The costliest signals of authenticity? How iconic deaths transform audience reception in hip-hop.

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Introduction

> Tell me, why the legends always gotta die quick? – Roddy Ricch, *Die Young*.

> I like a look of Agony // Because I know it's true. – Emily Dickinson, *339*.

Lil Peep. XXXTentacion. Juice WRLD. In 2015, a new generation of hip-hop artists emerged on SoundCloud, and the trio led the vanguard. This loose coalition of artists came to be known under the banner of *cloud rap*. In no time, cloud rap became the "biggest talking-point in hip-hop" (Petridis 2018). Like the first wave of punk, cloud rap delighted in sonic simplicity and gleeful violation of social and music norms. The face tattoos its brightest representatives wore became a metonymy for the subgenre itself: hated, adored, but never ignored. Then, a succession of tragedies arrived. In 2017, Lil Peep died of a fentanyl overdose at 21; XXXTentacion fatally shot during a robbery at 20; Juice WRLD passed from an oxycodone overdose at 21. A music movement that had seemed so radical, inevitable, and powerful found itself on the verge of implosion. For many fans of hip-hop, these deaths were poignant echoes of Biggie's and 2pac's a generation before. In this study, we examine how audience valuations are transformed by these deaths.

In most of life, death connotes an ending. This is less obviously so in cultural fields, where an artist's work transcends their own earthly mortality. To an audience, the death of an artist is experienced instead as an eventful interlude that changes the way they understand the artist's antemortem work. Drawing on novel longitudinal data of audience evaluations from a major online music community, we show how the death of an hip-hop artist transforms audience reception of their antemortem work, inducing an enduring inflation in audience valuations. Such death-induced changes to audience valuations are mediated by the ability of some deaths – what we term iconic deaths – to act as costly signals of an artist's authenticity. Authenticity is a highly valorized form of symbolic capital within hip-hop. Iconic deaths that better signal authenticity produce greater death-induced improvements in audience valuations. Such costly signaling effects are more salient within discredited subgenres of hip-hop. We show how costly signaling of authenticity acts as a distinct mechanism robust to complementary explanations, such as sympathetic eulogizing or audience expansion effects.

This study makes three main contributions. First, we demonstrate the importance of the semiotic dimensions of death within hip-hop, and cultural fields more broadly. Early schol-

arship on death effects have tended to treat death in simple stylized fashion as an exogenous and permanent supply-side disruption (e.g. Ekelund et al. 2000). We complement ongoing work revisiting the bounds around such assumptions by showing how the symbolic meanings of death transform the ways audiences receive artist's antemortem work. Second, we show that, contrary to previous scholarship, deaths can produce positive and persistent improvements in audience reception of cultural products. We also show that such death-induced inflations are driven by the costly signaling of authenticity, a mechanism that had previously been overlooked in the literature. Third, our findings carry implications for the construction of genre categories in cultural fields. We find that fledgling music categories that are discredited by audiences, such as cloud rap, are the largest beneficiaries of costly signaling effects. Iconic deaths may not just communicate the authenticity of the deceased, but spill over to the broader field at large.

Literature Review

While it's often said that the truest measure of greatness in art is the posthumous recognition an artist receives from the public, we know precious little about the processes behind such posthumous reputation formation (Lang & Lang 1988). In this study, we consider how the death of an artist transforms audience valuation of their antemortem work through the costly signaling of field-specific symbolic capital. Within quantitative studies of culture, the death of an artist is usually studied from the *cultural economics* perspective, where it is treated as a sudden and irrevocable cessation of production. This perspective views artists in creative industries as durable goods monopolists unable to exert market power in life due to their ability to inflate production at any time through the creation of more cultural crafts and goods (Coase 1972). From the market's perspective, death can be viewed as a sudden and credible commitment to cease any further production. The market adjusts to this new information and valuations of their crafts and goods change as a result. Testing such theories using a panel data of Latin American artists' work, Ekelund et al. (2000) find that prices of artwork rises substantially just after an artist's death, before falling back to previous levels. The death effect has also been observed in the market for sports memorabilia (Matheson & Baade 2004) and sales of albums (Brandes et al. 2016). Although quantitative too in its approach, our study proceeds from a complementary *cultural sociology* perspective. Sociological studies of artists' deaths have largely taken the form of qualitative case studies that examine how posthumous reputation is shaped by the objective traces and networks that the deceased accumulated in their lifetime (e.g. Lang & Lang 1988; Jones 2010).

While these case studies have been influential in their own right, they neglect the eventfulness of the deaths themselves. Our study focuses on the way death shapes reputations of a particular kind – audience valuations on a major online music community, *RateYourMusic*. Online review aggregators like this have become key information intermediaries today, both gathering and disseminating data that is relevant to cultural consumers. As they climbed in legitimacy, they have also become treated by popular and scholarly audiences alike as thermometers for cultural producers' reputations among mass audiences (Sharkey et al. 2023). Drawing on the intuition of the potential outcomes model of causal inference, we conceptualize an artist's death as a stylized one-off treatment, and estimate "death effects" on audience valuations across time. We then show how such death-induced changes to audience valuations are produced through the costly signaling of authenticity.

We take hip-hop music as our case. Hip-hop is a music genre that first emerged in the 1960s from the block parties of South Bronx as a syncretic fusion of American, West African, and Jamaican music (Ewoodzie 2017). Hip-hop is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by digital music. While hip-hop's genealogy can be traced back to deindustrialization and the rusting urban core, today it has become a popular genre of music consumed by a diverse group of listeners (Lena 2006). Hip-hop is a genre haunted by dramatic deaths. The most notable of these tragedies occurred in the mid 90s, when the genre's two biggest stars, Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, were fatally shot within six months of each other. Hip-hop's poignant connection to early death persists today. Elders in the hip-hop community have called for interventions and self-reflection to address the so-called 'crisis' in the genre (e.g. Too $hort & E-40 2022). While popular musicians on average have lower expected life expectancy compared to the broader population, such trends are particularly stark within hip-hop where homicide is the leading cause of death: 55 percent of hip-hop artists who passed away from 1987 to 2014 were victims of homicide (Lawson 2015; Kenny & Asher 2016).

