



Exploring Social Media Contexts for Cultivating Connected Learning with Black Youth in Urban Communities: The Case of Dreamer Studio

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Abstract

Using the Connected Learning framework as a conceptual lens, this study utilizes digital ethnographic methods to explore outcomes of a Hip-Hop Based Education program developed to provide music related career pathways for Chicago youth. Using the narratives of the participants within the program, I draw on participant observation online and in-depth interviews collected to explore the link between the tenets of Connected Learning and digital participation in this artistic community of practice. I explore participants' work within social media platforms toward building their creative skill, cultivating a public voice, connecting to mentors, and communicating in ways that strengthens the social bonds within their peer community. This study's findings affirm prior studies that suggest late adolescence is an important time frame where children are developing social identities online in affinity spaces but in ways that are tied to civic engagement, self-empowerment, and critical skill development for their future pathways. To conclude, I suggest that investigating participant activity on social media platforms as a part of field work can help ethnographers to better connect their impact to the agency and life trajectories of their youth participants.

Keywords Connected learning · Social media · Hip-Hop · Civic media · Participatory culture · Popular music education

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Introduction and Background

When one arrives at Dreamer Studio, Marvel (affectionately known as Vel to his students) is almost always deep in the midst of mixing audio, sitting in a large black leather chair in front of a large Apple computer. He looms in the center of the room, often directing commentary to his students without turning from the screen in front of him. He's lanky and thin, wearing a blue Adidas tracksuit and gold rosary beads. Formerly a touring artist who was signed to a major record label in early 2000's, Vel now spends basically everyday at Dreamer, helping youths who seek to follow in his steps. Opened in July 2014, the community recording studio is a collaboration with a national nonprofit where he serves as a mentor and a social service agency that owns the loft space that the studio occupies.

The first day in which I visited the studio there were more than 30 young artists, aged between 14 and 22 years old, bound about the space. Vel told me proudly that they all come from different pockets of Chicago, though they're largely clustered in neighborhoods around the south and west sides that are considered among the most dangerous in the city. As I talk with the youth, they tell me that the studio offers them a safe place to meet and collaborate with like-minded musicians from other areas. While many Dreamer artists are just finding their footing as musicians, they are a testament to Vel's hypothesis—that there is a demand for different organizations to provide Black youth with spaces that they can learn from and hone their creative skills. Even with all of his seeming success, it is still an uphill climb. Every year, Vel must pound the pavement and fundraise in order to keep his space up and running. Many times, this required tapping into his personal finances. Vel knows that without Dreamer Studio, it is more than likely that many of the student participants defer their creative abilities for allure of illicit activities or succumb to the violence in and around their communities.

Unfortunately, Vel's struggles to keep his creative space afloat are not atypical. Access to spaces and places that provide pathways to lucrative creative careers in the U.S. have historically been stubbornly tied to race and socioeconomic background (Florida 2019; Watkins and Cho 2018). However, research indicates that through Connected Learning (Ito et al. 2013), modern technological tools are increasingly allowing adolescents the ability to individually navigate skill development for their personal interests, develop connections with peers, and improve their networking skills (Callahan et al. 2019; Watkins 2019). Professional development also has been shown to manifest through online affinity spaces, social media platforms, and their affiliated creator communities, where these youth can build kinship bonds with others who hold similar aspirations and social identities unbounded from their physical location (Gee 2017). These kinship (and often neighborhood) driven communities are what Duffy and colleagues (2021) call creator pods, or social media relationships that focus on audience quality and knowledge generation and not just collecting a large quantity of random followers. Though digital affinity spaces can provide true expertise, they are often exclusionary to those with dissimilar socioeconomic backgrounds and racial identities (Jenkins 2007). In particular, Black youth in low-income communities often lack access to digital tools required for participation or do not know about opportunities to connect with relevant resources and thus, are not given proper

pathways to use social media in ways that further hone their creative skills or shape a career based on their interests.

That said, these exclusionary processes can still be disrupted through mentorship in programs where marginalized youth form relationships with peers and mentors who both share their background and are part of a high-value field or career path (Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2014; Raposa et al. 2019). For Vel, reorienting Dreamer Studio to also serve as a digital affinity space is one strategy for allowing his participants to break through exclusionary structures and facilitate music career pathways whether or not the physical studio space is accessible. Through social media, one can now access the world through one's own perspective and interests and eschew the uniform vision constructed by the media (Jenkins 2007). By integrating the social media relationships/ Do-It-Yourself (DIY) skills that successful creatives need/form on their own, Vel's students talked to me about how they utilized Twitter, Instagram, Club-House¹, and Twitch to self-brand themselves and digitally present themselves to a public to forge both personal and professional relationships. Despite this anecdotal evidence, further research is still needed to elucidate youth perspectives on how programs like Dreamer Studio are looking to social media in fortifying the collectives they cultivate and how their communities of practice, though tied to physical spaces, leverage digital media to generate/gain/share knowledge among one another.

