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# **Brands and Product Mentions in Rap Music: An Analysis of Branded Entertainment in Rap Music Lyrics From 2006-2020**

Tricia M. Farwell

*Middle Tennessee State University*

Ben Stickle

*Middle Tennessee State University*

Denise Shackelford

*Middle Tennessee State University*

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## **Abstract**

With the way consumers access and engage with music changing due to the internet, record labels have looked at product placements as a crucial way to build declining revenue from music plays. The present study examines rap music's lyrical mention of brands in most popular songs on the U.S. Billboard charts from 2006 to 2020. Overall, it is clear that the appeal for brands to partner with the music industry, and for artists to include brand mentions in songs, is still prevalent. Yet, these partnerships must be strategically pursued to lead to benefits to both the artist and the brand.

Keywords: brand mentions, product placement, content analysis, music, rap, branded entertainment

## **Introduction**

With the way consumers access and engage with music changing due to the internet, record labels have begun to look at product placements as a crucial way to build declining revenue from music plays. Branded placements in song lyrics and music videos are potentially lucrative for the record labels and the artists. Record labels earned an estimated \$15 million to \$20 million in revenue from product placement in music videos, which increased from previous years.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, total global product placement spending was expected to rise nearly 14 percent from 2020 to approximately \$23 billion.<sup>2</sup> However, much of the details of placement

agreements are kept private between those involved. With more people opting for “ad free” services on streaming music services, it is anticipated that product placement will increase.

From a marketing standpoint, the metric for the success of brand mentions is consumer sales. For example, Desiigner’s “Panda” was #1 on Billboard’s Hot 100 in May 2016 and BMW sold 712 X6s, compared to 565 in May 2015.<sup>3</sup> However, advertisers cannot draw a one-to-one connection between the song lyric and the increase in sales. With limited empirical data available pertaining to the origin of the placement of brand mentions in rap song lyrics, the question of which placements were paid endorsements and which occurred organically as a result of the artist’s affinity for the brand or product has led researchers to explore the type and frequency of placements in entertainment media such as movies, television shows, and music videos. However, the extent and impact of brand mentions within music lyrics is still an emerging study area.<sup>4</sup>

It is estimated that users spend nearly 17 percent of their life listening to music,<sup>5</sup> and between 2016 and 2017, music consumption is estimated to have increased by 12 percent.<sup>6</sup> In particular, adolescents consume music at the highest rate<sup>7</sup> and are four times more likely to list rap as their preferred genre.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, rap is the fastest growing and most popular music genre, accounting for a quarter of all music consumption<sup>9</sup> and six of the top ten most popular artists in 2019 were rappers.<sup>10</sup>

The frequency of brands mentioned within rap music has led some scholars to say that brand mentions are “a way of life in rap music.”<sup>11</sup> With rap music focusing on lived experiences more than other genres,<sup>12</sup> the genre may be a particularly good fit for brand mentions.<sup>13</sup> However, as mentioned prior, it is not easy to know if any of these brands are mentioned as part of a paid arrangement or if the artist merely chose them for lyrical or status purposes. Regardless of the reason, rap music commonly includes brands.<sup>14</sup>

The present study examines rap music’s lyrical mention of brands in most popular songs on the U.S. Billboard charts from 2006 to 2020. It contributes to the current body of research on product placements in rap music by: 1) focusing on a variety of categories of product placements in a specific genre of music to present a more comprehensive picture of the genre’s connection to consumer culture; 2) answering Sánchez-Olmos et al.’s (2020) call for looking at brand mentions in specific music genres; 3) answering Mohammed-Baksh and Callison’s (2008 and 2015) call for

studying placement in lyrics over time; and 4) updating past studies by examining recent top songs.