To study the effects of an artist's death on audience valuations, we examine ratings of hip-hop albums on a major online music review aggregator, *RateYourMusic* (*RYM*). Described as a "democratized canon" of music reviews, *RYM* is a large online community dedicated to the reviewing and cataloguing of music (McNamee 2007). Like other online review aggregators, *RYM* draws on reviews written by everyday users based on their personal experiences with music (Sharkey et al. 2023). To begin, we ask if and how the death of a musician affects the audience

valuations of their antemortem work in the short- and long-term, testing the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1**: The death of an hip-hop artist causes changes in audience valuations of their antemortem work in the (a) short-term and (b) long-term.

The costly signaling of authenticity

Why might the death of an artist produce such durable changes in audience reception of their work? Previous studies suggest that one plausible mechanism is posthumous memorialization efforts from deceased's associates. In their classic study of etchers, Lang and Lang (1988) find the durability of an artist's reputation to be tied to the presence of stewards who preserve and promote a deceased's artist oeuvre. Studies of posthumous reputations in non-cultural fields find similar. In the biomedical sciences, deaths of scientists often stimulates durable increases in citation rates, much of which are attributable to posthumous recognition efforts from the deceased's surrogates (Azoulay et al. 2019: 820). We propose another. In the case of hip-hop, death effects may be mediated by a separate causal mechanism that attributable to the meaningfulness of the deaths themselves. In this study, we propose that deaths may function as costly signals of an artist's authenticity, thereby improving audience reception of their antemortem work. Deaths within hip-hop are symbolically laden events that communicate information about an artist that can transform how audiences understand and appraise the deceased's music. We can observe indirect evidence of this by considering (a) between-death differences in changes in audience valuations as well as (b) within-genre differences in changes in audience valuations.

Music genres are semi-autonomous fields endowed with their own laws of functioning (Bourdieu 1991). Accordingly, there are genre-specific varieties of symbolic capital that confer status, prestige and resources to those that possess it. Authenticity is a form of symbolic capital particularly important to the field of hip-hop (Jeffries 2011; Harkness 2014). While authenticity is valorized across many cultural fields, it remains an ambiguous concept understood in multiform and often contested ways (Trilling 1972; Peterson 2005; Kovács 2019). Within hip-hop, authenticity is understood in iconic terms as "street authenticity" (Watts 1997), a kind of sincere conformity to established category norms (Lehman et al. 2019; McDonnell 2023). Such category norms in hip-hop involve fidelity to a stylized interpretation of black male street culture (Rose 1994; Patterson & Fosse 2015). Both mass consumption and elite evaluation of hip-hop is tied to

the spectacular consumption of authenticity so understood (Watts 1997). In the underground hip-hop scene, gang membership is often treated as a status conferring-trait, "a demarcation of authenticity in a youth culture where 'keeping it real' is imperative" (Harkness 2013: 153). Elite tastemakers at the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* understand authenticity in similar terms. As Cheyne & Binder (2010) put it, music critics often assume the iconic ghetto to be "the site from which rap full of personal meaning emerges" and in their evaluations of hip-hop use associations with black street culture "to mark rap's racial-urban origins."

The authenticity of the artist justifies the authenticity of the art (Fine 2003). To be perceived as authentic, hip-hop artists have to do more than produce music that conforms to the technical norms within hip-hop, they must also produce public signals of their conformity to street authenticity. For many hip-hop artists, this requires public performances of "ghetto blackness" (Rose 1994). Because few hip-hop artists are as socially proximate to the urban ghetto as they wish to claim, such performances often involve elaborate efforts at exaggeration, deception, or fabrication. In his ethnography of drill artists, Stuart finds that his respondents strategically use song lyrics and music videos to signal their authenticity:

> If there is a dominant message running through virtually every drill song, video, and related content, it's an appeal to superior authenticity: I really do these violent deeds. I really use these guns. I really sell these drugs. My rivals, however, do none of this. (Stuart 2020)

For the most part, these stylized performances are hot air. Stuart reports that "a good majority of drillers' online displays of violent criminality are gross exaggerations and, at times, complete fabrications."

All of which brings us to the important qualifier of sincerity. For an artist to be perceived as authentic within hip-hop, the mere signaling of conformity is not sufficient– these signals must also be perceived by audiences to be sincere, that is, consistent with the artist's internally-held values. Audiences are savvy to hip-hop artists' attempts at fabrications, and so artists have to go to great lengths to prove their authenticity claims credible (Peterson 2005; Hahl et al. 2017). They can do so by producing signals of authenticity that are costly to fabricate. The more costly a signal is, the more credible it tends to be (e.g. Bereczkei et al. 2010). We argue that certain types of deaths that we term *iconic deaths* are able to function in exactly such a capacity, as a costly – the costliest – signal of an artist's authenticity. Iconic deaths refer to deaths that confer

street authenticity upon the deceased artist. Iconic deaths within hip-hop are so because they comport with an audience's notion of black street culture and the iconic ghetto (Watts 1997). In this study, we define iconic deaths as deaths where the cause of death is attributable to violent crimes or substance abuse. A hip-hop artist who passes away young from such iconic deaths did not "merely" rap about gangs, guns, or drugs in their verses – they lived it and paid for it. The credibility of such signals are further enhanced by their characteristic disinterestedness. There's a long tradition in aesthetics going back to Kant that documents the art world's "interest in disinterestedness" (Bourdieu 1993:40). Because the deceased do not stand to benefit personally from the signal, such costly signals may also perceived by audiences as disinterested, and thus more credible and legitimate. To be clear, we are not implying that artists strategically die to confer their own work authenticity; we are saying that artist's deaths can serve the function of credibly communicating the authenticity of their person and thereafter music.