This study explores how Dreamer Studio has produced significant and lasting impacts on its participants' transitions into creative labor beyond the physical studio setting. This paper utilizes methods of digital urban ethnography (Lane 2016) to ask how active participants, mentors, and alumni of the program organized as a creator pod to network and strengthen their artistic community of practice through utilization of social media platforms. During in-depth interviews with participants, they suggested that the self-empowerment taught in the Dreamer program was only the first step towards furthering their own self-started transitions into creative work. Vel, the studio's staff, participants, and alumni explicated and demonstrated this in three key practices: (1) corraling as a pod, (2) collaborative problem solving and, (3) DIY circulation. Ultimately, I argue that participants of Dreamer Studio are a case exemplar of how social media provides a vital avenue for Black youth and their mentors to interact and that, in defining part of the success of Dreamer Studio as a matter of access and opportunity to engage with their passions in expert ways, communication with peers through social media platforms grounded their knowledge and practical know-how acquired through in-person participation at the studio.

21st Century Skills, DIY Careers, and Youth Participation on Social Media Platforms

Social media, video sharing, and music streaming platforms have drastically changed the digital participation strategies of aspiring musicians, as they now can move

¹ Debuted in March of 2020, Clubhouse is an audio-based social media app. The main feature of Clubhouse is real-time virtual "rooms" in which users can communicate with each other via audio. Users can also schedule conversations by creating events.

between and within platforms to self-promote themselves while seeking to professionalize their careers (Haynes and Marshall 2018; Hesmondhalgh 2020; Powers 2015). In particular, social media platforms have been shown to greatly support the work of musicians by providing launching pads for these burgeoning artists to speak directly to fan communities, build personal relationships with them, and let them share in their creative process (Baym 2012). These relationships often now go beyond simple “friending” to direct messaging, portal shows, and live streams of mundane activities that lead to other kinds of intimate interpersonal contact (Rendell 2021). A rapidly professionalizing and monetizing wave of diverse, multicultural, previously amateur creatives from around the world have harnessed these platforms to incubate their own media brands, engage in content innovation, and cultivate often massive, transnational, and cross-cultural fan communities (Baym 2018).

For youth, this platformed presentation of self is largely important to occupational identity development (Watkins and Cho 2018), becoming an entertainer (Cunningham and Craig 2021) and navigating today’s creative workforce (Duffy 2018). All of these factors have provided a unique and precarious opportunity to Black youth in urban America, who have been shown to have a strong aspiration for careers involving digital media often while nestled in communities of digital disadvantage due to their race, class, and geography (Perry and Raeburn 2017; Stuart 2020; Watkins 2019). This has led to philanthropic efforts to seriously invest in supporting curricula to empower marginalized students to gain civic media literacy, which broadly means thinking critically about reimagining the social function of media, leveling digital inequities, and the implications of technological advancements on their everyday lives (Mihaïlidis et al. 2021). In considering the digital participation of urban youth of color, interest-driven practices on social media platforms are online activities these young people find appealing but also central as they build their creative networks, peer relations, and seek cultural capital (Watkins and Cho 2018).

Recent scholarship has argued that formal efforts engineered towards closing the learning pathways gap for Black youth should be more focused on leveraging their creative and cultural capital in the realm of Hip-Hop music (Emdin 2021; Evans 2021; Kramer et al. 2021). For example, African American youth’s involvement in Hip-Hop cultural practices have previously been shown to play a significant role in teaching them the importance of collaboration, innovation with technology, as well as their identity development (Love 2015). Hip-Hop communities of practice also provide both a sense of belonging and acceptance (e.g., the development and/or strengthening of relationships) to youth within peer cultures (Dimitriadis 2009; Helmer 2015; Seidel 2011). Despite a proliferation of social and behavioral research pointing to the positive impact of Hip-Hop music production within programmatic interventions (Petchauer 2015), very few studies have thoroughly attempted to track the impact of Hip-Hop Based Education programs towards pathways development beyond the school buildings or community centers and in the everyday lives of its participants beyond the program.

