Analysis of an Online Activity System

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Introduction to /r/MakingHipHop

Direct human interaction these days is largely being replaced by online interaction. It seems every form of media has a foot in the World Wide Web. The music industry, especially, relies on the Internet for communication between producers and artists, advertisement, distribution of music, and so much more. In hip hop, for example, many rappers go online to get most of their work done. For about one year now, I have been part of an online community of rappers and hip hop music producers called */r/MakingHipHop*. This website is part of a larger site, Reddit, which allows people to create their own communities and manage them with their own sets of rules. The purpose of */r/MakingHipHop* is to create an environment where rappers and producers can collaborate, get advice and feedback on tracks, and promote themselves.

I have been producing music for three years. More recently, I have been producing instrumental hip hop and trap beats for people to listen or rap to. Once I discovered */r/MakingHipHop*, I quickly decided I could greatly benefit from being a member. The layout of the website is simple; it involves lists of links that users submit, and it is arranged somewhat like a bulletin board. People use this space to ask questions and help each other out by posting comments and replies. The website's communication is mainly via text posts, though it is not unusual for users to submit links to audio files, news articles, and other external websites for analysis. Discussion is a huge part of what keeps the community alive.

I wanted to be a part of this community for many reasons. Not only was I inspired by dozens of famous music producers at the time, but I also wanted to turn my musical hobby into something serious. My initial role in the community was as a young amateur seeking professional technical help. However, it was always my goal to advance in the system to become an experienced member who actually gives advice.

Introduction to Activity Systems

/r/MakingHipHop is an example of an activity system. This is "a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive" (Kain and Wardle 275). There are many characteristics that further define an activity system, as outlined by Kain and Wardle (276). First, it is a system that continues indefinitely, not for a finite period of time. Thus, an analysis of an activity system typically involves predictions about its future. Next, it has specific sets of goals that it was designed to achieve. All interaction within the activity system is in some way related to accomplishing those goals. Another important aspect is that the system is "dialectically structured" which means that the different parts and divisions depend on one another and thus will change with one another when necessary. All activity systems also have a history explaining why they started and what actions led

to their creation. Finally, they entail the usage of shared tools and media to implement human interaction. I will analyze */r/MakingHipHop* as an activity system using some key concepts.

Tools

Tools are defined not only as the physical items that are used but also the language and skills necessary to communicate and complete tasks within the activity system (Kain and Wardle 276). Hip hop music producers and rappers share some tools within */r/MakingHipHop*, but there are also differences in what they use as individuals.

Though many producers do not have a full studio to work with, they at least have some equipment setup to suit their own personal preferences. For example, some producers prefer to use studio monitor headphones while others prefer to use speakers with amplifiers. A MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) keyboard, which is almost like a programmable piano, is pretty standard but there are many different types. Some keyboards have buttons and knobs that can be programmed to change a variety of settings in the sound while others only have piano keys. Professionals tend to fill their studios with a variety of controllers, which are used to tweak the sounds in many different ways. Beginners often can't afford to have all of this expensive equipment, so they only have the essentials. This specialized equipment is said to be "operationalized, which" occurs when tools within an activity system are employed so frequently that they no longer require much conscious thought to use (Kain and Wardle 278).

Users of */r/MakingHipHop* share a wide variety of tools; in fact, sharing is one of the main principles behind the website.

One of the most important tools is the DAW, or Digital Audio Workstation. Of all the tools in music production, this one is the most operationalized. The DAW is the program on the computer that allows the producer to make and organize projects. It allows them to create synths, beats, and melodies, put them all together, and add vocals. Furthermore, it is where the producers master the audio and manipulate the elements of the song with many different effects. There are a few different major DAWs to choose from. The two most popular ones are Ableton and FL Studio. These programs also use VST plugins. VST stands for Virtual Studio Technology and it includes synthesizers, virtual instruments, and drum machines. These are essential, as they are the programs used to create the individual sounds or song elements. Producers rarely need to think when they are using this software. From my experience, after using the software for three years everything comes naturally.

Rappers require different equipment than producers. Rappers need to use recording equipment, which may include a microphone and amplifier. Not all rappers have a DAW on their computer, but they can typically find other free programs that will allow them to record their voice. Then, they can send the audio file to a producer who will use it in their DAW project. Some rappers, especially the more popular ones, may have full studio access depending on their connections and establishment within the music industry. Full studio access means that they are able to work with the producers directly and use their equipment as necessary.