We test if this is indeed so. We propose two sets of hypotheses. First, if iconic deaths act as costly signals of authenticity, we can expect there to be between-death differences in how deaths affect postmortem audience valuations. Hip-hop artists who passed away from iconic deaths should experience greater death-induced changes in audience valuations than artists who passed away from non-iconic deaths:

> **Hypothesis 2**: Iconic deaths produce larger changes in audience valuations of a hip-hop artist's antemortem work in the short-term and long-term than non-iconic deaths.

Second, if costly signaling of authenticity were to be one of the mechanisms driving death-induced changes in audience valuations, we should expect there to be within-genre differences in the effects of iconic deaths. Music belonging to discredited subgenres of hip-hop perceived to lack authenticity should experience greater changes in audience valuations than music from credible hip-hop subgenres. Hip-hop is a heterogeneous genre. One of the most notable changes in hip-hop over the recent years has involved the rapid ascendancy of cloud rap, described by the *New York Times* as "the most vital and disruptive new movement in hip hop" (Caramanica 2017). Cloud rap is a loosely organized subgenre that is closely identified with the hip-hop artists that rose to fame on the SoundCloud streaming platform in the mid-to-late 2010s. While SoundCloud itself is no longer the locus of the community, the term itself has endured. Cloud rap is characterized by an "ethereal, almost otherworldly sound with slow, spaced-out delivery ... the

sound of hip-hop floating in a virtual black hole (Walker 2021)." Born from internet culture far from the iconic urban ghetto, cloud rap artists frequently found their authenticity questioned. Lil Peep, for example, was criticized for his dramatization of substance abuse in *The Guardian*:

> Without wishing to belittle the mental health or addiction issues that some artists clearly suffer, there often seems something performative about their drug use: the birthday cakes shaped like Xanax tablets or prescription bottles, the Instagram videos of Lil Peep in various states of drugged disarray. (Petridis 2018)

Another leading cloud rap artist, Tekashi 6ix9ine, was described by *Pitchfork* as a charlatan who strategically sought out gang associations because he viewed them "an opportunity to land the credibility he sought" (Pierre 2018). Elders within hip-hop can likewise be uncharitable to the fledgling genre, describing cloud rap artists as "soft," "goofy," or even "a disgrace to our culture" (Amorosi 2023; Bell 2023). Because cloud rap is a discredited subgenre within hip-hop, we expect cloud rap music to experience greater improvements in audience valuations than music from other, credible subgenres. We test the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3**: Iconic deaths produce larger improvements in audience valuations of hip-hop albums in discredited subgenres than those from credible subgenres.

Considering alternative explanations

Finally, we want to consider alternative explanations for any observed death effects. The costly signaling of authenticity is not the only mechanism that can produce death-induced transformations of audience valuations. While we are unable to precisely parcel out the effects of costly signaling with our research design, we can use supplementary measures of audience reception to show how costly signaling of authenticity operates as a mechanism distinct from *sympathetic eulogizing*, an audience's tendency to exaggerate its praise for a cultural article after an artist's passing, and *audience expansion*, increases in the size of an evaluative audience following an artist's death.

Death-induced changes to audience valuations may be attributable to what we term sympathetic eulogizing. Audience valuations of a deceased artist's work are affected by feeling rules that constrain or encourage different types of evaluations (Hochschild 1979). There are social rules of propriety that we feel obliged to follow in the event of a person's passing (Fowlkes 1990). Such feeling rules may oblige us to suppress our negative evaluations of the deceased (and

their associates) or exaggerate our positive evaluations of the same. Within Anglo-American societies, this collective tendency is perhaps best expressed by the aphorism *mortuis nihil nisi bonum*: never speak ill of the dead.

There are two main ways we may distinguish sympathetic eulogizing from the costly signaling of authenticity. One, sympathetic eulogizing is normally understood to be temporally bounded. To the extent that changes in audience valuations persist in the long-term, sympathetic eulogizing is unlikely to be the sole mechanism driving the process. Two, sympathetic eulogizing and costly signaling of authenticity are expected to produce different changes to the variance of audience valuations. Since both poor and good evaluations are temporarily elevated under sympathetic eulogizing, it should produce approximately linear changes in audience valuations. Variance does not respond to such linear changes. This is not the case for costly signaling. The costly signaling of authenticity should be heterogeneous across listeners. The more a listener finds an artist's authenticity suspect, the more costly signaling is expected to improve their valuation. If we assume that it is the listeners who find the artist's authenticity suspect that rate them poorly, costly signaling effects should then be most pronounced among those who evaluate an artist poorly. In probability theory terms, we can think of post-death audience valuations as a sum of two random variables: antemortem valuations and costly signaling effects. By Bienaymé's identity, the variance of post-death valuations is then the sum of the covariances between antemortem valuations and costly signaling. Since this covariance is theorized to be negative, we expect audience valuations to converge. Since music from discredited subgenres of hip-hop benefit more from costly signaling, we can expect these albums to experience greater decreases in the variance of audience valuations than counterparts in credible subgenres. We test the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4**: Iconic deaths cause greater decreases in valuation dispersion among albums from discredited genres than ones from credible genres.

