one as a means to make money. This is a term that is often used in hip-hop music as most young black men who exist outside formal economic structures have to turn to "hustling" in order to make a living. Contextually, this is a result of how historically many black men have often occupied the margins of society and are often plagued by

the reality of unemployment, thus resulting in the need to “hustle” in order to survive. This is seen through Nthato’s attempt at juggling various other activities outside of those he’s involved in with The Reps. His work includes his radio show on a campus radio station and his events company, which he co-owns with a friend. However, through the setting of his apartment, as reflected in Episode 4 of 25 March 2011, it appears that Nthato’s actual lifestyle might in fact be an extreme contradiction to the glamorous lifestyle that is often projected by himself and the rest of the group. This is further demonstrated to the viewer as we witness how he has to walk around the inner jo’burg CBD since he doesn’t own a car.

Throughout the series, there are moments that reveal how certain members of The Reps misrepresent their reality. For example, Ellipsis is described through Mike’s diary session, as house DJ who is “coming up in the ranks contrary to his belief that he is made”. The mode of diary entries is a method that allows the cast members to respond to different scenes and in essence capture the “reality” side of the narrative as opposed to what may often be performed during shooting. It is also a more reflective method of describing the show’s narrative. Explaining how he started deejaying, Ellipsis states that since he used to attend a lot of parties and as a result, he realized that he already had most of the music that would be played at these parties. Hence, the realization was that he could attempt deejaying and also benefit by attending parties for free and having access to female “groupies”. Upon Ellipsis’ arrival at the event venue, he is greeted by the sound of “crickets”. This is a sound effect which is often used in film and television to exaggerate the absence of people leading to the anticlimax of what the audience has been made to expect. Commenting on this, the rest of the group members laugh and hint towards the fact that Ellipsis often misrepresents himself on social media Larry explains this by stating:

...and he’s always on some tip like yo I’m at this gig and I just killed it off and I’ll probably be standing next to him like dude you’re lying, there are like three people at that event. But that’s the type of person Ellipsis is...

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter presents a description of the title sequence music and the episodes in the case study and outlines its major themes. By unpacking the lyrics and visual texts that accompany the music, I am able to describe the narrative and meanings of the songs. Through discussing the selected episodes, I further illustrate other elements of hip-hop culture such as language, The Reps' interpersonal relationships with women and other men, style and bodily disposition, as sites that reveal the group's representations and understandings of masculinity. This chapter provides the foundation for analysis to take place as well as for readers to understand the backgrounds of the music and episodes in a general way.

#### **Chapter Four: Engaging with the Representations of black Masculinity in Running with the Reps**

The following chapter presents an analysis of the key findings of the present research in light of the arguments developed in the literature review. It achieves this through the analysis of the themes found in the description of the episodes and title sequence music from Season One of the reality television series; Running with the Reps. The results of analysis presented below, speak specifically to the representations of black males in the selected series. In order to present results that adequately explain the representations of young black males, these results are separated by hip-hop themes such as language, music, interpersonal relationships with women, style and bodily dispositions. These findings have brought up specific representations about the predominant ways in which The Reps perform masculinity(ies)- as both affirming and opposing hegemonic discourses of black male identity. In addition, these findings warrant an analysis of the gaze through which commercial media represents standardized images, which reinforce white capitalist views of gender.

The reality television series Running with the Reps makes for interesting analysis and discussion about the depictions of gender and gendered roles in hip-hop and the imposition of these representations onto youth. Since the show exists on a commercial media platform that is popular among black youth, it serves as an ideal template to study how particular representations can be popularized through how they are circulated and consumed. As an element of popular culture, the television series is not produced in isolation but is accompanied by supplementary cultural products. The title music and body styling choices of The Reps become part of the process of production of knowledge and meaning as well as consumption. The title music reflects the popular ideas of masculinity in the hip-hop culture that he Reps ascribe to. The use of these elements show that The Reps are not just subjects that are operating in an unidentified social context, but they function within a specific contemporary background. These extra elements that come with the television series contribute to how the show is understood within the larger social context.