It might seem obvious, now, why language is one of the most important tools used in */r/MakingHipHop*. Without the knowledge of this advanced terminology, artists simply cannot communicate with each other. There are hundreds of terms like DAW and VST that members of the community are presumed to understand. Becoming familiar with this technical jargon is often a challenge for new members. Additionally, not everyone has the skills required to be a part of the system. Knowledge of music theory, computer software, and the music industry on some level are all important tools that every member is expected to have as they join.

Users of *r/MakingHipHop* share a wide variety of tools; in fact, sharing is one of the main principles behind the website. A common practice in the community is to create a sound and then upload it to other artists by posting it to the website. These other artists will download the sample and continue working on it in their own DAW before they return it to the creator. In this way, people from around the world use the same tools, even if on different computers. If one producer makes a drum sound using his drum machine VST plugin, he can send it to others who will work on it using the same drum machine. This practice is done with all kinds of sounds, instruments, vocals, and even projects which have been previously completed. It helps achieve two of the main goals of *r/MakingHipHop*: improvement and collaboration.

Motives

The motives of an activity system are the goals that it was created to achieve; they "direct the subject's activities" (Kain and Wardle 277). According to Kain and Wardle, there are two types of motives in an activity system: the "object of the activity" and the "outcome." While objectives typically involve completion of tasks and jobs at hand, outcomes are goals that the activity system intends to achieve or continuously maintain over a period of time.

Many objectives are completed daily on *r/MakingHipHop* by hundreds, if not thousands, of artists. These objectives are part of the recurring activities organized by the community. Producers often participate in a daily feedback thread, in which they upload their beats to a webpage and allow others to hear them and give comments. This gives producers some immediate insight to their work, which allows them to go back to their DAW and make changes and fix technical issues, if necessary. Rappers take advantage of beat cyphers (large scale collaborative rap projects), rap battles, and team contests where they put their skills to the test versus other rappers. This is good practice for them as it helps them better their flow, eloquence, and drive. There are also weekly "collab calls" which are discussion sections for both rappers and producers to talk about themselves and meet up with each other online. The purpose of this is for artists to find other potential collaborators. Hip hop requires both a rapper and a producer; this activity helps them pair up. Hip hop music would not exist without this relationship. It is so critical that sometimes rappers and producers in the industry who despise each other will still work with together because they do not have any other options. At *r/MakingHipHop*, nobody wants anything like that to happen. Through this community, we promote an environment of free options and opportunities.

All of these activities and objectives help realize the missions of *r/MakingHipHop*. The community strives to maintain an atmosphere full of collaboration, improvement, and good times. By allowing users to share music and encouraging them to establish connections, the website is fulfilling its goal of creating a collaborative environment. The many outlets for feedback play a huge role in improving the technical quality of artists' work. One of the qualities of the website that I observed and specifically found useful was having sections where people can ask whatever questions they want to ask, regardless of how silly they might sound. This promotes the idea that inexperienced artists are able to use this website to gain valuable knowledge about launching their career without being ridiculed as an amateur. Finally, having fun is a very important outcome of *r/MakingHipHop*'s activities. While becoming a professional and being taken seriously are goals shared by all members, one of the main reasons we come together online is simply to enjoy the hobby of making hip hop music. Not everyone has the ability to master such a complicated art, and it is fun to be part of something pretty exclusive. If people did not find pleasure in using the website, then it likely never would have launched with such success.

Membership

A diverse community of people are represented in */r/MakingHipHop*. There are serious producers who have a lot of experience in the industry and make music for a living just as there are novice producers learning the art for fun. Similarly, there are famous rappers amongst the lesser known ones. These people are drawn to this community because they seek improvement, entertainment, and discussion.

We represent an interesting demographic. Members' age, gender, and location are not so obvious in an online community. After years of communicating with other people, however, I have gathered a little bit of information. Most, if not all, of the members I have interacted with are from the United States. It seems that most producers are white males and most rappers are black males, though there are plenty of exceptions. I have seen both white and black males taking on both roles. There are also people from South America and other parts of the world that pop up occasionally. Something that I have not observed after all of this time is the presence of women. While this genre of music seems to be more popular with men, there is nothing holding women back from being part of the community. In fact, the change would be quite welcome.

Membership is a little bit complicated and it does not work out for everyone. To become a member of */r/MakingHipHop*, all one needs to do is press a single button on the website using their registered Reddit account. From there, they are expected to observe the rules listed on the side of the home page and keep them in mind as they dive into the activities. However, while everyone is welcome, not everyone gets to stay.