Death-induced changes to audience valuations may also be attributable to audience expansion. The death of an artist leads to renewed public interest in the artist, expanding the audiences who are interested in consuming the deceased's antemortem work. Such an audience expansion reshapes the composition of the evaluative audience. Newer listeners often have a different understanding of genre norms, and these changes coalesce to produce meaningful differences in aggregate audience valuations (Kovács & Sharkey 2014). Just like with sympathetic eu-

logizing, there's a need to demonstrate that costly signaling exists as a mechanism distinct from such "attention effects." We propose that we can do so by looking for within-genre similarities in attention received. If changes in quantity of audience attention is consistent across credible and discredited subgenres, then we can be more confident that audience expansion isn't the driver of the differences we had observed between the two. We test the following hypothesis:

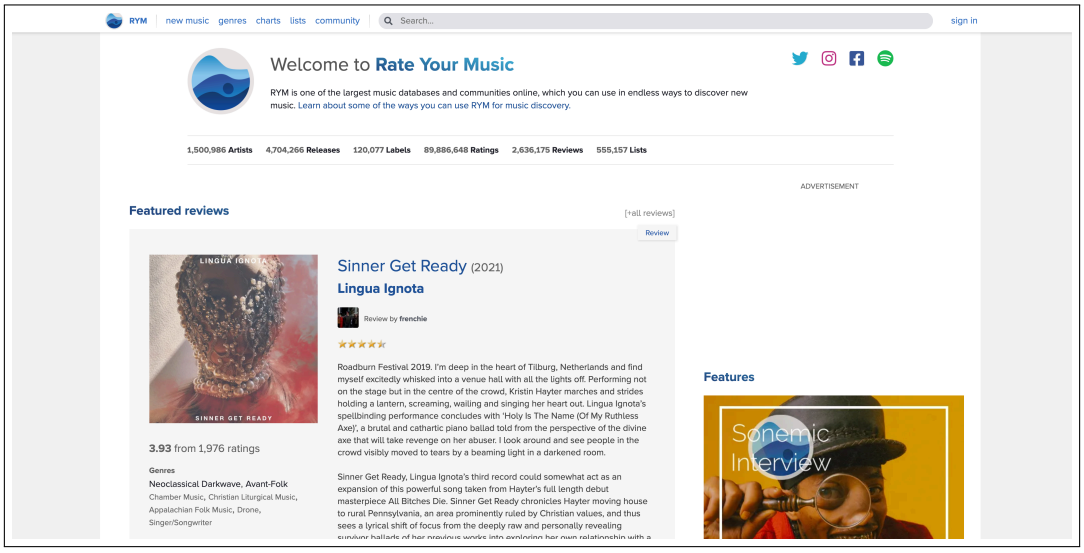
> **Hypothesis 5**: Iconic deaths do NOT produce differences in the quantity of attention received by albums in discredited and credible subgenres.

Data

Data collection

This study draws on a novel longitudinal data set of music albums from 2002 to 2020. The data set is constructed from two major sources. One, we draw on digital trace data of user evaluations from a major music web community, Rate Your Music (*RYM*). *RYM* refers to itself as "a community-built music and film database where you can rate, review, catalog, and discover new music and films, as well as participate in contributing to the database itself" (RYM 2023). A screen-capture of *RYM*'s home-page can be found in Figure 1. *RYM* community reviews have been cited in review and recommendation pieces across a range of publications, from *The Guardian*, to *Wired*, and *Vice* (e.g. McNamee 2007; Baio 2011; Madden 2014). We use *RYM* data on audience valuations because it is a rare source of panel data on audience valuations. Traditional sources of music evaluation produce one-time reviews of music albums at the time of their release. Panel data from *RYM* allows us to examine how evaluations change over time where traditional sources of music evaluation generally produce one-time snapshots of album reviews at the time of the albums' release.

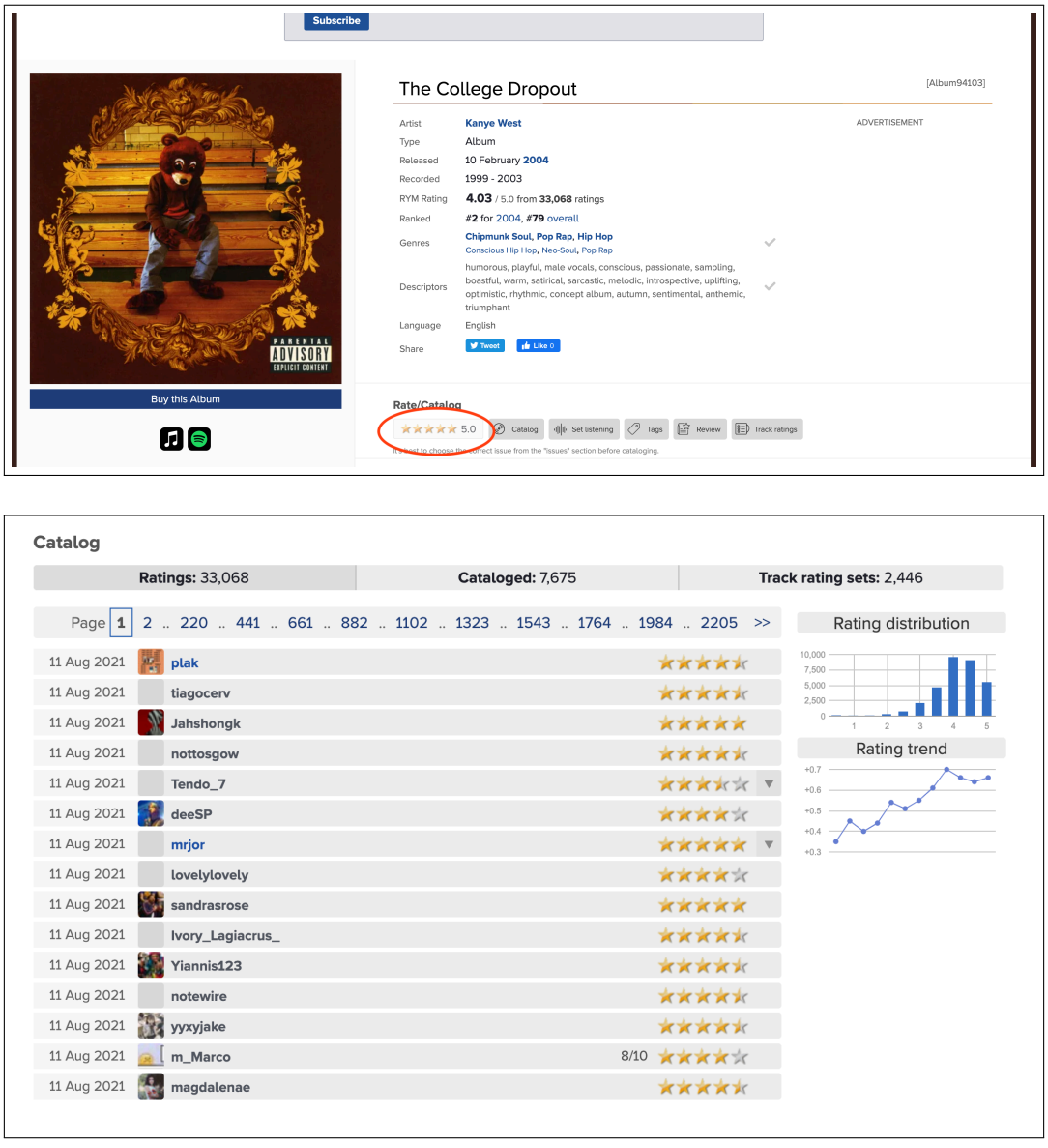
Figure 1: *Rate Your Music*'s (*RYM*) home page