## Review of the Literature

### Hip-Hop Culture

The terms rap and hip-hop are often used interchangeably to describe a genre of music consisting of stylized rhythmic music accompanied by a rhythmic and rhyming speech.<sup>15</sup> The terms will be used interchangeably to refer to the musical genre in this paper as well. Rap music is one of the four elements of the hip-hop culture, including emceeing, breakdancing, and graffiti art.<sup>16</sup> DJ Kool Herc is considered by many to be the originator of hip-hop for his innovations in emceeing while in the South Bronx area of New York City.<sup>17</sup>

Once a thriving borough of New York City, the demographic make-up in The Bronx experienced a significant shift, and by the 1980 census, Black and Puerto Rican residents, together with the other ethnic minorities, comprised the majority of the borough's residents.<sup>18</sup> As property values fell, crime rose, and arson became rampant. This led to the closure of many neighborhood businesses and left much of the borough in ruins.<sup>19</sup> Searching for entertainment and an opportunity to escape from the grim realities of the day, DJs turned the abandoned and burned-out buildings into a stage for block parties.<sup>20</sup>

It was against this backdrop of violence, poverty, and racial unrest that the culture and sounds of hip-hop were conceived. According to Marcus Reeves, hip-hop historian and author of *Somebody Scream! Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power*, the conditions led to a growth of ideas and a movement to escape from gangs and violence.<sup>21</sup> While modern hip-hop lyrics can be viewed as inciting violence, discriminating against women, and craving materialism, some researchers believe hip-hop culture itself "is built on values of social justice, peace, respect, self-worth, community, and having fun."<sup>22</sup>

It was not until the late 1970s that mainstream media began to embrace the genre and its growth soared.<sup>23</sup> The Sugarhill Gang's 1979 song "Rapper's Delight" is considered the first hip-hop recording to gain widespread popularity in the United States.<sup>24</sup> The mid-1980s saw the beginning of the so-called "golden age" decade of hip-hop with the 1986 release of Run-D.M.C.'s *Raising Hell* album, which has sold more than three

million copies to date. However, this era was also plagued with violence and crime, culminating with the murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. in separate drive-by shootings in 1996 and 1997, respectively.<sup>25</sup> By 1999, hip-hop was the top-selling genre of music in the U.S., with over 80 million albums sold<sup>26</sup> and by 2017, it surpassed rock as the most consumed musical genre in the United States, due in part to its dominance on streaming platforms.<sup>27</sup>

## Branding, Music, and Business in Rap Music

Song lyrics are often aspirational, whether about love or lifestyle.<sup>28</sup> It should be no surprise that a genre launched in an impoverished neighborhood located only twenty minutes from the heart of the world's wealthiest city would emphasize extravagance and luxury.<sup>29</sup> Boasting about what one has (or wants) in the lyrics of rap songs provides a basis for developing promotional partnerships between the artists and the brands that represent the lifestyle they emulate. As an executive from Roc-A-Fella Records explained, the hip-hop culture "is about the things we want and own," thus making it a perfect branding opportunity.

Hip-hop artists often incorporate brands they use in their daily lives into their song lyrics and music videos.<sup>31</sup> According to one marketing executive, the ideal situation would be for a mention of a brand name in the song, include the brand in the music video, and then have the brand and artist work together in other promotional opportunities.<sup>32</sup> Although brand mentions do not always reach that "ideal relationship," brands have been intertwined with hip-hop music since its earliest days. For example, Run-D.M.C.'s 1986 hit, "My Adidas," considered one of the first modern examples of product placement in hip-hop song lyrics, pays homage to the footwear brand in its title and no less than twenty times in the lyrics.<sup>33</sup> Though not initially compensated by the brand, a subsequent sold-out Madison Square Garden concert led to a lucrative endorsement contract and a signature line of shoes when Adidas executives in attendance witnessed most of the massive crowd holding Adidas sneakers in the air during Run-D.M.C.'s performance of the song.<sup>34</sup> To obtain a similar number of impressions through paid advertising as that which resulted organically from the song would have meant a significant expenditure for Adidas.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Adidas was not the first brand mentioned in Run-D.M.C.'s song lyrics. Their 1984 hit "Rock Box" included the lines "we bake a little cake with Duncan Hines" and "Calvin Klein's no friend of mine." The lat-

ter was not construed as an approving nod to the brand, and the former did not engender the same audience reaction with boxes of cake mix that “My Adidas” did with the sneaker showing that not all placements turned into success for the marketers.