People who do not follow the rules are instantly reported by the community and often banned without warning. Sometimes, the first offense might be excused, but after that, there is no tolerance for people who do not conform to the established policies. Furthermore, members who give false advice receive something called "downvotes" in discussion pages for their comments. Users will vote down material that is off topic, misleading, or wrong. Users who consistently receive more downvotes than "upvotes" often get banned. Therefore, while gaining membership might be easier than in other activity systems, losing it is easy as well.

Rules

Rules are not only established sets of laws within an activity system but also act as "norms, conventions, and values" (Kain and Wardle 278). The permanent rules for */r/MakingHipHop* involve the content that users are allowed to post to the home page as well as the ways they are allowed to communicate. It is strictly forbidden to self-promote on the homepage by posting original music videos, beats, or any type of advertisement. This content is reserved for feedback and promotion sections and most members do not want to see them elsewhere. "Memes" and other internet gags are also strictly forbidden under all sections of the website; professionalism is taken seriously and there are other Reddit communities specifically devoted to that type of casual material. In terms of communication, "hate speech" and racism will earn an instant ban for all members involved. Also, all disagreements must be calm and respectful.

Other rules are not written, but they are implied.

Other rules are not written, but they are implied. Users should stay on topic and refrain from posting anything that does not immediately relate to making hip hop. Reddit has many different communities and certain things are not wanted in this particular subreddit. Users should also be active and prompt in discussion. It is considered rude when someone does not answer a direct question or waits several days before answering. Finally, it can be considered annoying and disrespectful when members communicate using excessive internet slang and abbreviations. Users should heed English grammar rules to ensure clarity in text posts.

Division of Labor

All communities on Reddit are established by Reddit users. When a user creates a new community, they become its moderator and are given the leadership responsibilities for the website. They can choose other people to become moderators as well. Therefore, the only way to become a moderator of */r/MakingHipHop* is to be chosen by a current one for the position. Users who are very active, knowledgeable, and helpful often get offered this position. Currently, there are nine moderators. Eight of them have full responsibility to maintain order and organization within the website by banning toxic users and filtering irrelevant material. They set up the activities and take reports and requests submitted by regular members. They communicate with each other very frequently about their plans and ideas. The other moderator has much less responsibility. He is in charge of stylizing the website and decorating it the way he sees fit. He was most likely chosen for this position after submitting ideas for graphic design to the current moderators. Aside from moderator, there are no other positions to be held within the community besides being a standard member, who make up the people who participate actively and follow the rules.

Larger Community

As discussed previously, */r/MakingHipHop* is part of a larger community called Reddit. Reddit is an online collection of user-created communities called "subreddits." Each subreddit has its own moderators and rules. */r/MakingHipHop* is also part of a larger community of hip hop artists from around the world. It would make sense to discuss the rap industry, or even the music industry, as a whole as part of the larger community surrounding the website. While this one website alone is not an integral part of the music industry, it and similar online communities are inspiring thousands of young new artists to get involved with the genre, which could potentially make a very big difference in the industry.

Hip hop is more than just a genre of music. It is a culture, and to many people, it is a way of life. This is reflected in the subreddit */r/MakingHipHop*. Rappers will make verses about their own personal situations. Producers will often give advice based on (typically bad) experiences they have had in the past with the industry. Many people take this advice seriously because it is a big part of their life and career.

Identity

All members of an activity system have a personal identity; part of it is created by themselves while part of it is created by the system. Identity essentially describes how a member belongs in a community (Wardle 288). There are three "modes of belonging" that define full participation: engagement, imagination, and alignment (288). Utilization of these ideas can yield a successful experience within the group, while failure to comply will create social problems.

The first, engagement, is defined as a "'common enterprise' that newcomers and old-timers pursue together," helping members to create work related relationships (Wardle 288). In */r/MakingHipHop*, engagement happens when people follow the rules and participate in the discussion sections. Members begin to form contacts with people they might otherwise not encounter again online. Engagement is important because it helps members discover where they fit within an activity system. Producers and rappers meet other artists that have the same qualities or with common interests. For instance, amateurs might participate in the "No Stupid Questions" activity while professionals participate in competitions. In doing so, users separate into different categories based on their skills and motives. Some examples of these categories include skilled hobbyists, paid professionals, and motivated amateurs. With regard to engagement, I would

consider myself to be within the category of intermediate professionals, as I am currently striving to be paid for my beats and my career within the genre has begun to take off.

