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A “Chance” of Success: The Influence of Subcultural Capital on the Commercial Success of Chance The Rapper

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Abstract

This case study builds on Sarah Thornton’s (1996) theory of subcultural capital as well as Bourdieu’s theories of capital (1986) by providing a rich description of Chance the Rapper’s path to success. Findings demonstrate that his accumulation of subcultural capital within both the Christian and hip-hop subcultures, as well as his use of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital to build a following, were necessary for his commercial success. Using information derived from interviews, textual analyses, and streaming data, this study provides evidence affirming that his subcultural capital is directly related to four key factors: his employment of the free music model to release music, his independent artist identity, his musical style that transcends genres, and his authentic and consistent social media involvement. Finally, applications of the findings to the broader music community are offered, specifically addressing the implications of this study for independent artists.

Keywords: subcultural capital, recording industry, music industry, Chance the Rapper, free music model, independent music, independent artists, social media, case study

Introduction

The recent prominence of online music streaming has caused noticeable changes in how music is discovered and how artists reach their fans (IFPI 2016). Streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, SoundCloud, and Pandora have substantially increased the accessibility of music with little to no distribution costs to artists and record labels (TuneCore 2017). Furthermore, the internet, paired with recent technological innovations, allows for anyone to create, record, and distribute music online without the need for labels or professional studios (Jensen 2013, 8). Therefore,

independent or “do-it-yourself” (DIY) artists are more prominent than ever (Jensen 2013, 13). A significant example of this notion is Chance the Rapper, an independent hip-hop artist from Chicago. Known for achieving unprecedented success without the support of a record label or significant radio promotion, Chance the Rapper’s story boasts an unorthodox journey to fame and success that has nonetheless resulted in a devoted fan base. His decision to release music not only for free but exclusively on digital streaming platforms caused a notable disruption in the traditional music industry distribution model.

In this digital age, there is an infinite amount of music at the consumer’s disposal (Caves 2000). In order to cut through the “noise,” an artist must cultivate a unique identity that personally connects to an audience (Elliott and Davies 2006). More recently, this has been accomplished by “going against the grain” and opposing the natural characteristics of genres and artist typecasts of the past (Robinson 2016). Music is a shared experience, and smaller groups of fans develop based on shared tastes, preferences, ideals, and habits (Bourdieu 1979). These groups become “subcultures,” or bodies of individuals within larger cultures that often share social traits, beliefs, and values that distinguish them from broader society (Thornton 1996). Music listeners who belong to these subcultures not only acquire the culture of the group, they also create a shared group identity (Horsfall 2013, 51-52). As a result, artists can appeal to these subcultures by displaying musical authenticity, which offers feelings of community and establishes a trust for fans who crave validity and truth (Thornton 1996, 26).

“Subcultural capital,” a term coined by sociologist Sarah Thornton (1996, 163), describes the measures taken by individuals to accumulate status within a social domain, often by differentiating from the mainstream. In music, a high level of subcultural capital can be gained through establishing a distinct artistic style, defying genre lines, and appealing to a variety of audiences while simultaneously captivating small music subcultures. Chance the Rapper does this with ease; while the foundation of his music is hip-hop, he has cultivated a multi-faceted musical identity that resonates with multiple audiences and opposes what one would typically expect of a rap artist. He unapologetically proclaims his independence from a record label, further distinguishing himself from the traditional music industry. Chance the Rapper has acquired high levels of subcultural capital because he is perceived as relevant and relatable within multiple

subcultures. The purpose of this research is to explore how these subcultures, and his subsequent accumulation of capital within them, have influenced the career of Chance the Rapper, ultimately catapulting him into commercial success.

What Is Subcultural Capital?

The concept of a “subculture” is applied very differently today than it was when the term initially emerged in the early twentieth century. Beginning in the 1940s, sociologists developed subcultural theory, which organized specific demographic groups into subcultures based on a number of shared social traits (Williams 2011, 7). This theory transformed into a social phenomenon of nonconformity in the subsequent decade. Criminologist Albert Cohen conducted a landmark study entitled *Delinquent Boys* (1955) in which he observed how “young, working-class males chose to solve problems through abnormal, that is, deviant or delinquent, means,” establishing a subculture in and of themselves (Williams 2011, 7). In the 1960s, sociologist Howard Becker formed a theory of subculture while studying jazz musicians; the theory “emphasized that collective deviant behavior was most likely to become subcultural when members of a group consciously identified themselves in contrast to the broader mainstream society” (Williams 2011, 7-8). Becker’s perspective on the formation of subcultures is most closely synonymous with the way subcultural theory is used today. Sociologist J. Patrick Williams (2011, 8) claims that a “subculture” represents groups of individuals who form a community through shared characteristics which leads them to “identify themselves as different from—usually in some form of antagonistic relationship with—normal, ‘square’ society.” Therefore, since their inception, these subcultures have developed into communities of choice rather than groupings into which individuals are placed (Williams 2011, 6).

This study supports the claim that subcultures are defined first and foremost by their relation to the mainstream, described often as resistant, yet inevitably involved segments of the larger culture (Brooker 2003, 240). Although subcultures are subsections of larger cultures, their “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (Hall and du Gay 1996, 4). Thus, rejection of the mainstream is not merely a consequence of the creation of a subculture but an integral part of its identity. Subcultures are established as a result of their ability to label themselves as outsiders (Hall and du Gay 1995, 5). These subcultures cultivate community,

which, in turn, grants someone the opportunity to establish a reputation and status within that community. For example, when the hip-hop subculture emerged in the mid-1970s, pioneer Afrika Bambaataa coined various elements of the hip-hop subculture: graffiti art, breakdancing, rapping, and deejaying (Kitwana 2002, xiii). Today, when one speaks of hip-hop, this is a reference not only to the musical sound, but also to the “hip-hop specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility and worldview” surrounding the genre (Kitwana 2002, xiii). As a result, the culture is influential to listeners because fans identify with more than the music: they connect with the community and the values they share.