Thus, there is a need for research that examines how social media platforms are redefining community youth media programs, career training opportunities, and the spaces where career preparation takes place. Since youth are continually re-negotiating their identities and actively reinventing themselves on the platforms they par-

ticipate in, there is a need to understand how programs can better accommodate (and evaluate) communities of practice as they traverse digital and physical spaces. Additionally, there is a need to understand what the hybridity of these communities mean for career advancement. Many scholars have claimed that Hip-Hop (as a pedagogy of practice) offers an education where learners can work towards their desired aspirations via mediums or learning experiences that are familiar to them and build upon their already acquired knowledge (Emdin 2020; Hill and Petchauer 2013). It is also apparent that Hip-Hop provides new literacies acquired in social media platforms that are useful to African American youth for cultivating skills and competencies with digital tools and technologies (Evans 2020, 2021). The findings of that work suggest that measuring success of a youth media program is not only tied to how its participants discriminate and evaluate media content, but how they use media independently and communicate with peers and to gain skills to construct (and distribute) their own alternative media.

Theoretical Framework

The value of cultural production is generally organized to ensure that certain individuals are automatically advantaged, or disadvantaged based on their cultural capital (knowledge, behaviors, and skills that a person can tap into to demonstrate one's cultural competence and social status), or lack thereof (Bourdieu 1986). As an art form deeply rooted in disadvantaged urban communities, Hip-Hop has been depicted as a social identity that has historically been viewed from a deficit standpoint (Rose 1994). However, through the accumulation of digital clout (Hip-Hop-inflected cultural capital), modern youth gain social status and economic mobility through social media platforms and participatory culture (Baym & Evans 2022). Though sometimes associated with deviance and crime, digital tools and technology have emerged as a main source of social capital in low-income urban communities of color (Lane 2016). This form of social capital within Black communities is often context-specific and acquired depending on the situation (Hall 1992). To that point, previous work has written about how Hip-Hop music has served as a site of professional skill development and uncommon pathways of economic mobility for the more creative marginalized Black youth in urban America (Forman 2002; Harkness 2013; Lee 2016; Perry 2004; Quinn 2004), often subverting (and finding their clout outside of) the typical musician pathways of getting signed to a major record label (e.g., Ardit 2020). For example, Stuart (2020) detailed the ways in which young Black male rappers in Chicago used Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to bypass corporate-controlled record labels, subvert structures of gatekeeping, and cultivate a hip hop community of practice that harnessed substantial digital clout. Not surprisingly, social media platforms continue to be central to Hip-Hop's community of practice and, in many ways, has developed as a formidable source of self-empowerment for its most visible cultural producers.

The theoretical framework I suggest is most closely tied to the concept of Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE) providing Black youth learning pathways for creative careers is Connected Learning. In a Connected Learning context, young people have

increased access to a wider ecology of information, technology, and interest-driven learning communities (Ito et al. 2013). Within this framework, peer cultures and online communities provide ways for young people to learn important skills, cultivate relationships, and develop their own identities (Barron et al. 2014; Century et al. 2018). Theoretically, these capabilities should provide more pathways for young people to develop deeper identification with a personal interest, develop creativity, expertise and skill, and connection to professional aspirations (Ito et al. 2013).

In those instances, the framework suggests that knowledge and knowing are associated not only with the teacher, the curriculum, or outside experts but with every peer culture that the youth participate in. That is, learners are seen by themselves and by others as knowledgeable, committed, and accountable participants whose identities are variable, multi-vocal, and interactive (Wenger et al. 2002). Learners are held accountable for contributing to authentic problem solving, knowledge co-creation, and learning. In connected learning, learners are also provided with opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships and to learn with and from others. Thus, these learning environments broaden traditional forms of learner agency and accountability by expanding possibilities for engagement and bringing in new audiences with whom students collaborate and create new knowledge and understanding.

Little has been written to evaluate the role of social media platforms to bolster a program's community of practice, or to assess how those peer cultures might contribute to how participants make their transitions into creative work. Additionally, there is a call from researchers to better understand how these connected learning pathways develop for Black youth and how they make these connections between their personal interests, learning opportunities, racial identity, and real-world contexts (Emdin 2021; Garcia 2013; Watkins and Cho 2018). For instance, Garcia (2013) has argued that participatory media practices are a form of civic engagement that can connect disadvantaged youth of color to an understanding of their place as citizens in larger communities. Taken a step further, one could argue that young Hip-Hop artists are creating their own social movements. As such, the current study suggests that sites of Hip-Hop artistic practices should be recognized and encouraged by youth advocates and researchers seeking to engage in exploring this argument and how social media can play a role in strengthening artistic communities, civic engagement as well as kinship bonds between Black youth and potential mentors.

Aim of the Study

The broader aim of this study is to explore how the Dreamer's program/staff and youth participants came together on social media platforms to meet Vel's goals of building community, circulating information, and furthering skill development of his participants. Furthermore, this study investigates how youth from Dreamer Studio were using social media platforms to engage in Connected Learning and to begin to understand how the platforms themselves shaped different aspects of this process. As a part of an ongoing larger project, this study extends the author's previous work on Connected Learning and Hip-Hop Based Education in the formal classroom (Evans 2021) to understand how Hip-Hop Based Education programs meet the needs of stu-

dents in out-of-school time, and how they allow them to learn in contexts beyond the formal confines of their program facilities.