According to *RYM*'s site administrators, 50% of *RYM* web-traffic comes from the US, the UK and Canada. Western Europe, Russia, Poland, Brazil, and Australia also make up appreciable portions of their web-traffic. Visitors to the website who create a free *RYM* account are able

to leave behind ratings and reviews of a website. A record of every rating given to an album is publicly accessible and retrieved using a web-script (Figure 2). We augment the *RYM* digital trace data with album-level covariate data from Spotify (e.g. Askin & Mauskapf 2017). We validate the accuracy of data collected by comparing subsamples against two other major music websites, discogs.org and allmusic.com.

Figure 2: How users leave ratings on *RYM*



Population

Our sampling frame comprises all hip-hop music albums released from 1/1/2002 to 12/31/2020. From this sampling frame, we identify all valid albums that fulfill the following inclusion criteria. (1) The album must be released by a solo artist. (2) The album must be released antemortem (while an artist is alive) during our observation period (1/1/2002 to 12/31/2020). (3) The deceased artist's death must occur within the observation period. (3) There must be sufficient pre-death observation periods (>=6) of monthly album ratings. (4) There must be sufficient post-death observation periods (>=6) of monthly album ratings. (5) There must not be months with missing data (e.g. months where the album receives no ratings) since synthetic control requires balanced panel data. In total, we identify 11 albums that fulfill this inclusion criteria (Table 1). A biography of all deceased artists included in our sample can be found in Appendix A. To better understand the inclusion criteria, it may be helpful to consider some albums that were excluded from the study. Albums that were released by a hip-hop group, such as *Culture* by Migos, would be excluded since they do not fulfill criterion #1. Albums such as *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon* by Pop Smoke were excluded on the grounds of criterion #2 since they were posthumously released. Albums such as *Me Against the World* by Tupac Shakur were excluded on the grounds of criterion #3 since the artist's deaths occurred prior to the observation period. Albums such as *?* by XXXTentacion were excluded on the grounds of criterion #4 since the artists passed away shortly after the albums were released, such that they aren't sufficient pre-death observation periods. Albums such as *Born Like this* by MF Doom were excluded on the grounds of criterion #5, since the artists passed away so late in the observation period that there were insufficient post-death periods in the data. Albums such as *Resurgam* by Alias were excluded on the grounds of criterion #6 since there was missing data on monthly album ratings around the important windows of analysis (pre- and post-death months).

Measures

The study features five key measures as well as a suite of covariates.

(1) Measuring audience valuations. We measure audience valuations of a hip-hop album through the album ratings left by *RYM* members. *RYM* members are able to assign "ratings" to all albums catalogued on the site. These ratings span the range of 0.5 stars (lowest) to 5.0 stars (highest), in intervals of 0.5. We do so for 18 months before and after an artist's death.

Table 1: Music albums from deceased musicians in hip hop

Artist	Album
Nujabes	Metaphorical Music
Nujabes	Modal Soul
XXXTentacion	17
Lil Peep	Come Over When You're Sober, Pt. 1
Mac Miller	Blue Slide Park
Mac Miller	Watching Movies With the Sound Off
Mac Miller	GO:OD AM
Mac Miller	The Divine Feminine
Juice WRLD	Goodbye & Good Riddance
Juice WRLD	Death Race for Love
Nipsey Hussle	Victory Lap

(2) Measuring iconic deaths. We categorize deaths into two categories: iconic and non-iconic deaths. We classify an artist's death as an iconic death if the cause of death is attributable to either violent crimes (e.g. gun violence) or substance abuse (e.g. drug overdose). Deaths that are attributable to other causes of death are categorized as non-iconic deaths. 9 of the 11 albums in our samples involve iconic deaths.