As a community forms, its members customarily come to an agreement as to what is ideally representative of the group’s culture, which grants the opportunity for its members to establish status within that community (Williams 2011, 133-134). Status equates to capital, which can take many forms. Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1977) asserted that monetary wealth, or economic capital, is not the only display of status. Rather, status can be acquired by other means. One example is social capital: the real or potential resources that are derived from a network of relationships, such as belonging to a family or university. On the other hand, one can acquire cultural capital, which is earned by the possession of knowledge, accomplishments, and qualifications. Having both forms of capital can lead to opportunities that an individual would not otherwise have.

In the context of subcultures, status is measured based on the relative value of “hipness” defined by a group’s beliefs and values (Thornton 1996, 11). Through a “mode” of style, being “hip” helps to establish the identity of the subculture while defining the group and its individuals against each other or the mainstream (Ford 2002). Being “hip” is a level of “coolness” or trendiness that is often perceived by and within the subculture itself. Thornton therefore recognized that “hipness” can become an asset or capital by which the individual can use to leverage. Similar to Bourdieu’s ideas on forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), Thornton also claims that her idea of subcultural capital can be objectified or embodied. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, subcultural capital can be objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (Thornton 1996). Although the manifestation of subcultural capital is not as tangible as other forms of capital, it is nonetheless significant.

The expression of subcultural capital lends itself to the establishment of hierarchies dependent on the individual's demonstration of the subculture's ideals and values. In contrast to mainstream culture, which creates hierarchies to alienate individuals, hierarchies within subcultures exist to validate its position in society (Jensen 2013, 8). Through the acquisition of values and traits representative of the subculture, one's status within the group is boosted: "Those who express subcultural ideals best will very likely enjoy the most status" (Williams 2011, 133-134). Essentially, the more one immerses his or herself in the subculture and the more traits typical of that subculture he or she adopts, the greater his or her subcultural capital will be.

Though subcultures can be formed as a result of communal interests or characteristics, many are formed through a shared feeling of "otherness" from the mainstream (Anderson 2009, 171). These subcultures provide individuals, particularly those who often feel marginalized by society, a sense of identity through shared styles, interests, and tastes. Thus, individuals within subcultures form an identity for themselves by "adopting innovative non-mainstream styles whilst forming an identity made up of subcultural capital" (Shuker 2005, 64). Being "different" from the mainstream is not only celebrated, it is valued and contributes to the purpose of a subculture. These shared differences cannot be fabricated, as a subculture without authenticity is void. As Thornton (1996, 3-4) states, subcultures are recognized as the "authentic versus the phony, the 'hip' versus the 'mainstream,' and the 'underground' versus 'the media.'" Authenticity is not only an idea valued by the group as a whole, it must be demonstrated in individual identities as well. One gains subcultural capital by engaging in shared interests identifiable of the group. The challenge then becomes obtaining subcultural capital without mimicking others within the subculture because, "Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard" (Thornton 1996, 12). This balance can be reached by staying true to one's authentic personality, which naturally aligns with the subculture's ideals.

Although subcultural capital can explain the status and influence one can attain within a subculture, Thornton's theory has been criticized in several ways. Some believe that Thornton denies the importance of class within subcultures, yet the concept of subcultural capital serves as a currency that constitutes unequal statuses (Jensen 2006, 8). The existence of subcultural capital inherently creates its own set of classes. It has also been

argued that the typical “analysis of subcultural style is an oversimplification of actual young people’s cultural practices” (Laughey 2006, 52). According to Dan Laughey, author of *Music and Youth Culture* (2006, 52), this is especially apparent in ethnographic studies of youth music cultures. He claims that subcultural capital theory is “largely premised on unhelpful dichotomies between effects and resistance, dominance and opposition,” forming potentially inaccurate presumptions about the habits of young listeners (Laughey 2006, 52). Consequently, many feel that subcultures are romanticized as sources of resistance (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, 342). As with any theory, skepticism continues to develop as awareness of subcultural capital continues to grow. However, this study investigates and challenges those assertions by providing a rich description of the success of artists within the music industry using the strengths of Thornton’s theory of subcultural capital.

Subcultural capital has been examined for two decades, analyzing topics that range from subjects like nightclubs and raves to goth and hardcore punk. Yet, this study applies the theory in a new way by analyzing its application to artists in the music industry, specifically, Chance the Rapper. Subcultural capital can be used in analyzing the status of individuals within any creative business. As Thornton (1996, 12) explains, subcultural capital does not convert into economic wealth with as much ease as cultural capital; however, those in certain professions, such as musicians or clothing designers, make a living from their subcultural capital. Music is a prime example: author and sociologist David Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2) claims that music not only plays an important role in people’s lives, but also connects the private self to a more public community through shared emotions and experiences. As a result, music inevitably fosters an environment in which individuals follow the hierarchy the community has created: “Out of all other forms of creative culture, music has the strongest power to act as a measurement of status differentiation” (Hesmondhalgh 2008, 10). Subcultural capital is acquired based on values derived from the community behind the music. Music listeners measure artists’ performances and stories by making judgments based on their own feelings and beliefs (Hall and du Gay 1996, 121). Because identity in music is so largely dependent on the culture to which an individual belongs, subcultural capital plays a vital role in the interaction between artists and fans. Rather than inhibiting the creative process, subcultural capital exists “to establish the subculture’s position in society, its distinction from the mainstream,

and its authenticity in separating itself from it” (Jensen 2013, 8). Artists can and do transform subcultural capital into economic capital, but the difficulty in doing so is worthy of further exploration. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover how Chance the Rapper has been able to transcend these boundaries and transform his subcultural capital into mainstream economic, social, and cultural success.