Eventually, advertisers started to pay close attention to hip-hop when Sprite’s “Obey Your Thirst” campaign, which launched in 1994 and ran through 2019, connected with its target audiences. The campaign featured notable and recognizable rap artists such as MC Rakim, Nas, and others. In 2017 the campaign flipped the messaging and, instead of “Obey Your Thirst,” told consumers to “Obey Your Verse.” The flipped campaign celebrated hip-hop artists by printing their lyrics on soda cans, solidifying the connection between the music, the artists, and the drink.<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned earlier, not all brand mentions in song lyrics result from coordinated efforts by an organization’s marketing department. Busta Rhymes’ 2001 hit, “Pass the Courvoisier” (a high-end cognac), included the liquor brand purely as an artistic choice; however, after the brand’s parent company saw an 18.9 percent sales increase in the United States,<sup>37</sup> it entered into an agreement with the artist.<sup>38</sup> With the release of “Pass the Courvoisier Part II,” the brand’s sales increased almost 5 percent in the first quarter of 2002.<sup>39</sup> However, that spike did not last for long as by 2004, sales growth dropped as other alcohol brands mentioned in more popular songs saw a rise in sales.<sup>40</sup> Thus, showing that while brand mentions may provide a brand with an initial boost, the brand needs to find ways to capitalize on and maintain the spike.

Product placement in songs and music videos may be necessary as it is often difficult for artists to support themselves on music royalties alone. A recent example is when record labels such as Universal Music Group have partnered with tech companies and advertising agencies to allow retroactive ad placement.<sup>41</sup> In retroactive placement, the agency and tech company insert brands into music videos at some point after the original release of the video. While some may see this as a way for artists to continue to earn money on old content, others see it as artists “selling out.”<sup>42</sup>

## Brand Mentions in the Media

Brand mentions are often studied in television shows,<sup>43</sup> movies,<sup>44</sup> and music videos.<sup>45</sup> Studies have shown that there is a connection between brand mentions and viewer attitude towards a brand,<sup>46</sup> intent to purchase

and selection of brands,<sup>47</sup> and a connection between the viewer's investment in the storyline and feelings toward the brand.<sup>48</sup>

Given that the type and quality of brand mentions range from subtle incorporation of a brand name into a song to overt mentions by the artist of getting paid to mention the product,<sup>49</sup> the actual number of organic and paid placements in songs is unknown.<sup>50</sup> Usually, placements in song lyrics are discussed only when they have an overwhelmingly positive impact on sales or, as in the case of Lady Gaga's music video "Telephone," the brands are incorporated in an "obvious" and "extreme" manner designed to draw attention to the fact that brand mention is occurring.<sup>51</sup>

Due to the structure of, and out of necessity to see a rise in sales, the music business has turned to, and at times encourages, incorporating brand mentions in songs. Perhaps in an attempt to preserve the illusion that brand mentions are organic, most brand mention agreements are confidential.<sup>52</sup> However, some artists are open about getting paid to mention and/or wear products. Fergie, for example, agreed to mention and wear the fashion brand Candie's for \$2 million.<sup>53</sup>

Many studies of brand mentions in rap music focused on the appearance of brands in music videos. For example, Burkhalter and Thornton (2014) found that more than 90% of the music videos studied from 1995 to 2008 included some form of product placement. The researchers found that vehicles (418 mentions or 54.7%), clothing and shoes (133 mentions or 17.4%) were the most prominent references when looking at product categories. The researchers also found a slightly higher number of luxury items (400 mentions or 52.3%) over non-luxury items (364 mentions or 47.7%) within the videos.

In their study of music videos in the Billboard Hot 100 top thirty spots in each year from 2003 to 2016, Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) found that cars (608 mentions or 18.3%), caps (357 mentions or 10.6%), and shoes (277 mentions or 8.4%) were the most prominent types of products found in 420 music videos. However, they did find a new category represented in the brand mentions: technology. The authors point out that the appearance of technology (7%) had not appeared in previous studies. The top technology brands seen in the videos were Apple (56 or 1.8%), Nokia (34 or 1.1%), and Beats by Dre (43 or 1.4%). They concluded that the appearance of technology brands was to reflect users' lifestyles and a direct connection to the move to digital technology.