Research Questions

Given that the aim of this study seeks to examine specifically how Dreamer's community of practice aids Black youths transition into creative work, this analysis was guided by the following conceptual research questions (RQ):

RQ1 What are the critical elements of Dreamer Studio's social media ecologies and how does participation create Connected Learning for participants?

RQ2 Does the engagement of these youth in Dreamer Studio's social media ecologies present them with the opportunities to gain the skills in ways that they wouldn't otherwise access to?

Methodology, Participants, and Profile of the Sample

As a researcher, youth advocate, and Hip-Hop musician, I have spent upwards of twenty years as a key participant in Chicago's local Hip-Hop scene. As such, I have been afforded the opportunity to serve as a teaching artist in many settings. It was through a teaching experience at Dreamer Studio that I was compelled to do research on bringing about best practices in the community studio setting. My previous relationships with Vel and many of the youth in the program afforded me an access point to the fieldsite in ways that allowed me to build rapport with student participants that appear in this study.

The participants interviewed for this study included 10 (eight male and two female) Black students aged 14 to 24 years old who utilized Dreamer Studio during the 2019-20 school year and Vel, the executive director and owner of the studio. There was no incentive for interviews or participation. To protect anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to the name of the studio, all students and the teacher in this study.

Data for this project was collected over a 16-month period and initially relied on in-person fieldwork, including attendance at recording studio sessions, program workshops, live podcasts, and local open mic events. However, I found my biggest resource was observing respondents on social media, particularly Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram, in that chronological order. I was guided to these mediums by students and was allowed to friend them on each platform. This was where I also received updates on meetups that were occurring on social audio/audio sites like ClubHouse and Twitch. I immersed myself in conversations that youths were having on these platforms and then had offline conversations (via Facetime) with students to ask questions to participants like: What does this mean? Why did you say this this way? This is in line with Lane's (2016) take on digital urban ethnography, Patton and

colleagues (2020) contextual analysis of social media and Brock's (2018) critical techno-cultural discourse analysis (CTDA) which draws from technology studies, communication studies, and critical race theory in requiring researchers to include perspectives of cultural producers and seek to understand how their culture or lived experiences shapes the technologies they use. Ultimately, I focused my work to virtual participant observations in seeking to understand the creative lives of these students outside of the program.

I initially asked the participants to sit for interviews in auxiliary spaces where they participated in Hip-Hop culture and created music. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted several interviews for this study via Zoom or Apple's FaceTime, recording and transcribing them, before distilling recurrent themes. The analysis of this data was guided by the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2014), in which bits of data were continuously contrasted with one another to develop categories and distill recurrent themes.

Finally, I used evaluation methods associated with the Connected Learning Framework (CL) to inform my coding strategies. In this case study, I did not focus on CL design principles. Instead, I looked at whether the digital practices in which the students were engaged enabled the CL experiences of civic engagement and self-expression, increased accessibility to knowledge and learning experiences, and/or expanded social support for interests and empowerment for the student (Ito et al. 2013, 12). Employing MHA (Measures of Human Achievement) Labs' 21st Century Skill Building Blocks for participatory media projects (MHA Labs 2012), the initial codes selected to analyze field notes and online student discourse were: personal mindset, planning for success, problem solving, and social awareness. After first reading data openly as an entire data set noting initial field notes, I selected these specific themes for more focused and integrative coding because they aligned with what I assessed to be the goals of the program described to me by the Executive Director of the program.

Findings

Critical Elements to Dreamer Studio as an Artistic Community

Participatory culture is a term Jenkins (2007) claims is "emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies which make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways (25)." Outside of mobile communication, Black youth in Chicago generally have less expansive access to the Internet and its related digital tools that have been shown to be valuable in everyday life and the workplace (Barron et al. 2014; Century et al. 2018). This issue not only limits their future employment options and income potential, but this also hinders their academic success and overall participation with digital media (Robinson et al. 2015).

In this study, participation refers to educational practices and creative processes facilitated by Dreamer's social media ecologies. Overall, I found that Dreamer Studio encouraged its youth to develop the skills, knowledge, and kinship ties needed to

be full participants in contemporary culture. I found that studio's participants were actively given pathways for career development through three critical elements:

- Corraling as a pod — developing friendships and group memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around Hip-Hop, such as Twitter, Tik Tok, and Instagram.
- Collaborative problem-solving — working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks, develop and exchange new knowledge (such as through Conversations on ClubHouse).
- DIY circulation — Self-distribution and promotion of media among peers and mentors (such as livestreaming on Twitch or posting music to SoundCloud, YouTube, and/or social videos on Tik Tok).