Data Collection Methods

In order to better understand and explain Chance the Rapper’s quick and unconventional commercial success through the lens of subcultural capital, twenty music industry professionals familiar with Chance the Rapper’s success were interviewed. These interviews were conducted over a two-month period and each lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. They were conducted to gain context and perspective on how, and what types of strategies are used to launch and support artists’ careers. Participants included independent musicians as well as music industry professionals involved in the promotion, branding, or representation of songwriters and recording artists (see Appendix A). Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

In addition to interviews, textual analysis of industry trade journals and other relevant news, blogs, and social media sites served as evidence contributing to the findings presented in this study. Furthermore, data specific to Chance the Rapper’s career were derived from reports generated on Buzz Angle, a platform that provides data on music consumption. An artist history report was generated to analyze both streaming activity and radio airplay from December 30, 2013 to June 23, 2017 to identify the time periods in which Chance the Rapper’s streaming and spin numbers spiked. Using the context of those dates, the authors were then able to further explore specific events that may have contributed to increases in music consumption throughout his career.

Chance’s Path to Independent Success

Chance the Rapper’s connection with numerous subcultures can be attributed to a few notable factors: his employment of the free music model, his status as an independent artist, his inclusion of Christian faith and connection to the Christian community, and his authentic relationship and communication with fans through social media. Long before the name “Chance the Rapper” was coined, Chancelor Bennett was an amateur rap-

per from Chicago. As a senior in high school, he was suspended from school for ten days for marijuana possession. In that time, he recorded and produced his first mixtape, appropriately titled *10 Day*. When he began working on *10 Day* in 2011, Chance the Rapper had free access to a recording studio through the YOUmedia library facility in Chicago and was able to produce the content of his first mixtape at minimal cost. Mary Johns, a prominent artist manager in the hip-hop genre, observes that:

He paid a one-time fee for music to use in the background of his songs to avoid paying royalties down the line. (Interview 2017)

This allowed him to release his music free of cost on the mixtape sharing website, DatPiff (Biography.com Editors 2017), which provided access to a key market at a low cost. The term “mixtape,” which Chance the Rapper has continued to use for each of his projects, describes an “original or semi-original batch of songs that is released by musicians to the public at no cost” (Payne 2016). This practice is indicative of Chance the Rapper’s musical identity and commitment to the free music model.

Even after gaining popularity and receiving offers from multiple record labels, Chance the Rapper chose to continue distributing his work via streaming platforms like SoundCloud and DatPiff, offering fans the privilege of consuming music at no cost (Robinson 2017). “I don’t agree with the way labels are set up,” Chance the Rapper admitted in a *Beats 1* interview with Zane Lowe (Payne 2016). While this digital-only, free music model has yet to become widely adopted, Chance the Rapper’s initiative served as a catalyst for an amendment to the eligibility requirements for The Recording Academy’s consideration for GRAMMY Awards, which now includes digital-only and streaming-only releases (Rys 2016). Subsequently, this rule change allowed him to win three GRAMMYs in 2017 (one of them “Best New Artist”), which is a notable and groundbreaking development for past, present, and future independent artists. Chance the Rapper so firmly believes in the free music model that he goes so far as to reference it in his songs: “I don’t release my music for free, I release it for freedom.” Sarah Phillips, the senior editor of a prominent music industry publication stated:

The moment he realized he didn't need anyone else was when *Surf* came out. He went to the table with Apple and said he wanted to put it in the iTunes store for free (this was before Apple Music). That was the first time Apple had any free thing sell, and I think that really bolstered his confidence. (Interview 2017)

Much like other young artists attempting to pave a path to success, Marissa Daniels, an independent artist based in Nashville, felt she needed to provide her music for free as well. "Although payment is now required to download my music," Daniels made it clear, "offering music free of charge helped [me] accumulate fans." It was after she developed a loyal following that she began to charge for, and profit from, her music (Interview 2017). Blake Hudson, a manager for an independent band, further added, "You need to be giving your music away to get fans, instead of thinking, 'I need to make money right now'" (Interview 2017). This creates a long-term vision for the artist. Maximizing exposure and minimizing consumers' risk to "try out the music" before purchase is key. This was clearly a strategy that Chance the Rapper also pursued, enabling potential fans an opportunity to begin listening to his music "risk free" without a financial commitment.

Furthermore, a mixtape gives an artist complete freedom over what songs are recorded, collected, and distributed—this provides the ability to exercise creative vision without concern from third party interests (see Figure 1). High quality mixtapes have a profound effect on the artist-fan relationship by providing credibility to an artist that cannot be found by commercial means (Payne 2016). As was established earlier, "hipness" and relevance are crucial to obtaining and maintaining subcultural capital, which explains why Chance the Rapper's mixtapes on SoundCloud and DatPiff resonated with so many of his early fans. By releasing mixtapes and challenging mainstream music industry standards, Chance the Rapper was able to accumulate subcultural capital and a level of status that set him apart from the saturated pool of talented artists within his genre.