In addition to examining placement in music videos, scholars and advertising industry organizations have recently turned their focus to product placement in song lyrics. In 2004, American Brandstand reported that there were approximately one thousand brands mentioned in songs on the Top 20 Singles chart. These songs were predominantly hip-hop singles. The American Brandstand project, created by an advertising agency whose clients were often mentioned in songs, reported the most mentioned brand in songs on the Billboard charts in 2005 was Mercedes, followed by Nike and Cadillac.<sup>54</sup> Overall, 2005 saw 106 hip-hop songs with brand reference, total mentions down 6% from the previous year.<sup>55</sup> While fashion and beverage mentions decreased (9% and 36%, respectively), mentions of weapon brand names increased 19%.<sup>56</sup>

News and business outlets have also reported on the number of brand mentions appearing in songs. Bloomberg (2017) reported that one of the most popular brand groups represented in hip-hop song lyrics is automobiles stating, “Eight of the 12 most popular product mentions have four wheels”.<sup>57</sup> The most popular in the group is Rolls-Royce, with mentions in eleven songs released between 2015 and 2017.<sup>58</sup> Of the 280 songs analyzed by Bloomberg across all genres, the most branded mentions were in the categories of automotive, fashion, and entertainment.

The National Public Radio show *All Things Considered* looked at brand mentions in the Top 20 songs for three years.<sup>59</sup> Although there were 212 unique mentions of brand names, these mentions are not always as explicit as advertisers might like, given that many songs use slang instead of actual brand names. By way of example, in the song “Bad and Boujee,” the Migos rap “hop in the frog” (referring to a Porsche) and “hop in the lamb” (referring to a Lamborghini).<sup>60</sup> As with the Bloomberg report, automobiles were the top product mentioned.

One longitudinal study found that brand mentions increased over multiple decades. The study analyzed 1,583 of Billboard’s top thirty pop songs from 1960 to 2013 and found that location mentions in song lyrics became more frequent in the mid-1990s, with the number of place names reaching a high of 86 mentions in 2006.<sup>61</sup> As with other studies, Gloor found that automobiles, specifically Mercedes-Benz, Bentley, Corvette, and Cadillac, were the most frequent product mentions in song lyrics.

Mohammed-Baksh and Callison’s (2008) study of the top one hundred songs across genres, and using rankings from various sources, found that brand mentions and product mentions were more prevalent in rap



music than any other genre (56.67%), finding that rap songs tended to mention vehicles and luxury brands most often (40% and 72.82%, respectively). They also found that male rap artists were more likely than female rap artists to mention products in their lyrics (63.3% and 10%, respectively). Specifically, male artists mentioned automotive brands, and female artists frequently mentioned travel and entertainment brands. In a follow-up study, Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2015) confirmed that gender played a crucial role in the number and types of product mentions, with, once again, female artists mentioning significantly fewer products than male artists.

Craig et al.'s (2017) study of the top 20 year-end songs from 2009-2013 found that rap had more product mentions (73.0%), inclusive of branded and non-branded products, than any other five genres studied. Following earlier studies, they found that male artists mentioned brands at a higher rate (33.3%) than female artists (19.8%). However, the type of product mentioned by genre differed from Mohammed-Baksh and Callison's study in that Craig's team found males mentioned clothing and shoes (27.8%) and female artists mentioned automobiles and auto-related brands (25.7%). Craig's study also found that clothing and shoes were the most frequently mentioned products. Interestingly, 54.5% of the songs studied included non-branded product mentions compared to 30.5% of the songs containing branded mentions. The large number of non-branded product mentions provides opportunities for collaboration between artists and advertisers subsequent to a song's success in the marketplace. An executive with Totes Isotoner stated that partnering with Rihanna following her 2007 hit "Umbrella" provided "an opportunity to see what we could do in the [celebrity] accessories category."<sup>62</sup>

The literature reveals that branding is a significant component of music. Further, the type of brand or item discussed and the genre of the music also impact the frequency and type of mentions. However, there is limited research examining branding within rap music over time. Since this genre is the fastest growing in the United States and has been identified as containing more brands than other genres, it is essential to understand what messages are contained in this music.