(3) Measuring subgenre credibility. We categorize hip-hop music into two subgenre categories: discredited and credible subgenres. We rely on subgenre tagging by RYM to produce an emic understanding of subgenres. These categorization efforts are community-led and verified by *RYM* volunteer moderators, who are typically senior members of the community. *RYM* categorization of album subgenres is consistent with those of other major music websites and services, such as Spotify, Last.fm, allmusic.com and discogs.com. We classify a hip-hop album as belonging to a discredited subgenre if it is belongs to the cloud rap, mumble-rap, or emo rap subgenres. 4 of the 11 albums in our samples belong to discredited subgenres.

(4) Measuring valuation dispersion. We measure valuation variance through the monthly standard deviation in album ratings assigned to an album in a given month.

(5) Measuring audience attention. We measure audience attention through the natural log of the count of all album ratings assigned to an album in a given month.

(6) Covariates. In addition to the above, we also control for the following covariates: (a) the

skew of monthly ratings, (b) the kurtosis of monthly ratings, (c) age of the artist at album release, (d) recording history prior to album release, (e) initial reception of album (no. of ratings in first 3 months), (f) initial reception of album (average rating in first 3 months), (g) no. of subgenres an album belongs to, (h-n) sonic features of the album including track duration, danceability, energy, instrumentalness, loudness, speechiness, and valence.

Estimation Strategy

As explained previously, we take a leaf out of the potential outcomes literature and think of the death of an artist as a kind of one-off "treatment." We take a *treated unit* to refer to a hip-hop album whose creator passed away in the years after its release; an *untreated unit* a hip-hop album whose creator did not die. The death-induced changes in audience valuations (τ_{i1}) at time t for album i can then be thought of as the difference between the observed mean audience valuation of album i (Y_{it}) under the treatment and its untreated counterfactual (Y'_{it}), i.e.

$$\tau_{i1} = Y_{i1} - Y'_{i1}.$$

We construct an estimate of the counterfactual using synthetic control estimation. Synthetic control estimation was first introduced by Abadie and colleagues as a method for estimating the effect of a treatment in the presence of a single treated unit and a number of control units (Abadie 2021). It is ideal for research designs like ours where there is a low number of treated units and where the treated units are sui generis character such that it is difficult for a single untreated unit to provide a good comparison for them. The method constructs a set of weights such that covariates and pre-treatment outcomes of the treated unit are approximately matched by a weighted average of control units. Synthetic control estimation is most often used in economic and public policy, where it has been described as "arguably the most important innovation in the policy evaluation literature in the last 15 year" (Athey & Imbens 2017).

To perform synthetic control estimation, we construct a donor pool of comparison albums (Abadie et al. 2015). Let album i be an antemortem album that fulfilled the inclusion criteria stated earlier. We begin by identifying a valid donor pool J for each album i, $J \leq 50$. We do so by filtering for albums that (a) share at least one sub-genre classification as the treated unit, (b) were rated a similar number of times, (c) were released by artists of a similar age, (d) and were released within 1 year of the treated unit. In the event that there are more than 50 valid albums are in the donor pool, we take a random sample of 50 albums from the set of all possible comparison albums. Synthetic control weights can be represented by a $J \times 1$ vector of weights $W = (w_1, \ldots, w_J)'$. Let X_1 be the $k \times 1$ vector containing the values of important pre-intervention characteristics of the treated unit. Let X_0 be the $k \times 51$ matrix collecting the values of the same variables for the units in J. The synthetic control procedure seeks to minimize

the difference between the pre-intervention characteristics of the treated unit and the synthetic control. For $m = 1, \ldots, k$, let X_{1m} be the value of the mth variable for the treated unit and let X_{0m} be a $1 \times J$ vector containing the values of the mth variable for the units in the donor pool. W^* is the value of W that minimizes

$$\sum_{m=1}^{k} v_m (X_{1m} - X_{0m} W)^2.$$

v_m is a weight that reflects the relative importance that we assign to the m-th variable when we measure the discrepancy between X_1 and $X_0 W$. As mentioned before, we take Y_{it} to be the mean monthly audience valuation of album i at time t. The mean monthly audience valuation of the synthetic control ($\widehat{Y}'_{it}$) for album i at time t can then be expressed as

$$\widehat{Y}_{it} = \sum_{j=1}^{J} w_k^* Y'_{jt}.$$

The death-induced changes in audience valuations (τ_{it}) of album i at time t is then simply

$$\widehat{\tau}_{it} = Y_{it} - \widehat{Y}'_{it}.$$

We produce estimates of $\widehat{\tau}_{it}$ in the short-term (1 month) and long-term (18 months). We operationalize the short-term as the month immediately succeeding an artist's death (i.e. 1 month after). We operationalize the long-term as the 18th month after an artist's passing. This post-death observation period of 18-month was chosen because it was the maximum post-death window that could be observed across all of the albums in our sample. As a part of our robustness checks, we also consider the sensitivity of our analysis to alternative operationalizations of the long-term. We make statistical inferences about our estimates by performing in-time placebo tests where we assign each album in the control donor pool to fictitious treatment (Abadie et al. 2015). Pseudo p-values are constructed by estimating in-place placebo effects for each unit in the sample and then calculating the fraction of such effects greater than or equal to the effect estimated for the treated unit. We pool estimates by taking the mean of the coefficient estimates across the pooled

cases. We use the mean pooled percentile tank statistic to test for the sharp null hypothesis that the death effect is zero across all of the pooled estimates (Dube & Zipperer 2015). The distribution of such a mean percentile tank can be calculated using the Dirwin-Hall distribution since percentile ranks are uniformly distributed on the unit interval.