As an independent artist, Chance the Rapper has the privilege to decide for himself how he will distribute his music and run his career. The independent music subculture fosters a shared sense of dissatisfaction for the way in which the larger corporate music culture operates. As a result, the independent music community runs under its own structure, language,

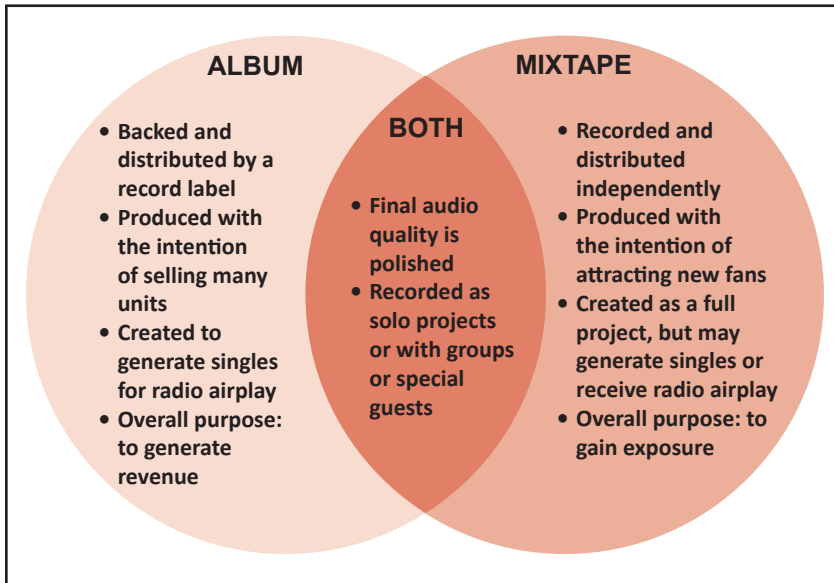


Figure 1. Comparison between albums and mixtapes.

and ultimately, culture, which invites those uninterested in the mainstream music world to join a distinct movement (Jensen 2013, 4). Jensen references author Tammy Anderson (2013, 46) in explaining, “Anderson suggests fans of particular genres, as well as the general public, are provided a cultural resource in the determination of ‘alternative’ or ‘underground’ identity and its distinction from the ‘mainstream.’” The “cultural resource” being provided here is subcultural capital. Although there are social forces that typically determine music tastes and products for a larger, common society, these subcultures praise separation from it. As a result, “music becomes more valuable aesthetically the more independent it is of the social forces that organize it” (Hall and du Gay 1996, 120). The further from this controlling force artists appear, the more subcultural capital they acquire.

Chance the Rapper’s devout independence as an artist awards him a high level of subcultural capital as it provides him a status defined by his opposition to mainstream music methodologies and is intricately tied to the independent (and, thus, “hip”) method of marketing oneself as an artist. In commenting on Chance the Rapper’s identity as an independent artist, Phillips further commented:

Early on, it was a badge of honor and a lot of kids respected him a lot more 'cause he was “sticking it to the man.” This act of “sticking it to the man” (that is, record labels) and being fiercely independent appealed greatly to early listeners of Chance the Rapper’s music. (Interview 2017)

It was also recognized that, “Chance disrupted the flow of the normal industry standard. He said, ‘No, I’m going to give my music away’” (Phillips, interview 2017). As a result of his resistance to the mainstream music industry, Chance the Rapper cultivated a “cool factor” that is often necessary in order to gain subcultural capital (Thornton 1996, 11).

One must consider the role of mainstream media in the existence of subcultural capital to properly evaluate the concept’s power and significance. Mainstream media and subcultural capital are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. Mark Jancovich studied cultural distinctions and expanded on Thornton’s ideas (2002, 10): “[Thornton] argues that despite their oppositional ideology, these subcultures are not the products of an authentic self-generation which is later threatened with incorporation by the media, but rather that the media is central to both their formation and maintenance.” In other words, subcultures are not to be isolated from the mainstream. Rather, the mainstream media helps form and maintain one’s subcultural capital. Chance the Rapper’s distinct musical identity is made known by comparing his distinguishing characteristics to commercial standards, thus his subcultural capital exists because he is opposing the mainstream. Phillips noted this opposition in saying,

What happens to a lot of kids right around that time is they would get signed to major labels and majors would release their mixtape on iTunes and it would become a retail project but what Chance did was resist all of that. (Interview 2017)

With nothing to oppose, there can be no subcultural capital. While Chance the Rapper’s career is rooted in opposition to it, the mainstream media plays an important role in his widespread popularity and his status as a household name. Therefore, the mainstream media, while not directly involved in the development of his early career, indirectly contributed to Chance the Rapper’s subcultural capital, the source of his success.

Fan Engagement and the Necessity for Authenticity

Chance the Rapper’s musical identity cannot be compartmentalized into clear-cut genres or a predictable artistic persona. His audience reach is considered “enormous”—meaning it is above the 98th percentile when compared to all other artists (Next Big Sound 2017). Moreover, his audience engagement falls between the 85th and 98th percentile of artists, making his engagement “strong” (Figures 2 and 3).

Stephanie Sinns, an account manager for a marketing agency, claims that, “The advent of streaming has caused an increasing level of genre flu- idity, which allows artists to break out of genre molds” (Interview 2017).