Through the analysis of the title sequence music, certain results pertaining to hip-hop's view and attitude towards women were found. The sequence music captures the thematic essence of the show, which is centered on the lives of young hip-hop dancers who heavily ascribe to global hip-hop culture trends as the expression of their masculine identities. This music plays a key role in how the show and its representations of masculinity are received by publics. In the series hip-hop is used as a metaphor for some of the contemporary concerns expressed by black youth around issues pertaining to identity and selfhood. Black youth audiences are therefore confronted with an element of popular culture that is familiar and meaningful to them. Hip-hop is an alternative path through which The Reps articulate the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary South Africa. The Casanova/playa identity portrayed in the introductory part of the title music can be described as asserting its masculine power through the acquisition of wealth and female bodies (Perry 2004: 132). Similarly, The Reps, often assert their masculinities by staging material success and complying with heteronormative standards of male sexuality. However, since The Reps have not yet attained a certain level of material success, they can be deemed as 'aspiring' to live a lifestyle of opulence and material status. In essence the show's title music and character introduction represents the nature of 'stunting' in playa rap, where one outwardly shows off either through the use of their body or conspicuous consumption. Although playa modes of embodiment may ultimately have hegemonic goals in mind, the path they travel reveals the particular constraints black men face when asserting male dominance.

The closing title music poses a shift in both sound and theme, where the focus shifts from 'b-boy' dance culture to a narrative that explores the nature of a relationship between a man and his 'baby-momma'. The referencing of women as a source of both male pain and pleasure can be read in terms of how patriarchy socializes men to fear and hate women. Michael Eric Dyson (2004) terms this as 'femiphobia', asserting that a lot of black men are afraid to love black women with abandon because they fear women will not recognize the hurts that black men face. In response to this fear, Dyson further asserts that black men must be careful not to justify their bad treatment of black women by pointing to their pain. Perry (2004: 119) echoes the same sentiments and states that "Recognizing that black men experience gendered

oppression does not render sexist practice on the part of black men irrelevant or forgivable”. Thus, in relation to the narrative explored in the closing title sequence music, I question the “baby momma” phenomenon, as a term often used to make reference the mother of one’s child. The connotation is that the mother and father of a child do not have any form of a relationship that could be beyond conflictual. The term is problematic in the sense that it makes light of a serious social dynamic that exists within the fractured black familial structure. It also further negates the responsibility from men to be present fathers and partners. Therefore, in most cases the baby momma is perceived and depicted as crazy, angry and generally unstable due to her bitterness towards the father of her child. This is a narrative that is vastly explored in hip-hop music and black films, as an account of black domestic politics. Seeing that The Reps heavily ascribe to hip-hop culture also reveals that they formulate their own understandings of sexuality and relationships with the opposite sex from the narratives they consume through hip-hop music.

Looking at the hip-hop language used in both the sequence music and by The Reps in selected episodes, my observation is that language offers us a dynamic scope for the interpretation of certain masculine ideals. At the most basic level it can be assumed that one builds their world through language thus, in order to understand how the young males perform their racial and gendered identities through hip-hop, language has been an important site of analysis for this study. Through codifying and labeling their own realities with new expressions, The Reps demonstrate how the youth are able to use words that represent the new ponderings, new searches, new desires, and new ideas (even if the ideas really are not so new). Using hip-hop slang, The Reps appropriate American hip-hop meanings of blackness and masculinity. Although the group attaches their own contextual social meanings to race, they also reproduce normative meanings around gender and sexuality. An urban or youth language can reflect the local linguistic setting, by integrating elements of the surrounding languages. Similarly, American youth use hip-hop language to express their contextual understandings of selfhood. Perry explains:

African American vernacular English, black English or Ebonics...constitutes the central form of linguistic communication in hip-hop, although it absorbs

singular words or phrases from other cultural communities as well...(2004: 24).