## Methodology

To address this gap in the literature, we examined the top 25 rap songs for each year, 2006 to 2020, to answer the following questions:

Q1: Has the number of brand mentions in rap music increased or decreased from 2006 to 2020?

Q2: Which brand categories were mentioned most often in rap music songs?

Q3: Which subcategories were mentioned most in rap music within each brand category?

Data for the present study are made up of rap songs identified through *Billboard*, which uses sales, airplay, and streaming counts to produce popularity charts. The authors utilized a convenience sample of the top 25 rap songs from the genre identified as “Hot Rap Songs” from 2006 through 2020 ( $n = 375$ ). Next, the authors used [www.AZLyrics.com](http://www.AZLyrics.com) to locate each song’s lyrics and enter the data into a qualitative software program, QDA Miner, to assist with analysis. Next, each song’s lyrics were contextually analyzed following an open coding concept, involving a thorough reading of the lyrics to identify themes and topics. Five broad themes were identified: food and non-alcoholic beverages, travel and destinations, transportation, entertainment, and fashion. Next, the authors examined the lyrics again using a closed or focused coding process, which provided additional coding and linking of data and confirms or disproves minor themes.

The process described above was repeated several times at each level: two independent passes when conducting open coding, and two read-throughs when completing the focused coding. This robust coding method ensured accurate identification and interpretation of the lyrics. There were instances where the exact meaning or message was uncertain, which is common in rap music; as Bogazianos (2012) suggests, this ambiguity creates controversy encouraged by corporate music businesses. When in doubt of the intended message or product, the researchers sought clarification using one or more of the following methods: watching music videos, listening to the music, or by using the annotations provided by [www.genius.com](http://www.genius.com), which allows registered users to explain the lyric and the community to vote (up or down) the interpretation as correct. Finally, once all codes were identified, a third review of the identified codes was undertaken by a researcher who had not reviewed the lyrics prior. Any discrepancies were identified, discussed, and the researchers worked together to resolve different interpretations, resulting in a consensus.

## Results

Brand mentions within the most popular rap songs from 2006 to 2020 ( $n = 375$ ) confirmed previous studies. Mentions of travel, transportation, and fashion products occurred in over 40% of songs, while entertainment was mentioned in a quarter of rap songs and food at just over 10%.

However, the number of songs mentioning some product type is only part of the analysis. We also examined the number of times each brand was mentioned within the songs to understand the prevalence of brand mentions. The total count (the number of times a brand is mentioned) across all the categories is 1,275. Table 1 provides a complete breakdown of the categories, the number and percentage of songs (cases) where the lyrics occurred, and the total counts. This analysis is helpful as it demonstrates that, for example, a fashion brand was rapped in 150 songs (40%) and that references to a fashion product (count) occurred 334 times within those 150 cases.

Product Category	Cases	Percent of Cases	Count
Food & Non-Alcoholic Beverages	43	11.5%	51
Travel & Destinations	166	44.3%	399
Transportation	157	41.9%	343
Entertainment	95	25.3%	148
Fashion	150	40.0%	334

Table 1. Brand mentions by product category, number of cases, percent of cases, and count.

### Question 1

Examining the trends in lyrics about products from 2006 to 2020, both in code counts (the number of occurrences within the songs) and cases (the number of songs mentioning products), few trends were evident. During the fifteen years of the study, the average number of top songs that included a product mention is slightly over 19 (or 76%), and the average number of times (count) a product is mentioned is 85 per year. While this has fluctuated over time, there has been no substantial increase or decrease during the last fifteen years (see Chart 1).

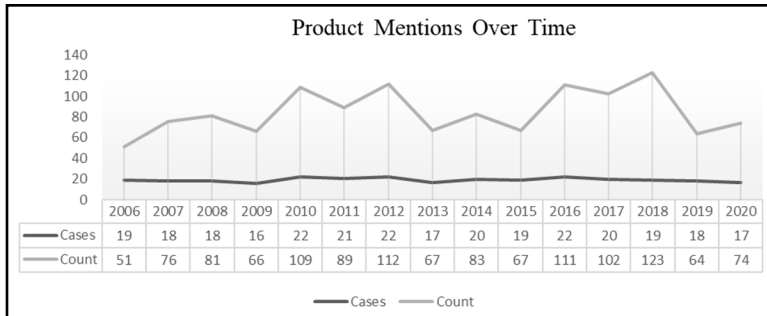


Chart 1. Product mentions over time.