Unintentionally, it was through the logic of these elements that youth themselves described how Dreamer's online ecologies reframed the concept of artistic community and achieved program success.

A Team Effort: Corraling and Collective Affiliation on Instagram (IG)

In Hip-Hop, the process of career development relies heavily on developing convenient connections, and networking with peers in order to form a creative collective to release and circulate one's creative work (Condry 2006, 88). Baym and Evans (2022) describe this using the term "corraling," which refers to the necessity of the posse in being a rapper, the number of hours required to build/maintain a sufficient collective, the blurred lines of fandom, collaboration, and friendship within platforms and the amount of sheer effort involved in digitally promoting a product or person as a unit. In contrast to the pre-digital era which treated music fans solely as spectators, when they use corraling, musicians engage fans as equals, often mobilizing the most engaged to serve in more official roles within their professional support system.

Participants in the Dreamer program continually expressed that they collectively strived to make the studio space into a platform to promote their creative work online, construct and showcase their digital selves. Besides uploading music videos to YouTube and Soundcloud, Instagram was described as the primary platform that allowed them to communicate their artistic lives. The program's Instagram account was started by Ka\$h, songwriter/producer who framed himself as the studio's official social media manager. When asked about the value of having this collective account, Ka\$h explained:

I realized that if we all posted collectively, then the algorithm would push our posts to the top of our friends' timelines back to back. Guerilla marketing just went from overpopulating the street to overpopulating Instagram.

What Ka\$h is saying here is that Hip-Hop's typical modes of word of mouth marketing have shifted from passing out flyers in the street to utilizing platforms for metrics, engagement and presentation. He speaks very astutely about how participants would gossip online about the algorithms that drive social media platforms and how to bet-

ter gain visibility. In this quote he speaks of “overpopulating” Instagram as a strategy to combat lack of representation in search engine optimization and recommender systems in order to achieve visibility on Instagram timeline. When asked to elaborate on the significance of this work, Ka\$h proclaimed:

Yeah, so like, Instagram doesn’t really support rap artists very well. So, one thing I was doin’ recently was tryin’ to find everybody’s second stream. Like, “cuz, hip hop, rappin”, whatever that is, producin’ might have been they first one. But I was like, what’s your second—your second avenue of talent you have, or interest? How can we use that to promote our collective?

In this moment, Ka\$h was explaining that he and the other participants of the program held many conversations about Instagram that went beyond the promotion of their music and how to build a support system to develop themselves as artists. He emphasized that forming a creative pod was the optimal way to amass having the same resources of, say, a corporate tier record label’s artist development department.

Lamar, a rapper who was also a journalism student at a local university, also reiterated this teamwork sentiment:

I been goin’ to Dreamer for like about 5 years, I think since like the first year they opened, that’s when I started goin’. I’d say like, out of a five-day week, I’d try to go through the studio like, if not every day, about three or four days a week. And even if it’s not to record, even if it’s not you know, to lay somethin’ myself, I just go online and check in with everybody. See what everybody else has been workin’ on. If anybody else needs help with anything, as far as mixin’ and masterin’, critiquing, marketing, anything like that...

Recent research has shown that videoconferencing and social video platforms provide learning opportunities just as powerful as in-person experiential learning (Hassing-Das et al. 2020). As both Lamar and Ka\$h’s comments indicated, talking online with one another was not always tied to casual conversation but rather exchanging of knowledge in ways that might develop their creative skill, spawn constructive dialogue on a creative project, or improve their knowledge of local resources. DJ Gemini, 21, explained:

A person needs to have a vision for their brand more so than having the talent to do the job. You can make all the songs you want but people have to be in your corner for you to win. We don’t just build friendships, we find collaborations (through Dreamer).

One of the primary ways artists who participated in Dreamer’s community of practice collectively used social media to choreograph their professionalism was by holding digital networking sessions on Instagram Live and having listening sessions on the studio’s Instagram (IG) TV channel. During these events, artists would either solicit critiques for their new music, invite studio professionals to share resources

about their facility, or hold conversations about different topics regarding professional advancement.