METRIC	THIS WEEK Jul 22–28	LAST WEEK Jul 15–21	% CHANGE	TOTAL	PERCENTILE Jul 22–28
 Vevo Video Views	33,048,348	21,203,580	+55.9%	877,941,572	100th
 YouTube Video Views	1,894,122	2,007,087	-5.6%	213,263,305	99th
 Instagram Likes	319,816	561,905	-43.1%	57,565,639	98th
 Twitter Mentions	130,700	85,800	+52.3%	-	100th
 Last.fm Plays	54,300	50,629	+7.3%	11,770,846	99th
 Twitter Retweets	48,400	230,400	-79%	-	100th
 Facebook Talking About This	32,891	87,654	-62.5%	-	91st
 YouTube Likes	12,830	13,123	-2.2%	1,641,350	99th
 Instagram Comments	2,006	3,951	-49.2%	952,252	97th
 Last.fm Listeners	1,475	1,425	+3.5%	254,144	99th
 Tumblr Notes on Posts	-1	23	-104.3%	156,549	-

Figure 2. Chance the Rapper audience engagement (Next Big Sound 2017).






METRIC	THIS WEEK Jul 23–29	LAST WEEK Jul 16–22	% CHANGE	TOTAL	PERCENTILE Jul 23–29
 Twitter Followers	95,696	128,492	-25.5%	5,020,115	100th
 Instagram Followers	81,151	80,354	+1%	6,164,311	100th
 YouTube Subscribers	7,184	7,132	+0.7%	884,933	99th
 Facebook Page Likes	5,885	6,474	-9.1%	1,815,118	99th
 Songkick Followers	3,871	3,450	+12.2%	385,639	100th

Figure 3. Chance the Rapper audience reach (Next Big Sound 2017).

Chance the Rapper's immense success in audience engagement stems from his connection to multiple subcultures despite the difficulty in pinpointing the genre to which he belongs. His musical style is one that the media has struggled to define: a dynamic mixture of several subcultures' characteristics. Chance the Rapper's large following and fan engagement numbers are a result of his appeal across subcultural lines and his accessibility to fans of different demographics. Phillips further adds:

It is not what you would associate with street rap where it is harder and your mom wants you to turn it off. There is that gospel element and that soul element and a lot of kids gravitate to that even if they aren't listening to hip-hop all the time. (Interview 2017)

He has created a style of music that combines two seemingly contrasting ideals—gospel/contemporary Christian music and hip-hop—and thus, defies what the public would expect from either category. Still, Chance the Rapper is not a Christian hip-hop artist either; he does not fit into any particular musical category. Touching further on the notion of Chance the Rapper's audience:

I think it is not necessarily the type of kids you would expect to be listening to hip-hop. It is really kind of broad because his music reaches across different genre lines which broadens who pays attention to him. (Phillips, interview 2017)

Chance the Rapper has acquired capital in both of these subcultures by winning over fans from both Christian and hip-hop circles while simultaneously opposing and exceeding the expectations of the audiences of both genres. Chance the Rapper's third mixtape, *Coloring Book*, best displays his popularity among multiple subcultures. A 2017 *Teen Vogue* interview with *Get Out* writer-director Jordan Peele digests *Coloring Book*'s multiple layers and the impact it has had on Chance the Rapper's career (Figure 4).

Peele (2017) describes Chance the Rapper not only as an artist, but a cultural leader who is pushing boundaries in his music. According to Peele, Chance the Rapper is "going against the bad-boy swagger of work-

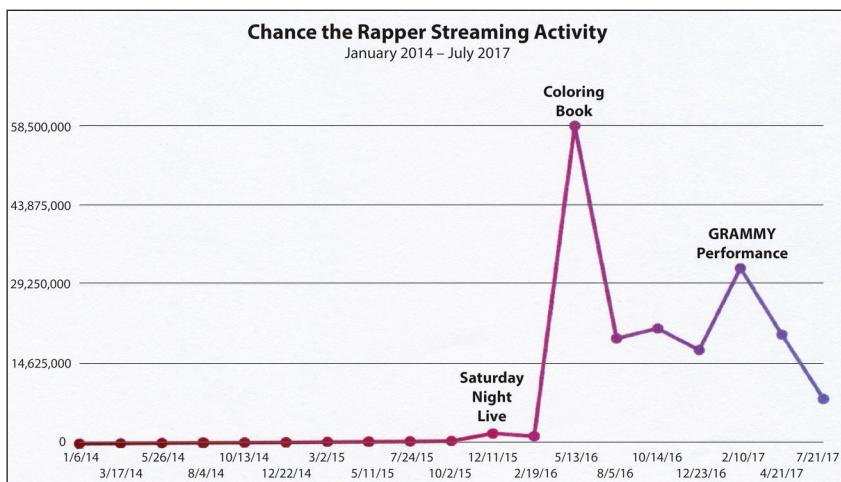


Figure 4. Chance the Rapper streaming activity, January 2014-July 2017 (Border City Media - BuzzAngle 2017).

ing in hip-hop” by incorporating elements of Christian faith into his rapper image. In the interview, Chance the Rapper recognizes his dynamic musical identity: “One of my biggest fears with *Coloring Book* was that it would be labeled. I hate labels. I never sought out for people to recognize it as a gospel album. I don’t make Christian rap, but I am a Christian rapper” (Peele and Welteroth 2017). This statement gets to the heart of his multifaceted musical identity. For someone who calls himself a rapper, he is too religious. For someone who calls himself a Christian, he is too profane. Chance the Rapper recalls the success of *Coloring Book*, saying, “People were very accepting of it. Whether they say, ‘I’m an atheist, but I love *Coloring Book*’ or they say, ‘I’m so glad I was able to get closer to God through this project’” (Peele and Welteroth 2017). By daring to combine these two cultural ideals, he resists the stereotypes of both genres and mainstream music as a whole. At this intersection, he acquires subcultural capital, which pushes his success further by heightening his status and distinguishing him as an artist.