However, within each category, some years stood out as having more mentions than others. For the entertainment category, sports mentions were most prevalent in 2010, movie and television mentions were most prevalent in 2016, physical technology was most prevalent in 2011, and software technology mentions were most prevalent in 2015. For the fashion category, shoe mentions were most prevalent in 2014, jewelry mentions were most prevalent in 2018, and clothing mentions were most prevalent in 2021. For the travel category, city mentions were most prevalent in 2007, and country mentions were most prevalent in 2011. For the transportation category, sports and luxury car mentions were most prevalent in 2016 and 2017, non-sports and non-luxury car mentions were most prevalent in 2008. The food and beverage category saw no years with large increases.

## Question 2

The second question addressed is the most frequently mentioned category. Results indicate that the most frequently mentioned product was Travel & Destinations (44.3%), followed by Transportation (41.9%) and Fashion (40%). The least mentioned categories are Entertainment (25.3%) and Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages (11.5%). This finding contradicts previous research,<sup>63</sup> which found that automotive and fashion<sup>64</sup> were the top categories mentioned (see Chart 2).

## Question 3

Question three asked which subcategories were mentioned most in rap music. Table 2 provides the breakdown for each subcategory. In this section, we will describe selected findings. The most mentioned product

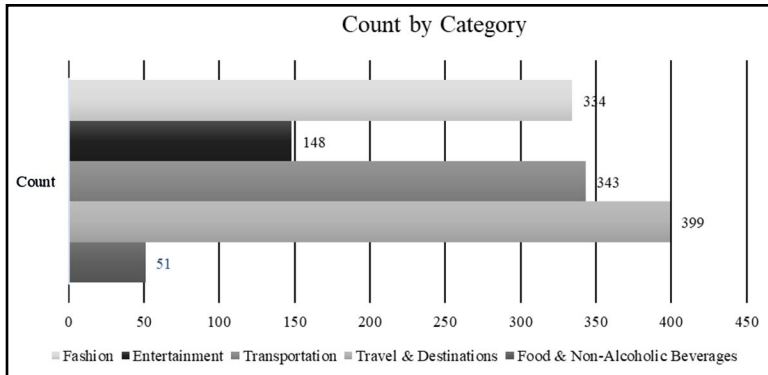


Chart 2. Count by category.

within the music (both by case and count) is sports and luxury cars which were rapped about in 140 songs (37.3%) and over 269 times. Just behind luxury and sports cars, cities were featured prominently, occurring in 118 songs (31.5%) and being mentioned 220 times. Luxury products (78%) were mentioned significantly more frequently than non-luxury products (22%). This finding is consistent with Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2008) but inconsistent with Burkhalter and Thomas (2014), who found an equal number of luxury and non-luxury items.

In the entertainment category, BET was the most mentioned product (10 mentions); in the fashion category, Gucci (40 mentions), Jordans (34 mentions), Rolex (25 mentions), and Louis Vuitton (25 mentions) received the most mentions; in the transportation category, Rolls-Royce (57 total mentions, including 12 mentions specifically of Rolls-Royce, 25 mentions of Phantom, 14 mentions of Wraith, and 6 mentions of Ghost), Ferrari (32 mentions), Lamborghini (31 mentions), Mercedes-Benz (27 mentions), and Chevrolet (22 mentions); and in the travel category, New York (27 mentions), Atlanta (20 mentions), Los Angeles (18 mentions) were the most-mentioned destinations.

Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) was the first study to mention technology brands. Our findings show that technology brand mentions still appear in rap music lyrics. Overall, Apple products were the most prevalent brand mentions (11 mentions). However, when looking at hardware and software separately, Kodak (6 mentions) and iPhone (5 mentions) are the top mentions for hardware. FaceTime (6 mentions), Instagram (6 mentions), and Twitter (4 mentions) were the most prevalent mentions of software. Additionally, hardware mentions were limited to just two brands, while

software mentions were across six brands ranging from entertainment to maps. To provide a more nuanced understanding of each category, Table 2 provides an overview of the cases and counts for each product and associated subcategories.