For example, Gemini used one of these sessions as a way to announce that she was opening a studio of her own that she would rent out for deejays (DJs) to rehearse, for novices to take lessons (in-person or virtually) as well as for private events or podcast tapings. During this session she streamed live from her new rental loft in Logan Square, giving a virtual tour and performing a live DJ set. She concluded her set by announcing that those who are affiliated with Dreamer could rent her space at an exclusive discount by following her on Instagram and commenting “Dreamer 4eva” on her most recent post. When asked about her motivations to announce her studio in this way, she stated:

I could have promoted my studio by myself over the next six months and I wouldn't have been able to get the same amount of attention I got for myself online (through Dreamer) in less than an hour. Dreamer is my homebase and if it wasn't for our community, I wouldn't have been inspired to enterprise and build my own space. We need places we can graduate to when we just want to focus on our work beyond the program. The more places, the more opportunities. We are building something where we provide and support each other as resources. We aren't in competition, we are in collaboration.

Lamar elaborated on how the artists in the studio found the most visibility for their work by promoting the Dreamer name as a social movement that anyone could join and feel important within:

We all just keep tryin' to strike oil, really. But really just a legacy thing. We want everything to have some type of longevity to it. So, we ride for each other. Most of the people come here, like they still young mind. But the fact that we're able to put all of that to the side and still make music, still do shows together, still find different ways to embrace each other. You know, what I'm sayin'? All of that makes a difference. And all of that helps – and that's what makes it bigger than the music, because... We got a collective story to tell.

When Lamar says “tryin' to strike oil,” it seemed he was speaking directly about seeking to gain financially from their creative labor. It was apparent that he and others at Dreamer were pursuing creative work that would qualify as aspirational labor. This meant that social media posting activities were such that participants believed they had the potential to pay off in terms of future economic reward. Additionally, his mention of having “a collective story” indicates that he viewed success for one of artists at Dreamer as a visibility that would raise awareness for their collective identity.

Friendship-driven practices on social media are such that young people of Hip-Hop find appealing but also necessary as they build social communities, peer relations and seek cultural capital (Watkins and Cho 2018). What participants like Lamar illustrated is that one of the strong points of Dreamer's community of practice was that there were participants from a variety of age ranges (and knowledge bases) that came together from different parts of Chicago. Due to this level of diversity of

thought and lived experiences, the participants felt a sense of belonging to a movement larger than themselves, and felt safer to be expressive, visible, and knowledge-seeking in online spaces.

Tik Tok and YouTube as Sites of Virtual Learning and Product Circulation

Collectively, participation was a process of trial and error for Dreamer participants seeking to engage themselves online. Even still, social video content produced by participants on both YouTube and Tik Tok served to produce an extended network of intimate strangers that legitimately expanded each other's knowledge base. Ron talked about how watching Tik Tok videos shared by other participants using the Dreamer Studio hashtag taught him the most about how to use certain audio equipment needed to be an effective music producer:

So, originally, I was just like, okay, I'm just gonna work, get money to buy equipment and just, you know, self-teach everything. 'Cuz, it's not like the talent wasn't there with the writing, or like I'm sayin', with the production per se, but I was missin' a lot of technical skills, and watching (my friend Re@L's posts) have given me so much knowledge on the way that things go. How to build a home studio and make quality stuff at home, you know?

Beyond technical skills, Vel talked about how participants self-organized the studio's social media initiatives and how having their creative community online was likely the most critical step for his students to professionalize their creative work:

I noticed that they were interested in how they could become more visible on social media. It used to just be about having dope music but that's not enough anymore. In this era, having a funny personality on social media can take you much further than any song. That's why Dreamer and the social media community we have developed is so vital to their artistic growth.

To his point, 16-year-old rap artist Meechy was a primary example. A sophomore in high school, Meechy already boasted over 9,000 followers on Instagram when we sat down and talked. When he put out a song on Dreamer's SoundCloud called "Winners Never Lose," he expressed excitement over how the collective rallied around him using platforms like Instagram, Twitch, Tik-Tok, YouTube and Twitter to share the song. The song garnered over 10,000 plays and over 1,000 downloads in 24 hours on the Dreamer SoundCloud page. This culminated in him gaining an opportunity to perform at a local skate competition sponsored by the shoe company Vans. Meechy shared his thoughts on how this transpired:

It was major. Just having that social media presence, From startin' a YouTube channel to whatever it is. They learned how to brand me. You know what I'm sayin'? So, post – like pickin' the right hashtag, figuring out the algorithm for who they are supposed to be on Instagram and Facebook and like makin' a

website. I saw real tangible results from the collective work of the studio. I feel like everyone treated the success of my song like it was their own.

In another example, when Lamar released his new single on his Spotify, he talked about now being able to secure shows in Los Angeles, Houston, and Atlanta based on a booking agent finding a snippet of his music video on the Dreamer Instagram page:

Since I put the single out on Spotify, stuff has just gone to a whole new level. I think we were able to figure out how playlists and algorithms can work for the collective and we've just been reaping the benefits of that. My music is dope but I understand that without an audience, I really can't have a career. Social media is essential to that, so everybody just shares each other's work and gives tips on how to work the system so everyone wins.