By mixing religion with profanity to consider doubt and faith together, Chance the Rapper reveals authenticity, a crucial element in the acquisition of subcultural capital (Nibokun 2017). Additionally, he substantiates his aforementioned reputation of authenticity, thus reinforcing his subcultural capital with fans and followers, with his transparency on social media. Sarah Thornton asserts that “authenticity is arguably the most im-

portant value ascribed to popular music” (1996, 26). When controversy struck regarding Chance the Rapper’s exclusive deal with Apple Music for the initial two weeks of *Coloring Book*’s release—going against his commitment to free music, in some fans’ opinions—Chance the Rapper took to Twitter to explain his reasoning and communicated honestly with fans about the situation and why he engaged in the deal (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Chance the Rapper, tweet regarding Apple Music deal (Twitter 2017).

In his book *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*, J. Patrick Williams explains, “In subcultural theory, authenticity was initially used in a realist sense, as an antonym for inauthentic, mass consumer culture” (2011, 140). Since Chance the Rapper has maintained control of his musical career and social influence as a wholly independent artist, he is able to make his own judgments about what and when to post, and how much

information to share with his fans. Chance the Rapper is not under the compulsion to comply with anyone else's social norms or privacy restrictions, and consequently, has made strides toward an unprecedented level of openness and authenticity with fans. As previously mentioned, Chance the Rapper's music is authentic, which contributes to his credibility within this subculture. However, his authenticity outside of his music and the values he represents further establishes himself within the peer group, as Jensen quotes Anderson (2013, 12) in explaining, "Authenticity cannot be derived from music alone; it must have the accompanying lifestyle and traits that make the culture authentic in the first place."

Independent artists Karen Bailey and Marissa Daniels have also effectively employed these strategies in the process of developing fan bases of their own. On the subject of social media, Karen Bailey emphasized the importance of "trying to show up with your actual personality" (Interview 2017). According to Bailey, artists should avoid relying on a third party to monitor and support fan interactions on social media platforms. Furthermore, Bailey asserted that artists should leverage the platforms they feel most comfortable using. For Bailey, it is Instagram, but for independent pop artist Marissa Daniels, it is YouTube. Because these artists feel comfortable on these platforms, they are able to be completely authentic when using them to interact with fans. Daniels affirmed this notion in saying, "You have to give yourself permission to be who you are. A lot of being an artist is giving yourself permission to be who you are. And this is on a whole different level when you're posting things" (Interview 2017). Chance the Rapper's authenticity in both music and lifestyle further raises his status and differentiates him as an artist. This leads to his accumulation of subcultural capital within multiple subcultures, musical and otherwise.

Conclusion

This research seeks to explain Chance the Rapper's success through the lens of subcultural capital. The findings suggest that in order for artists to maximize their opportunities, they must be perceived as genuine and relevant to audiences within the subculture from which the artist identifies. Chance the Rapper, relating and speaking to the values within multiple subcultures, has acquired subcultural capital in those various groups, leading to increased opportunity for commercial success. Reaching across subcultural identifications has allowed him to leverage this capital in ways not often seen in the modern commercial music industry. Chance the Rap-

per's strategies in acquiring subcultural capital can be emulated and applied to one's own artistic career in order to improve chances for success, but cannot easily be done alone without the aid of other forms of social, economic, or embodied cultural capital. Using these assets to seek a free music model, maintain the perception of being an "independent artist," create a sound that challenges genre norms, and maintain authenticity on social media have all contributed to the acquisition of subcultural capital and ultimately his commercial success.

As previously mentioned, Chance uses mixtapes as a strategy to promote and grow his fan base. This is of particular importance within the subculture of hip-hop since releasing mixtapes is a popular and widely accepted practice (Rys 2017). By distributing his music under the title of a "mixtape," Chance the Rapper appeals specifically to the hip-hop subculture, gaining subcultural capital by his chosen method of music distribution, a form of access and consumption that is of particular importance within the confines of this subculture. Furthermore, by making his music available for free, Chance the Rapper was able to establish credibility within the hip-hop subculture while also reaching a broader audience. Because Chance the Rapper didn't charge money for his music, he was able to further his reach without risk to his consumers, who may have initially been reluctant to purchase his music. This was evidenced by his slow but steady streaming growth from January 2014 to July 2017 (see Figure 4 above). Establishing his credibility through these means and accumulating subcultural capital among multiple audiences and regions over time enabled a slow and steady exposure while laying the groundwork for an eventual recognition within a commercial mass audience.

As an independent artist, Chance the Rapper rose to a level of fame and success that has been undoubtedly difficult to attain without the support of a record label. Maintaining his independence as an artist is a large part of Chance the Rapper's identity. Although he received offers from numerous record labels, he chose to prioritize independence. This perceived resistance to the mainstream music industry bolstered his credibility among his audience. Opposing the mainstream is an appealing trait when accumulating subcultural capital, as it plays an important role in gaining position, power, and status among the group (Thornton 1996, 163). The entire story of Chance the Rapper's career is one founded in resisting common industry standards, a decision highly respected by the hip-hop and independent subcultures, thereby awarding Chance the Rapper high lev-

els of subcultural capital. Therefore, despite patterns previously exhibited throughout the history of the music industry, it is now important for artists to consider remaining independent as a means of developing a reputation and, ultimately, increasing their odds of success.