Imagination involves members of the community "locating [their] engagement in a broader system…defining a trajectory that connects what [they] are doing to an extended identity…and assuming the meaning of foreign artifacts and actions" (qtd. in Wardle 288). In terms of */r/MakingHipHop*, imagination shapes identity when artists see themselves involved in activities. If the idea of being an active member satisfies them, then they will more likely become an active member. For instance, when I first began using the subreddit, I observed many other users giving detailed and advanced production tips. I wanted to be like them; I could see myself doing that sort of thing in the future. After two years of learning and gaining knowledge of my DAW, I can finally say I am happy to be in the position where I can give that sort of advice within the activity system. Using imagination, my identity has become that of an experienced teacher/mentor for novices. Imagination also entails the way newcomers interpret unfamiliar environments. Using imagination in */r/MakingHipHop,* members observe the language and practices used by the community and factor that into their general understanding of the system. If they do not understand producers' jargon and a rappers' lingo, they might not fit in. On the other hand, if they do understand it, they will feel right at home. Yet another possibility is that they misinterpret the language, at which point they may generate confusion for the other artists. For instance, I can recall when a user kept on referring to certain production equipment as if it was computer software. It took a while for us to understand what he was even talking about and what he was trying to ask.

I like to think of alignment as conformity with options. It is defined as "negotiating perspectives" and "finding common ground" (Wardle 288). Activity systems are founded on certain principles, and when members join the system with varying perspectives, they must collect their ideas and create consensuses. */r/MakingHipHop* users have very similar standards of musical professionalism, but some people will have different methods for work than others. These varying ideas of production play a huge role in defining the individual members of the community. Everyone has a different perspective on the rap industry and different ways of making contributions. For instance, some artists like releasing commercial music videos while others live by underground mixtapes (compilations of their work, usually homemade). I am the kind of guy who creates singles and releases them immediately; in contrast, a former client of mine, a rapper from Ecuador, focuses on selling albums which he plans and develops several months in advance. We fall into place within the community according to our perspectives and preferences. This determines how we contribute to both the subreddit and to the world. As a member of */r/MakingHipHop*, a user must decide in what way s/he will contribute to the industry, and if s/he cannot contribute anything, then the subreddit is no place for her or him.

A user who does not wish to establish an identity within the system is known as a non-participant. Even the decision to not establish an identity, however, creates an identity for that person, albeit a negative one. In */r/MakingHipHop*, I observe this when users blatantly disregard the rules and post their singles on the home page. These types of people are often cocky, acting as if their track deserves home-page attention. This kind of action encourages people to define their own rules, which is not acceptable in this community. Every time something like this happens, our established rules are slightly less functional.

Authority

Authority does not only belong to the moderators. It is granted to all members in some form. It is defined as "an intangible quality granted to persons through institutions, which renders their pronouncements as accepted by those in that institution's communities of practice, but which must be maintained through individuals' speech and actions" (Wardle 290). In other words,

whenever communication occurs, someone had permission to deliver it, but it has to be in a form recognized and accepted by the community.

All participants of the subreddit gain, by default, the authority to communicate in a clear, honest, and respectful manner. Users are expected to be responsible with this authority. As discussed earlier, a ban may occur when the rules are broken. Sometimes in an activity system there is a "grace period" (Wardle 290). This is when old members are lenient toward a newcomer's use of authority. In *r/MakingHipHop*, the grace period holds true for one post. After that, if the user does not comply, they will be ignored or banned. There is not much purpose in being a member of this community without any authority, which is why it is important to use it correctly.

DO NOT POST:

- Advertisements
- Singles/beats/music videos
- Memes

This is a community to help each other improve. If you post these things, **your post will be removed and/or you will be banned**. Singles/beats can go in either the **Daily Feedback Threads** or the **Weekly Singles Threads. YOU MUST USE THE RECURRING THREADS FOR SINGLES, COLLAB CALLS (free mixing and mastering offers must go here as well), FEEDBACK, ETC.** You can give your honest opinion about anything but **DISRESPECTFUL LANGUAGE AND HATESPEECH WILL GET YOU BANNED.**

DO POST:

- Questions/discussions
- Albums/mixtapes/EPs/beat tapes - **Active members only.** You can become an active member by posting in the Cyphers, Flip This Challenges, or Daily Feedback Threads for a week. Click here for full guidelines. **Not following guidelines could result in your tape being removed.**

Please **USE DESCRIPTIVE POST TITLES** and tag posts with the appropriate tag.