Overall, interviewees made it clear that social video platforms allowed them to address questions for skill development that existed within their larger collective while also supporting circulation of their creative works in the wider marketplace of attention. As is clear from the above examples, although not all Dreamer's young people were able to articulate the importance of providing certain kinds of information to the larger collective, they understood the collective was a key to their development as emerging music professionals and entrepreneurs.

Critical Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange on Clubhouse

Though Vel was clearly the adult supervisor and primary teaching artist of the studio, Dreamer's overall community was far more participatory than it was "top down." The physical studio space was able to thrive as a place where these youth rely both on finding their truth and getting honest critique. Their conversations on the social audio platform of ClubHouse, similarly, were brutally honest and there was a dialogic process between the artists and their studio community members in choosing how to pursue production and promotion for their work. For instance, following quote was given by Lamar during a conversation with both staff, alumni and students of Dreamer Studio on the social audio platform of Clubhouse:

Like, music doesn't have a user's manual. There is no way to figure out everything you need to do with some type of text. You gotta study; you gotta talk; you gotta collaborate. That's the only way you're gonna figure out what's gonna work, what's not gonna work... We see rappers doin' shows. We see rappers on TV. We see blah, blah, blah. How do they set those up? How do they get those opportunities? Where were they at when it happened?

In this particular quote, Lamar points out that there is an extreme level of mystery to the process of transitioning from aspirational creative laborer to being a paid professional artist. He speaks about parasocial relationships as not providing enough depth for an emerging artist to study and emulate. In that regard, Dreamer's Clubhouse conversations provided him with advice from peers that collectively were going through

trials and tribulations of pursuing career pathways in Hip-Hop music. MJ, an aspiring singer/songwriter, agreed with that point:

Honestly, I look at it as a family brand, like everybody, everybody in there from different hoods, everybody in there from like come from different backgrounds. This group is like Reddit. Like, any time I need to do something, it's my Reddit or YouTube. It's like kind of a live blog or somethin' for me, so I can see what these people's experiences are, and see if I can like, do somethin' like it, or if I should try to replicate it, or just filter it out.

MJ comments here about having people from “different hoods and backgrounds” provided a “Reddit-like” resource showing that this spatial unbounding allowed them to more readily come together and make productive music, beats, select for opportunities, not only for ourselves, but with each other. As MJ's comments indicate, Dreamer students often referenced the family atmosphere as being paramount to their learning experiences in the program. Given that today's media tools and technologies have infinite amounts of connectivity and information to draw from, students relished the fact that they could all build off each other at any point of the day, in any location that had wi-fi.

In the various testimonials above, participants repeatedly used ClubHouse conversation to be engaged in connected learning. They were involved in a process that asked them to consider what issues were of importance, beyond themselves, to establish a meaningful ecosystem for young Chicago creatives from low-income communities of color. As Black (2006) and Jenkins (2007) have argued, digital cultures like these provide support systems to help youth improve their core competencies as readers and writers of new literacies. For example, through video blogs or live streaming, young people receive feedback on their music and to gain experience in communicating with a larger public, experiences that might once have been restricted to those with access to live concert venues or high-level commercial recording studios.

To that point, DJ Gemini further detailed the importance of these virtual meetups and how they allowed for low barriers to entry into networking opportunities:

Our Clubhouse channel is where iron sharpens iron. I had like 2,000 followers at one point and I think many booking agents perceived me to be local and not as skilled as I actually am as a DJ. Members of our Clubhouse looked at my IG and suggested I start from scratch and rebrand online. I deleted all of my posts that night and bought like 5,000 followers. From that point on I started putting my logo as a watermark on all of my pictures, I streamed me at home spinning different mixes and posted edited recap videos of all the events I did. My skill level as a DJ is the same but the perception of those skills is now different.

As Hip-Hop's origins are from America's low-income urban communities of color, (Perry 2004) work of young women like Gemini is often pursued as aspirational labor (Duffy 2018) with the hopes of creative acclaim, recognition, and financial rewards. Given this context, youth of Dreamer used their artistic practices to harness the power of clout to articulate a sense of self and establishment of a public reputation on their

own terms. In Gemini's case, that meant learning to financially invest in the logics of social media platforms (purchasing followers, creating a logo, and professionally editing content) in order to project a level of established presence to new audience members. Through peer dialogue, she came to understand that her impression management demanded treating her social media presence as something as serious as her investment in studio time and received specific directives to make personal improvements. In sum, these conversations on Clubhouse allowed her to compete, collaborate, connect within the larger Hip-Hop community of cultural producers and build a creative economy for her potential career pathway.