This linguistic hybridity in hip-hop means that often hip-hop slang terms are understood by context. Therefore, it is noteworthy that although The Reps are highly influenced by American hip-hop culture, they have used language as a tool to exercise their agency in appropriating trends and in reproducing meaning. The blend of American hip-hop slang and the South African vernacular has recreated a pool of words used to express senses of being young, urban and 'hip' in contemporary South Africa. Terms such as 'stundee' have been adapted and popularized by The Reps and this popularity was demonstrated by the word trending on twitter nation-wide, during the airing of Episode 1 of 4 March 2011. The term stundee is originally used in a lyrical conversation between Lil' Wayne and Drake as an adaptation of the word 'standard'. It is noteworthy that its first contextual use is traced to both these highly popular American hip-hop artists as this indicates the level of influence that black American culture has on The Reps. According to the urban dictionary stundee is "A word mostly used by South African artists meaning cool, appealing, looking good or to describe something great". The use of the word appears to be another method that The Reps deploy in their self-naming. Another example of how The Reps have popularized certain hip-hop terms through their own localized meanings, is their usage of the word 'swag'. This word has been adapted from its alternative; "cool" and it is used to refer to anything or anyone that is thought to carry themselves in a way seen as cool/sexy. Therefore, the word is seen to symbolize an epitomized standard of style and appeal. Being a group of young and trendy dancers, The Reps can be said to feature personalities who embody the term.

The Reps heavily ascribe to hip-hop attitudes, speech and bodily acts therefore language becomes a site revealing hip-hop's inherently sexist nature. The use of terms such as 'wifey' and 'honey' illustrates the group's characterization of women which exists between the dichotomy of a virtuous and indecent woman. This dichotomy reveals that there are two predominant roles for women in hip-hop culture: the "video hoe", who is essentially a prop for male sexual pleasure, and the "loyal girlfriend" willing to "ride or die" for her man. The ride or die term is a prevalent term in hip-hop, often used to describe what is seen as an ideal woman figure who goes through

all costs to demonstrate her loyalty. This leaves very little space if any at all, for women to negotiate their own identities as patriarchy inevitably domesticates and sexualizes the female role. Conforming to the above notions, we see how The Reps are often surrounded by sexualized images of women who often do not engage in any dialogue outside of their role as props for the show. The only time we see female characters in the show is through certain characters introducing their girlfriends. Even those images are muted, compared to times we get to see women dressed skimpily with their faces blurred off the camera. This alone suggests that the only women who can be identified in their human capacity, are those who are in romantic relations with The Reps.

Hip-hop's construction of masculinity depends a lot on how men relate to women. The use of and accessibility to women is a major part of how hip-hop constructs masculine identity. The use of women in the music videos of male hip-hop artists often makes very clear reference to the culture of strip clubs and pornography. Pamela Paul (2005) explains this pornographic gaze and states that

music videos and rap lyrics increasingly draw on well-established themes in pornography. The 'pornification' of rap music also involves increased representation of women as porn stars, strippers, prostitutes, and other types of sex workers.

Hip-hop culture critics, such as Byron Hurt have described the portrayal of black women in many hip-hop videos as analogous to how white male slave-owners once viewed black women as their property to use as they please. Thus, the slave-owner power dynamic is one inherited from years of black oppression and we witness how this power dynamic is mimicked by patriarchy.

The above reference is closely related to The Reps own engagement with women in the show. The sexualized imagery concerning women is seen to reflect the ways in which hip-hop often reflects the sexual consumption and fantasy life of men. On a broader scale, the messages sent by these images also become instructions of how women need to be sexy in order to capture the attention of men (Perry 2004: 176). However, in certain instances, the show also reveals The Reps as being under the



control and influence of the women in their lives. Both Makhosini and Larry are portrayed as somewhat being emasculated by the power that their girlfriends exert over them. This is represented as unacceptable by the heteronormative standards that govern relationships between men, and ultimately determine how The Reps relate to each other as men.

Now shifting towards the theme of brotherhood, as represented in the show, I find that it plays an important role in terms of how The Reps fashion their understandings of loyalty. The bond between men is represented as overarching any other relation, especially in those where women are concerned. The use of terms such as “homies over hoes” or “bros before hoes”, in hip-hop, reinforces the prioritization of brotherhood over relationships with women. The failure to ascribe to this code of masculinity often results in one being alienated from the fraternity and at worst being likened to a woman. The character of Nthato is often portrayed as not conforming to this code and this behaviour at worst results in him being demoted from his leadership position in the group. He ends up deciding to dismember from the group, as it frequently becomes evident how his failure to abide by the brotherhood code leaves him alienated from everyone else. This treatment demonstrates the refusal, by heteronormative understandings of manhood, to recognize any alternative ideas or expressions of male identity.