Projects cannot be older than 4 months; beats in beat tapes must be from within 4 months. Include info about the projects (e.g. concepts conveyed, credits, how long it has been in the works, etc.)

Figure 1: This set of rules floats permanently on the side of all webpages within the site. It is known as the "sidebar" within a subreddit.

Part of maintaining authority is expressing it correctly (Wardle 289). Often times, users will set up discussions regarding how bad the subreddit is and how it needs to be more akin to their personal standards. These people do not have moderator authority to start this type of discussion. Also, some users fail to understand that most members are given the same authority as everyone else; they should embrace this equality and not act as though they are more important than others. In this subreddit, experience does not merit authority.

One major mechanism that factors into every member's authority is the ability to upvote and downvote content. In this sense, users can deem text posts as useful or, on the contrary, irrelevant to the purposes of the subreddit. It is up to each member to use this power of upvoting and downvoting to ultimately highlight quality posts while filtering out the bad content. When a post receives a large amount of upvotes, it tells the community that the post contains exceptionally useful information. If the author of that post contributes again, the community will likely recognize them and know they can be trusted.

Moderators have a different kind of authority than standard users. They can define what authority standard members have and they can even define what authority they reserve for themselves. It might seem like this would lead to some great conflicts between the leaders of the subreddit, but the truth is that I have not observed any misuse of power (though, I have observed it in many other subreddits). The moderators typically use the same language as standard users and so appear to act as models for proper communication.

Textual Analysis

Figure 1 is the set of rules posted on the side of the home page of *r/MakingHipHop*. It is not a complete set of rules for the entire subreddit, but it includes the most important points. One of the moderators, most likely the founder of the subreddit, had the authority to write it. It is meant to be read by all members before they engage in the subreddit's activities. The text does not use any slang or inappropriate grammar and it is formatted in a clear and concise manner. This serves as a model for how users of the subreddit should communicate: as clearly as possible. Furthermore, this text is

extremely important to */r/MakingHipHop* because it serves as the official guideline for how the subreddit should operate. Observing these rules, it is evident that the community values organization, courtesy, and productivity within its text discussions. Ideally, this section would also outline the ways in which a new user could become a part of the subreddit, but unfortunately they have to figure that out for themselves.
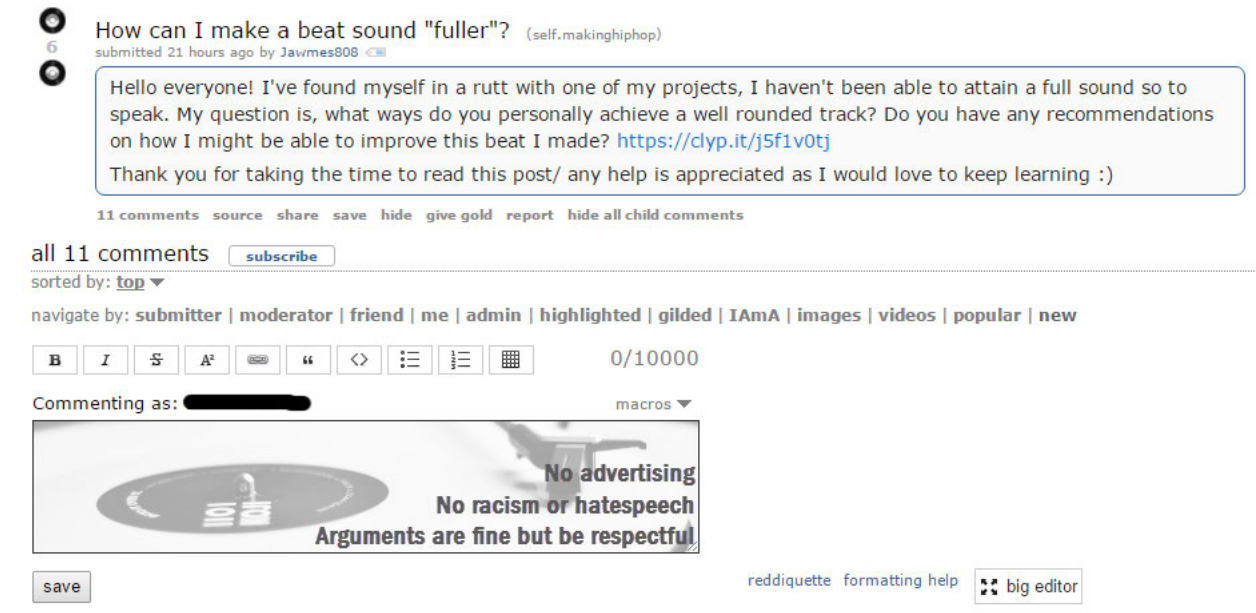

Figure 2: A screenshot of a typical text post within /r/MakingHipHop.