Chance the Rapper does not neatly fit into any single genre subculture, appealing to audiences outside the hip-hop fan base. Because he has developed a style of music that transcends traditional genre lines, he has been able to transcend the natural boundaries that may exist within strong and identifiable subcultures. Not only does Chance the Rapper reach passionate hip-hop fans, he is also able to reach a strong subculture of Christians who identify with his message. However, he was not able to do this himself; it was only possible through the aid and transformation of social and cultural capital in the form of a well-connected and experienced agent and manager. By combining characteristics of genres, Chance was able to appeal to a pluralism of genre cultures, thereby accumulating capital within the hip-hop, as well as within the Christian subcultures. Chance the Rapper does not isolate himself to one specific demographic; rather he provides a message so compelling that it resonates with fans of various social statuses, backgrounds, and beliefs. This results in high levels of relational capital in various communities (Khavandkar, Theodorakopoulos, Hart, and Preston 2016). An up-and-coming artist can attract fans across genres in order to acquire subcultural capital within many subcultures. This acquisition of subcultural capital from various audiences will help lead to a success that is not entirely dependent on the support of any one genre culture or fan base.

As previously explained, authenticity is the force that drives subcultures. A shared feeling of “otherness” and mutual disapproval of the mainstream binds subcultures together (Anderson 2009, 171). As an artist, Chance the Rapper utilizes social media to portray his personality to his fan base. He engages fans in political discussions on Twitter and posts pictures of his daughter on Instagram. Chance the Rapper appears reachable, often retweeting fans on Twitter and returning comments on Facebook and Instagram. It is these interactions and displays of transparency that create an image of authenticity while simultaneously increasing his stature and reputation. Therefore, in order for aspiring artists to follow a similar path, they too should consider using social media as a platform to display transparency and authenticity.

Although Chance the Rapper's accomplishments can be largely attributed to his methods of distribution, his musical independence, his connection to different communities, and his powerful authenticity, there are a number of other factors which may have played a role in his success, particularly allowing him to transcend into the "mainstream" from the subcultures in which he originated. These include opportunities that arose through his important relationships and access to financial resources. First and foremost, Chance the Rapper's father was directly involved with Barack Obama's congressional and presidential campaigns. This created a significant lasting relationship with an influential public figure and provided Chance the Rapper access to social capital that many up-and-coming artists do not have. Additionally, his manager, Pat Corcoran, served and continues to serve as a source of economic and social capital for Chance's activities. Corcoran invested millions of dollars into Chance the Rapper's career at the onset, which is a level of economic capital most young artists do not have access to. Corcoran's status as an influential manager, along with support from Cara Lewis, a notable agent with Creative Artists Agency, no doubt impacted Chance the Rapper's opportunities for success. Playing at Lollapalooza or headlining a tour are not typical opportunities that independent artists in their first few years are able to access. Ultimately, Chance the Rapper's rise to fame may have been influenced by these resources alongside his subcultural status.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this research was able to highlight some of the influences that can be attributed to Chance the Rapper's success, the case was limited to interviews from those not directly affiliated with Chance's team. Multiple attempts to gain access directly to him, his manager, attorney, or agent were unsuccessful. A perspective from a professional directly involved in Chance the Rapper's daily career would have produced a richer data set. Likewise, the authors were unable to access any of Chance the Rapper's financial information, which could have also led to a deeper understanding of his circumstances. The decisions surrounding the investments made in Chance the Rapper's career could provide a better explanation for his success that may not be apparent in the findings presented here.

Because this study focused on Chance the Rapper's career and his primary genre of hip-hop, future research could aim to examine subcultural capital and its influences on other artists or genre cultures. What is

valued within the hip-hop subculture will no doubt vary for artists striving for commercial success in the country, dance, or Latin genres. Furthermore, future research could also look into the influences of the broader culture on the subculture from which the capital is influenced and generated. What constitutes “anti-mainstream” and the plurality of subcultures in the United Kingdom, Germany, or other markets could lead to a deeper understanding of how subcultural capital can influence the mainstream commercial success of an artist.

Chance the Rapper has experienced an unparalleled level of success as an independent artist without the backing of a “record label.” By focusing on the influences of subcultural capital on his career, a rich description of the factors and values that took shape across multiple communities has been provided. By relating to these values, Chance was able to further leverage his access to social, economic and cultural capital to catapult him into the mainstream. Not only is the accumulation of subcultural capital essential to Chance the Rapper, it is essential to any artist’s success. By obtaining and having access to this valuable resource, artists can connect with their fans in a relatable and meaningful manner. From the Beatles to Lady Gaga, history consistently substantiates the idea that artists who “go against the grain” and take a stance about what they truly believe are more likely to resonate with their audiences.

Chance the Rapper is an excellent example of authentic expression, because of his willingness to express his Christian faith openly, while also speaking candidly (and sometimes profanely) about his upbringing. Musical artists of the present and future should take note of Chance the Rapper’s attainment of subcultural capital and consider how being mindful of its influence can be applied to their own careers. By staying faithful to one’s authentic identity, utilizing social media as a platform to connect with one’s fan base, releasing music in a manner that disrupts the content overload of the digital age, and recognizing one’s influence as a societal figure, an artist enhances his or her credibility within subcultures and builds equity with fans. All in all, there is no secret formula to fame, fortune, or mainstream success within the music industry—but being true to oneself is a great place to start down this elusive path.