Lastly, Running with the Reps portrays the male body and its aesthetics as a central theme in hip-hop, representing the performance of masculinity. What stands out about the dance routines performed by The Reps, is the exaggerated and highly energetic movement involving the arms, head, legs, chest, and feet. These movements assert bodily presence and strength through the physical articulations of chest pops, arms swings, footwork, and character embodiment (Todd 2009). The nature of these dance routines is highly competitive and the aim is to outdo the contender with physical contortions, spins and back flips. This global tradition of b-boy crew dance-offs is a legacy of the urban roots of hip-hop music that demands that artists/dancers prove themselves in order to gain respect and popularity. What is important to note is that this is congruent with the ethos of participation and lifestyle that is a part of global hip-hop music culture.

The male body mainly represents an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing that often represents black masculinity. Lewis (2008: 1) problematizes this cool guise or cool posing central to hip-hop. He asserts that the posturing of black men is seized upon and shaped by media to construct the negative stereotype of bad black men. Having adopted a distinctively American hip-hop aesthetic in their clothing and disposition, The Reps wear baggy jeans, caps and other forms of athletic attire. Sporting labeled attire and a certain attitude here is seen as an indicator of material success and manliness according to capitalist standards. Interestingly, the acquisition of these stylish status symbols is often accompanied by the telling of good bragging stories. Although The Reps are a group of young men who have hardly “made it” when it comes to material wealth and success, it is clearly evident that their extravagant desires are not necessarily projected in their lived realities. They are self-professed “hustlers” who’s financial income is limited to the probability of being booked to perform or the success of an event. Therefore, the ways in which they stage desire and consumption is a performative aspect of their expression of masculinity.

It is also important to consider the counter-hegemonic ways in which bodily styling can be used as a form of agency in identity construction. Perry (2004: 123) describes hip-hop attire as “both art and politics it constitutes an antiestablishment aesthetics of the casual, an anti-objectified aesthetic of the abstract, as opposed to the revealed body”. Therefore hip-hop trends demonstrated by The Reps styling choices can also be read as a way of subverting white power. By casting one’s status through the style of their clothing, this subverts the image of the low status associated with black bodies. Illuminating this alternative view, Perry (2004: 197) asserts that the consumerism and conspicuous consumption, as fundamental elements in hip-hop can be considered differently and not as mere crass materialism. She further states that

consumerism touches on the pleasure derived from the beauty of things, from the adornment of the self. Hip-hop consumerism is in part about the use of luxury to express black style. Gadgets also enhance the public self; they declare an importance in being reached. These ideas are rooted in a long tradition of black satirical expression, where style proves important, and

creativity even more so. Status is attached to the goods, not in mimicry of white privilege, but rather in an effort to recast status (Perry 2004: 197).

Therefore, hip-hop as a mode of cultural expression places a lot of importance in how one is styled and their entire attitude and disposition. Not only are these elements connected to the performance of male bravado, but they are also at times a direct subversion of the power that is associated to racial and gendered bodies.

Throughout the different episodes analyzed, interesting results have been found in terms of how The Reps represent black masculinities, which ascribe to global hip-hop influences. Although these masculinities are influenced by the dominant culture, this research found that hegemonic masculinity has its limitations as a lens for understanding subordinated men. Therefore, in thinking through the impact of the dominant culture on young black men, we have to also consider that black people do not only view themselves through their own eyes but also through the eyes of the dominant culture (DuBois 1996 [1903]). This implies that The Reps represent masculinities not only to satisfy their own desires but also to meet heteronormative ideas about gender. Therefore, the level of agency they demonstrate is conditioned by the institutional power of dominant men and/hegemonic masculinity. It is also critical to question and locate the gaze offered by commercial media (which remains white owned) and what normative political implications come with how it represents black men. Since commercial viability plays a role in determining popular culture trends, this report finds that the trends that enjoy more mainstream representation and success are those financially supported by the corporate companies. In the context of this study, Vuzu as a commercial television medium, which remains white owned, supports the trends represented by The Reps.