During one Clubhouse conversation held during the COVID-19 social lockdown, Antoine elaborated on why having creative conversations online were often more helpful than the conversations he was able to have in the studio:

It's like, alright, you know, we're gonna talk about like, career-wise, what moves you can make. How to improve your music, what you maybe can help in these portions of it. Like, if I be like, "Man, you could really put some live instrumentation here." Or, "I like the way you mixed this song. Maybe lay off on the lows a little bit. Maybe to help this stand out some more..." Just knowing someone has your back 24/7. It gives you the freedom to experiment and still have honest and safe dialogue of what another person might think, good or bad.

As Gemini, Antoine, and others depicted in this section, digital spaces empowered those in the Dreamer community greatly by offering a sounding board unbounded from geography. This is not to say that everyone in the community was thriving due to their involvement in the conversations that were being had because very few students actually had the tangible successes of someone like Meechie or Gemini. However, through their participation in the Dreamer social media ecology, interviewees felt that they had a trusted resource for which they could express their concerns and draw inspiration from. In the end, these emerging artists expressed that while the Internet has opened opportunities for their work, it has also created an overcrowded attention economy for which it is nearly impossible to break through by oneself. As such, interviewees pointed Dreamer's social media ecosystem as a vital source of professional information, creative community and social support.

Discussion and Implications for Digital Ethnography

Similar to cafes and barbershops, the creativity within Hip-Hop recording studios builds connectivity within the communities they are nestled in. The findings of this study suggest Dreamer Studio helped its participants to participate in pursuing their career aspirations through direct experience with online publishing, social networking, and collective action. Their community of practice did this by employing three critical elements: (1) enhancing social affiliations through corralling as a pod, (2) collaborative problem solving for creative works, and (3) DIY circulating of media for external audiences. By facilitating their students to do creative work that they truly care about, the Dreamer Studio collective simultaneously exposes learning equity

gaps and gives voice and agency to Black youth that live within those gaps. Participants didn't necessarily come to the studio in hopes of a record deal, they reported that they came to discover how to shape their relationships and skill sets. The participants also expressed that the studio's community of practice showed them how to use social media platforms to deepen their passions, supportive relationships, and access to opportunities. Though it is uncertain what the professional future will hold for these emerging musicians—signing record deals and becoming famous were the aspirations for many of them—Dreamer Studios was certainly helping prepare them for their futures by cultivating a community that can carry each other through the challenges and stresses of connecting their creative works to a larger audience in the crowded and technology-driven marketplace for attention.

Evidence from this study suggests that access to social media ecologies affiliated with creativity are just as useful to youth as their in-person creative experiences at a studio. The implications of these findings suggest that young people can use social media to join active social communities, hone skills related to their personal interests, and develop their creative career aspirations—which are all hallmarks of Connected Learning. Although social media technologies and practices of media production are moving at a rate that outpaces empirical understanding, there are major implications in this study for understanding how young people of color in low-income communities utilize participatory media. Programs like Dreamer Studio suggest that the future of the music industry will be influenced by a more diverse range of voices from young people who will demand professional inclusion via DIY tactics. Because entry into virtual communities is often cheaper and less burdensome than gaining access to opportunities in the physical world, Black youth can use Connected Learning to cultivate a community around creative work that might otherwise be marginalized or ignored. Further understanding the transitions of these youth into creative work is of the utmost importance but it appears that Connected Learning is impacting Black creative youth of Hip-Hop in ways that are unique to their shared racial identity.

Finally, the findings of this study also have great implications for the methodology of ethnography. For some time both digital ethnography and urban ethnography have respectively been seen as separate but important ways of investigating the social lives of young people. The work I have conducted at Dreamer Studio reveals that now more than ever, the investigation of urban life is made more holistic by also considering implications of life in the digital realm and vice versa. Digital media is ubiquitous in the lives of young people and social media platforms are a vital part of how they communicate with each other, self-express their identities, and develop meaningful connections in the physical world. The participants at Dreamer studios used the studio as a social site to develop know-how and experience in working in a professional working environment with like-minded individuals. Even so, the creative pursuits of these young artists was not limited to their time spent within the physical space of the studio. By attending the various virtual hangout sessions on ClubHouse and tuning in to the official livestreams on both Twitch and Instagram, another dimension to this artistic community of practice was revealed to me, deepening my understanding of their world. This study illustrates that in conducting ethnographies of culture, particularly those that center on the worlds of artistic Black youth, it is imperative that we not only look into their social media engagement as a function of labor or

resistance but also as an extension of their personal identity, civic engagement, and socioemotional support, which is directly related to re-defining an understanding of Connected Learning in career pathway development. By paying attention to race, class and geography, among other things, the students of Dreamer exemplify how digital ethnographic methods provide contextual value and nuance to contemporary life.

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