Appendix A – Interviewees

Pseudonyms are Used to Maintain Anonymity

1. Jenna Anderson - Data analyst at an independent record label
2. Max Friedel - Data analyst at an independent record label
3. Sam Sloth - Fan engagement strategist at a major record label
4. Sydney Stith - Digital strategy director at an independent management company
5. Sampson Tidle - Song plugger at a major publishing company
6. Mary Johns - Artist manager at a prominent management company
7. John Smith - Business partner for a major Christian artist
8. Phillip Madden - Director of strategy at a marketing agency
9. Rich Believe - Strategy manager at a marketing agency
10. Sarah Emanuel - Operations coordinator at an independent record label
11. Kate Allan - Music industry representative for a politician
12. Stephanie Sinns - Account manager for a marketing agency
13. Michael Alexandar - Founder of an independent video production company
14. Marissa Daniels - Independent pop artist
15. Jack Jones - President and general manager of a virtual reality company
16. Karen Bailey - Independent country artist
17. Shelly Jewel - Manager for an independent pop artist
18. Borris John - Brand partnership specialist at a major record label
19. Sarah Phillips - Senior editor for a prominent music industry publication
20. Meredith Henry - Manager for independent alternative band

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CASSIDY BEST, originally from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, always dreamed of becoming a singer/songwriter. In 2015 she moved to Nashville to get an education at Belmont University. Currently in her junior year, she is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Songwriting in the Curb College at Belmont University. With hopes still high of being a professional musician, Best has become heavily involved in the music industry and within multiple on campus organizations. She currently serves as the vice president of her sorority, Phi Mu (Theta chapter), and is an active member of the Belmont University



Songwriter's Association. Additionally, she has explored many avenues of the music industry through her former internship at Aether, an artist management and develop company, her current internship in radio promotion at Big Machine Label Group, and of course, her role as a market research analyst as part of the Pipeline Project 7.0. Passionate about music, Best hopes to further explore all areas of the music industry, and ultimately, make music that makes people feel known.

Originally from Long Island, New York, **KATIE BRAILE** relocated to Nashville to study Music Business and Marketing at Belmont University.



Now in her junior year, Braile is the president of Bear House Writer Management, a student-run organization that serves to provide exposure opportunities for songwriters and artists attending the university. Additionally, she is an ambassador for the networking organization and online community, Young Entertainment Professionals. Having recently participated in the Pipeline Project at Belmont University, Braile devoted ten weeks to open dialogue, market research, and analysis of music industry issues. She is currently interning with

the A&R department at Big Machine Label Group, the largest independent label in the world. Driven by a strong desire to advocate for talent, Braille is actively pursuing a career in artist management and development.

EMILY FALVEY is a senior, double-majoring in Songwriting (B.A.) and Music Business (B.B.A) in the Curb College at Belmont University. Falvey is a member of Alpha Chi and Beta Gamma Sigma, as well as being awarded the Emerging Leader Award and the Exemplary First-Year Resident Assistant Award from Belmont's Office of Student Affairs. She has gotten heavily involved in the music industry throughout her undergraduate years at Belmont, and currently works as a copyright consultant at the Nashville office of Warner/Chappell Music while finishing her degrees. Additionally, Falvey has completed internships with The Recording Academy/GRAMMYS, BMI Catalog Cast, SMACKSongs (a music publishing company owned by the acclaimed Shane McAnally), Warner/Chappell, as well as Belmont University's Pipeline Project 7.0.



SAMANTHA ROSS, a Cincinnati, Ohio native, is a junior at Belmont University pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration in Music Business. She is a member of the student council for the Honors Program at Belmont and is an officer for Belmont's chapter of Best Buddies Tennessee. Additionally, she was a student-athlete for Belmont Women's Basketball and a market research analyst for the Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business' Pipeline Project 7.0.

JULIA ROTUNNO grew up outside of Chicago, Illinois but always dreamt of moving to Nashville. Now a junior at Belmont University, she is pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration in Music Business and engaging in the university's various industry related organizations, including GrammyU, the educational arm of The Recording Academy. Additionally, she served as a market research analyst for the university's music business program, the Pipeline Project. Since being at Belmont, Rotunno has been awarded the Brad Paisley Endowed Scholarship for her contributions to the Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business. As the marketing director for Belmont University Songwriter's Association and the marketing intern for *American Songwriter* magazine, Rotunno is passionate about country music songwriters and aspires to work alongside them to develop their craft and creativity.



DAVID SCHREIBER is an Assistant Professor and Chair of the Entertainment Industry Studies program at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. His research interests include the influences upon strategic decision-making practices within music industry micro-enterprises and the role of strategic sexual performance as it is used in creative and cultural industry organizations. He is also working on two textbooks: *Managing Organizations in the Creative Economy: Organizational Behaviour for the Cultural Sector* through Routledge Publishing in the U.K. and *Principles and Practice of the Global Music Business* through Kendall Hunt Publishing. Furthermore, Schreiber is a member of the Academy of Manage-



ment (AOM), European Group of Organization Studies (EGOS), and the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association (MEIEA). Prior to his time in academia, Schreiber began his career as an independent musician and teacher before moving into a Regional Sales Manager position at Schmitt Music. He later held positions as a Marketing and Business Development Manager for Shiny Penny Productions, in the licensing and royalty department of Miami Records, as Business Development Manager at Pivot Entertainment, and managed artist Dean Fields.

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