The Reps preoccupation with the body as a site for expressing masculinity, as demonstrated throughout the different episodes, is also telling of popular culture's obsession with scrutinizing black bodies. Therefore, the body is not only a site for the expression of masculinity but its centrality in the show also reveals the gaze that has been historically employed to fetishize black subjects (Collins 2005). Furthermore, this report finds that although The Reps may represent male privilege by dominating women and other men, their position as black men still renders them disadvantaged.

Rather than saying The Reps promote hegemonic masculinities, which does not fit with black men's lack of institutional power, we can explore how they establish normative discourses about masculinity at given points in time (Randolph 2005). This report is a departure from masculinities studies that have only focused on patriarchal privilege, therefore I demonstrate The Reps represent different masculinities among its members, meaning that they do not all benefit the same from gender privileging.

## **Conclusion**

This section essentially, presents the semiotic analysis of the representation of young black males in the reality television series Running with the Reps. It also presents the examination of the different themes found in the series and what these imply for The Reps individual and collective understandings of manhood, brotherhood, women and the performativity of masculinity.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

This section presents the concluding statements regarding the representations of black youth masculinities in the reality television series Running with the Reps. Areas that have been concentrated on include key discourses in studies of popular culture, hip-hop, black masculinities, and ideology and notions of media representation. The show has also enabled me to reflect critically about the range of choices that commercialized media enable for the construction of black youth masculine identity.

Prominently, the findings and results of this research have shown the connections between black masculinities and their representations within the framework of commercial media production- specifically reality television. Therefore, in examining the representations of young black males in Running with the Reps I have proven that the process of hegemony is indeed one that is never complete, as there is a constant tension in the struggle for consent and power. Thus, it would be misleading to conclude that The Reps promote a hegemonic masculinity, as this does not fit with their lack of institutional power as black men. Instead, I have explored how The Reps often engage normative understandings about masculinity and how their construction of masculinity is not just to exert dominance over competing masculinities, but to also reap the rewards of a dominant culture that they do not control. By deploying the framework of normative masculinity, I was able to consider the limitations caused by their position as black men who lack institutional power. I was also able to address the complexity that comes with being located at the intersections of blackness and maleness while also being at the center of popular culture.

Due to The Reps' excessive emulation of American hip-hop trends I find that they often lack creativity in formulating unique ideas around masculine identity. This often leads to them repeating and reproducing the femiphobia of hip hoppers from the west, thereby marking them as a site of heteronormative ideas of gender. This reveals that commercial media plays a significant role in informing and constructing identity by promoting certain ideals and social constructions as "normative". This idea of "normative" often upholds values that are patriarchal, capitalist, and perpetuate

problematic gender stereotypes. The gender stereotypes produced by femiphobia often result in the hostility of men towards other men, who are seen as more feminine, and women. This conditioning can also be seen as a factor that contributes to the perpetuation of violence and risky sexual behaviour from men. This has concerning implications for a country like South Africa that has inherited the legacies of both colonialism and apartheid. Therefore, moving towards a future that ensures both racial and gender equality, means that extra attention be paid to the power held by media in influencing racial and gender ideologies. Commercial media, which continues to be white owned, offers very limited spaces of agency for black youth subjects who are often portrayed through a gaze that is white male controlled. Moments that could serve as opportunities for black men's agency, end up in themselves reproducing normative ideas about manhood. Therefore the contribution of this research lies in its ability to transcend the hegemonic versus counterhegemonic binary that is often evident in studies of hip-hop culture. Instead, the study demonstrates how hip-hop exhibits an array of contradictions in its ability to critique Western imperialism while simultaneously celebrating misogyny, sexual dominance, consumerism, and capitalism. This report is a departure from masculinities studies that have only focused on patriarchal privilege, therefore I contest that all men are the same or that they benefit the same from gender privileging. Furthermore, this study attempts to address the silences on gender, in South African scholarship on hip-hop that often engages with the representations of racial identities.

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## **Appendix A: DVD Disk**

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