Table 2: Changes in Audience Valuations after Artists' Deaths

	Pre-death	Post-death (short-term)				Post-death (long-term)			
	Y	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p
Overall									
All deaths	2.82	3.03	2.80	0.24**	<0.01	3.03	2.91	0.13**	<0.01
Between-Death Differences									
Iconic deaths	2.60	2.92	2.62	0.29**	<0.01	2.85	2.65	0.21**	<0.01
Non-Iconic deaths	3.81	3.56	3.56	<0.01	0.10	3.58	3.69	-0.11	0.42
Within-Genre Differences (Iconic Deaths)									
Discredited subgenres	2.25	2.55	2.27	0.29*	0.03	2.38	2.07	0.32*	0.02
Credible subgenres	2.88	3.21	2.92	0.29**	<0.01	3.09	2.94	0.15**	<0.01

Note:
Y refer to the observed audience valuations in treated units (pooled). $\hat{Y}$ refers to the estimated audience valuations in synthetic controls (pooled). $\hat{\tau}$ refers to the estimated death-induced changes in audience valuations. P-values are pseudo p-values from placebo permutation tests. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Results

Death-induced inflation of audience valuations

How do audiences account for an artist's passing? On first reading, community opinions on *RYM* appear split. One group argues that an artist's passing should not influence a listener's judgement of their antemortem work. In a postmortem review of Lil Peep's *Come Over When You're Sober, Pt. 1*, a community member takes offense at those who "critically elevate any music ... when the artist dies" despite it being "quite simply some of the worst music I've ever heard." Another similarly takes issue with "those people who will blindly glorify artists because they are no longer alive," maintaining that they would never "say that an artist made good music just because they died." Yet, there are others in the same community that eschew such attitudes. This latter group finds the ask of cleanly separating the artist from their passing implausible. To them, the death of an artist ought to be accounted for. In text reviews of the very same Lil Peep album, one member argues that it is "hypocritical to just spout [Lil Peep's] death shoudn't [sic] affect the rating when this website knows first-hand the impact of context in music (very recently with legend David Bowie's passing)," while another member accuses others of committing the same sin in reverse, observing that "the way it's become cool to dunk on [dead artists] online in certain circles, especially after he died, is fucking weird."

We find that the death of an artist causes an enduring transformation in audience reception of their antemortem work, even on a platform where many might claim otherwise. Simply comparing pre- and post-death observations, we find that audience valuations of albums from dead hip-hop artists improve from their pre-death levels (Table 2). These initial observations are validated by our synthetic control estimation. In the short-term, audience valuations of albums from dead artists improve by 0.24 points ($p < 0.01$) compared to their synthetic control counterfactuals. These improvements in audience valuations endure over time, even if they diminish in magnitude. In the long-term, audience valuations of an artist's work remains 0.13 points ($p < 0.01$) higher than synthetic controls.

Costly signaling of authenticity

Earlier, we had posited that one possible explanation of such death-induced inflation to audience valuation is that an artist's death functions as a costly signal of authenticity. Such information

may invite the audience to revise their interpretation of the artist and their ante-mortem work. Although community reviews on *RYM* are too scarce to facilitate systematic computational text analysis, there are reviews describing how the death of an artist prompted personal reassessments of the deceased's music. In one review, a listener describes how Mac Miller's early death from a drug overdose "cast a retroactive light over every impression" that his antemortem album had created: "Nothing in here reads as a suicide note, but the attitude that lead to his self-destruction is apparent in its hazy dissociation." An artist's death may lead to dramatic re-assessments of the deceased's works, in some instances prompting avowed about-turns in judgements. One listener's review of Lil Peep's *Come Over When You're Sober, Pt. 1* provides a case-in-point:

> When I first heard Lil Peep, I, like many, assumed he was one of a litany of rappers using depression as a fashion statement. It was trendy, it sold, and I figured Lil Peep, with his incredibly poppy and simplistic lyrics revolving around these subjects, was milking it for all it's worth. (*RYM* listener)

Lil Peep's early death from an accidental fentanyl and Xanax overdose changed this listener's mind. The artist's passing led the listener to the realization that "Peep was a kid who was going through a lot that was trying to make a lighthearted take on some pretty heavy stuff weighing on his mind."

We find two points of evidence supporting the hypothesis that the observed death-induced inflation of audience valuations is driven by the costly signaling of authenticity. First, iconic deaths produces stronger and more durable death effects than non-iconic deaths. We find significant between-death differences in death effects, such that iconic deaths are associated with greater death-induced inflation in the short- and long-term when compared to non-iconic deaths. In the short-term, hip-hop albums from artists who suffered iconic deaths experienced a 0.29 increase ($p < 0.01$) in mean monthly valuations in the short-term when compared to synthetic controls. (Table 2). This persists in the long-term. These music albums experienced a 0.21 increase ($p < 0.01$) in mean monthly valuations in the long-term when compared to synthetic controls (Table 2). In contrast, there are no statistically significant changes in audience valuations among music albums whose artists suffered non-iconic deaths.

Second, hip-hop albums from discredited subgenres benefit more than their counterparts from credible subgenres. While iconic deaths have a similar effect on audience valuations in the short-term across music albums in both discredited and credible hip-hop subgenres, im-

portant differences emerge in the long-term (Table 2). The death-induced inflation from iconic deaths experienced by albums in novel subgenres *increases* in magnitude in the long-term, while the same for albums in established subgenres diminishes in the long-term. This within-genre divergence lead to albums within discredited subgenres experiencing nearly double the death-induced inflation as do their counterparts in credible subgenres. In the short-term, albums in discredited subgenres experience a 0.29 ($p = 0.03$) increase in audience valuations in the short-term from iconic deaths. Such changes in audience valuations increase to 0.32 ($p = 0.02$) in the long-term. While albums from credible subgenres experience a similar 0.29 ($p< 0.01$) increase in audience valuations from iconic deaths in the short-term, we find that such death-induced changes diminish in the long-term to 0.15 ($p < 0.01$). To validate the statistical significance of these within-genre differences, we construct pseudo p-values using placebo permutation tests (Firpo & Possebom 2018; Abadie 2021). A permutation distribution is constructed by pooling observed within-genre differences with placebo counterparts constructed from bootstrapped samples. The observed within-genre differences can be seemed significant if they are large relative to the distribution of the placebo differences. In the short-term, the differences between death effects in discredited and credible subgenres are negligible (<0.01, $p = 0.47$). In the long-term, albums from discredited subgenres experience a 0.17 increase ($p = 0.06$) in audience valuations over albums from credible subgenres.