Figure 2 shows a great example of a producer requesting advice. This specific text is targeted more at other producers than rappers because it is a technical question and the responses involve terminology with which rappers might not even be familiar. The user needed advice on how to make his sounds "fuller," as in, more complete or substantial. These types of questions are great for the overall learning experience and encourage others users to ask meaningful, discussion-inducing questions. Notice the text box (the rectangle with the picture in the background) where users type their comments. It has some fundamental rules written on the inside (when a user clicks on the box to begin typing, they will disappear). This serves as a constant reminder that users need to follow rules and be respectful. Figure 3 shows the top reply:
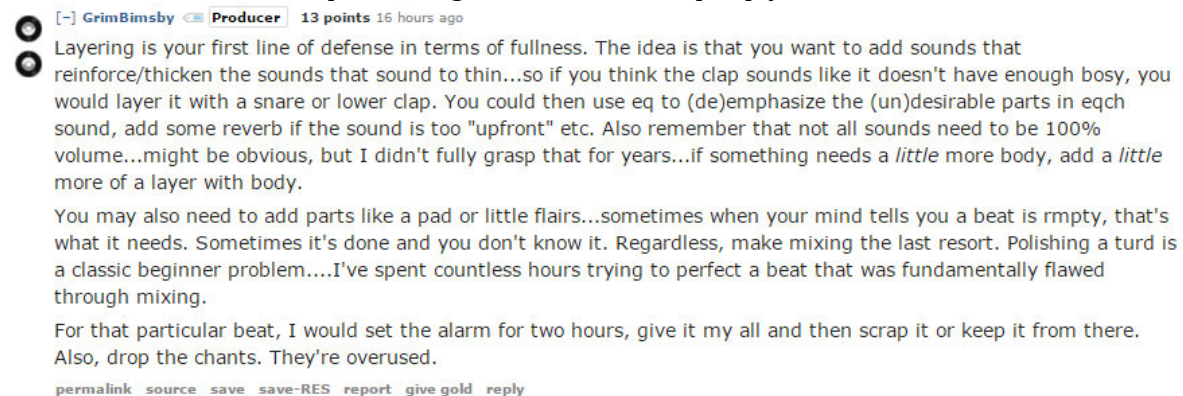

Figure 3: A "top comment" within the comments section is the one with the most upvotes.

To summarize, the person giving the advice said that layering is very important to making a sound more full. Layering often involves copying a melody or beat across multiple VSTs and then modifying each of the sounds so that they each play at their own independent frequencies. The user mentioned his past experiences with creating sounds and trying to achieve that same goal. This text post, involving both the question and answers, represents the environment that */r/MakingHipHop* strives to maintain, one in which users can post their work and let others help them improve. The community values this sort of productive discussion.

Figure 4: Some posts represent the less technical style of the subreddit. This is an example of a post seeking advice on a personal problem.

Figure 4 represents a situation in which a rapper had a personal issue. The rapper was upset because his girlfriend never really gave any positive feedback on his verses. Many people, unfamiliar with the subreddit, might think that this is highly unprofessional. Despite this popular belief, we in */r/MakingHipHop* see rap as a lifestyle, and so we talk about it. This is a perfect example of someone having real life relationship issues stemming from hip hop. The rapper came to the subreddit and this text post was met with some very kind and helpful replies telling him he should ignore her. They emphasized that rap ought to come from within and not be audience driven. Overall, this text shows how it's nice to discuss things outside of the DAW every once in awhile. We can use normal, man-to-man language, and help each other out like brothers.

Conclusion

/r/MakingHipHop is a great example of an activity system as it demonstrates many of the definitive concepts. However, there are still questions to be asked regarding the community. For instance, what technical support do rappers receive? Does trap music play a very large role in the community? What tools do rappers and producers share within the subreddit? What role does Reddit play and why is it optimal for this type of community? Also, what does the specific demographic look like?

This subreddit has played a huge role in my career, constantly motivating me to get better at producing. I hope that it continues to grow and gain appeal within the rap industry. Perhaps it will become even more of a success down the road, enriching the art of hip hop.

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