<b>Product Category</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>Percent of Cases</b>	<b>Count</b>
<b>Food &amp; Non-Alcoholic Beverages</b>			
Beverages	8	2.1%	10
Food	37	9.9%	41
<b>Travel &amp; Destinations</b>			
Cities	118	31.5%	220
States	24	6.4%	32
Countries	44	11.7%	65
Venue	52	13.9%	68
Other Travel or Destination	10	2.7%	14
<b>Transportation</b>			
Sports/Luxury Car	140	37.3%	269
Non-Sports/Non-Luxury Car	35	6.3%	53
Other Transportation	17	4.5%	21
<b>Entertainment</b>			
Movies/TV/News	27	7.2%	38
Sports	22	5.9%	28
Technology - Hardware	15	4.0%	19
Technology - Software	24	6.4%	30
Other Technology	25	6.7%	33
<b>Fashion</b>			
Shoes	52	13.9%	79
Jewelry	45	12.0%	65
Clothing	61	16.3%	80
Accessories	40	10.7%	45
Other Fashion	35	9.3%	65

Table 2. Overview of the cases and counts for each product and subcategory.

## Discussion

The study provides a current analysis of the trends in brand mentions in rap music from 2006 to 2020. When considered over time, the study's findings show that year-to-year changes in brand mentions in song lyrics are not consistent. There are spikes within each category across the time studied; yet overall, product mentions in rap music have remained fairly consistent from 2006 to 2020.

There was a shift in category dominance, however, when compared to other studies. While past studies found transportation or fashion the most frequent category appearing through branded mentions, this study finds that travel was the dominant category. This could point to a more significant change based on generational trends, such as people of younger ages preferring to spend their time and money on experiences.<sup>65</sup> For many rap artists, the mention of cities is connected to their growth or success. 118 songs announced that the artist was from a city or heading to a city.

A large number of transportation and fashion branded mentions shows that these categories are still prominent in hip-hop culture. Both fashion and transportation methods are ways people identify with certain groups and express their belonging. Displaying brands from these categories becomes a shorthand way of announcing group membership for many people. Fashion and shoes were often used as signs of status in rap music as people mentioned in the songs had Gucci (40 mentions), Louis Vuitton (25 mentions), or wore Jordans (34 mentions).

The Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) study found technology as an emerging trend in branded mentions, and this current study confirmed their findings. However, instead of hardware such as iPod, Kodak, and Nintendo 64 being the primary form of technology, software such as Google Maps, Instagram, and FaceTime were more common. During the fifteen years, it is worth noting that mentions of hardware has declined significantly while software mentions have increased (see Chart 3). Between 2012 and 2013, there was a clear shift from the mention of hardware (e.g., iPhone) to software technology (e.g., Twitter, Google). There is likely a connection between the growing popularity of software over hardware technology around the same time.

In line with previous studies, one consistent trend is that luxury items, specifically luxury vehicles, still strongly connect with rap music. Given that most younger people may not be able to afford a luxury vehicle, the mention of these brands in songs points to an aspirational goal and a

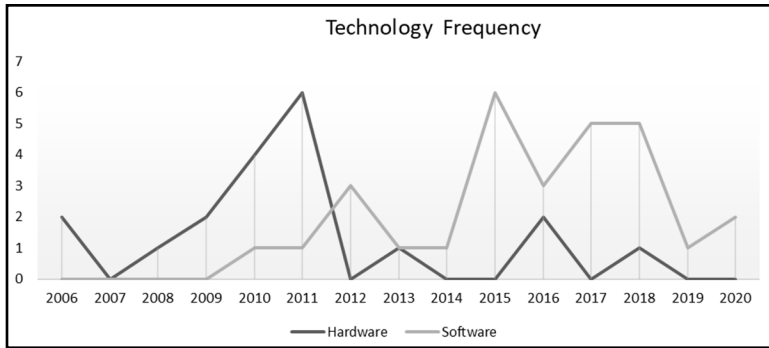


Chart 3. Technology frequency.

way of associating one’s own personal brand with these high-end prestige vehicles. When looking at the top subcategories, branded mentions of cities, luxury cars, clothing, and shoes, it becomes clearer that these items may reinforce and announce group membership regarding where people are currently and where they wish to be as aspirational goals. Although this study did find mentions of Chevrolet, Mercedes, Cadillac, and BMW as transportation brands, higher-end luxury vehicles were more frequently mentioned: Lamborghini (31 mentions), Ferrari (32 mentions), Rolls-Royce Phantom (25 mentions), Bugatti (16 mentions), and Maybach (16 mentions).

### Industry implications

The data from this study point towards a selective approach to brand partnerships for artists, advertisers, and the recording industry. Instead of reaching out to top artists or recording labels, marketers need to consider the bigger picture of trends with the generation listening to the music they are considering. Additionally, studying the ups and downs of the year-to-year product mentions might provide marketers with crucial information on when to partner with artists and record labels so that their brand mention does not fight the branded mention noise.

Luxury brands could look to having their product names mentioned in rap songs for long-term status connections. While younger people may not be able to buy the product at the point of listening, hearing the product name mentioned in songs they relate to could point them in a direction for when they do have the financial ability to afford luxury items. Brands may



see an increase in desirability from being associated with a specific rap artist or song.

### Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this study is that the coders were focused on the mentions of recognizable brands mentioned in rap music lyrics. Therefore, some brand mentions which might have been slang or insider ways of referring to a specific brand might not have been coded. Additionally, this study did not explore recall and recognition in audiences listening to songs. However, the study does provide groundwork and context for future studies.

Future research should attempt to contextualize the brand placements in terms of context within the song and the cultural environment when the songs are on the top lists. This would provide a richer analysis and, perhaps, help predict when there will be high levels of branded mentions in songs. Additionally, future research could consider top rap songs from a more extensive period and include more songs to look for trends. Finally, this type of study area is not complete without adding the voice of the artists and record labels. Interviews with both the artist and marketer sides would help provide context for the number of branded mentions in rap music.

### Conclusion

Overall, this study confirms that branded mentions are still prevalent in rap music. While there was no substantial increase or decrease in brand mentions over the time studied, there were fluctuations. This may show that rap music is not just mentioning brands to communicate reputation, but also to connect with real-world events. As with past studies, this current study also finds that the most frequently mentioned categories convey status, both aspirational and lived. The connection between brand mentions and lived experiences may also account for the rise in mentions of technology brands. As technology becomes more incorporated in daily life, both as a tool and a status symbol, the more consumers can expect the brands to be included in their entertainment.

Overall, it is clear that the appeal for brands to partner with the music industry and for artists to include brand mentions in songs is still prevalent. Yet, these partnerships, must be strategically pursued to lead to benefits for

both the artist and the brand. If there is no match between the brand and the artist, the mention becomes more noise for the consumer.

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### **Declaration of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest or financial incentive for this work.

## Endnotes

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**TRICIA M. FARWELL** is an Associate Professor of Advertising and Public Relations at Middle Tennessee State University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Master of Mass Communication, a Master of Arts in English, and a Ph.D. from Arizona State University. Dr. Farwell has worked in corporate communications for more than twenty years. Her research focuses on strategic communication pedagogy and diversity.

**BEN STICKLE** is a criminologist focusing on property crime and policing. He is widely recognized through his research contributions on metal theft, package theft, and emerging crime trends. Dr. Stickle is a Professor of Criminal Justice Administration at Middle Tennessee State University and holds a Ph.D. in Justice Administration from the University of Louisville. He has nearly twenty years of law enforcement and private security experience. Stickle has published widely in scholarly journal articles, chapters, and books.



**DENISE SHACKELFORD** is an Assistant Professor in the Recording Industry department at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) where she teaches Entertainment Intellectual Property and Survey of the Recording Industry. She also serves as a faculty advisor for Match Records, MTSU's student-run record label, and for the Urban Entertainment Society. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Belmont University and a J.D. degree from Nashville School of Law. In addition to her role with MTSU, she continues to practice transactional entertainment law in the Nashville music community.



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Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association  
1900 Belmont Boulevard  
Nashville, TN 37212 U.S.A.  
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