Table 3: Within-Genre Differences in Alternative Measures of Audience Reception Among Iconic Deaths

	Pre-death	Post-death (short-term)				Post-death (long-term)			
	Y	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p
Y = **Valuation Dispersion (s.d.)**									
Discredited subgenres	0.99	0.96	0.83	0.13*	0.02	1.19	0.99	0.21*	0.01
Credible subgenres	0.71	0.76	0.74	0.02**	<0.01	0.74	0.75	-0.02**	<0.01
Y = **Audience Attention (logged)**									
Discredited subgenres	4.52	4.34	4.27	0.07**	<0.01	4.61	4.33	0.29**	<0.01
Credible subgenres	2.87	3.38	3.01	0.37**	<0.01	4.27	3.80	0.47*	0.01

Note:
Y refer to the observed variable in treated units (pooled). $\hat{Y}$ refers to the estimate from synthetic controls (pooled). $\hat{\tau}$ refers to the estimated death-induced changes in the variable. P-values are pseudo p-values from placebo permutation tests. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Considering alternative explanations

Costly signaling is not the only mechanism that can produce the observed death effects. Earlier, we had proposed that we may be able to find support for the distinctiveness of costly signaling of authenticity as a mechanism driving death effects on audience valuations by assessing how artists' deaths affect alternative measures of audience reception. First, we compare costly signaling of authenticity to sympathetic eulogizing. Here, we find evidence supporting the distinctiveness of costly signaling, although some of the findings contravene earlier expectations. One, we find that death-induced changes to audience valuations are durable (Table 2). This is true of death effects on the aggregate (from 0.24 in the short-term to 0.13 in the long-term, both $p < 0.01$), and particularly so when it comes to iconic deaths (from 0.29 to 0.21, both $p < 0.01$). Given that sympathetic eulogizing effects are expected to ameliorate over time, this suggests that another mechanism, such as costly signaling, must be driving these long-term changes in audience reception. Two, we find within-genre differences in how iconic deaths affect the dispersion of audience valuations (Table 3). Iconic deaths produce statistically significant within-genre differences in valuation dispersion. However, the direction of these effects are the obverse of our expectations. Albums from discredited genres experience larger, not smaller, increases in valuation dispersion than counterparts from credible subgenres. This implies that characterization of the covariance between ante-mortem valuations and costly signaling was inaccurate. There is a positive correlation between audience valuations and costly signaling effects, such that listeners who rate an artist's music highly are expected to experience greater costly signaling effects. One possible explanation is that there is a minimum threshold of "liking" a listener must have before they are receptive to the costly signaling of authenticity from iconic deaths. A listener who despises an album is unlikely to be receptive to the costly signaling from iconic deaths, but a listener who finds it mediocre or good-not-great may be much more persuadable by the same. Such threshold effects would explain the positive covariance between costly signaling and audience valuations. For albums in discredited subgenres, iconic deaths produce a 0.13 increase ($p = 0.02$) in the standard deviation of audience valuations in the short-term. This rises to an increase of 0.21 ($p = 0.01$) in the long-term. While we find statistically significant effects among albums in credible subgenres, the effect sizes are negligible in magnitude despite being statistically significant: 0.02 ($p < 0.01$) in the short term and -0.02 ($p < 0.01$) in the long-term. To validate the statistical significance of the within-genre differences, we construct pseudo p-values using placebo permutation tests again. The observed within-genre differences are 0.11 ($p = 0.10$) in the short-term, and rise to 0.21

(p = 0.03) in the long-term.

Second, we compare costly signaling of authenticity to audience expansion. We find that hip-hop albums in discredited subgenres do not receive more attention after iconic deaths than counterparts from credible subgenres (Table 3). In the short-term, albums from discredited subgenres experience an increase of just 6.7 percent ($e^{0.07}$, p < 0.01) in audience attention, where albums from credible subgenres experience an increase of 44.1 percent ($e^{0.37}$, p < 0.01). While albums from discredited subgenres experience a 33.1 percent ($e^{0.29}$, p < 0.01) change in audience attention in the long-term, this remains smaller in magnitude than the 59.9 percent change ($e^{0.47}$, p = 0.01) albums from credible subgenres experience. However, from our permutation tests we find that these within-genre differences are not statistically significant in the short-term (-0.31, p = 0.8) or in the long-term (-0.18, = 0.9).

Third, we perform sensitivity analysis of our findings to our operationalization of post-death periods (Table 4). We compare our designation of the long-term post-death observation period (18 months) to a slightly shortened one (17 months). We find that our findings are largely consistent. Estimates and substantive interpretations are robust to alternative designations of long-term post-death observation periods. One minor difference that emerged was the estimated treatment effect from iconic deaths on audience attention, where the 17-th month estimate is higher than the 18th month estimate (0.77 compared to 0.47). However, the substantive interpretation stands. From our permutation tests, there are no statistically significant within-genre difference between estimated treatment effects on audience attention under the 17th month designation of long-term (p = 0.66).

Table 4: Sensitivity Analysis using Alternative Designation of Long-term Post-death Observations

	Long-term as 17th-month				Long-term as 18th-month			
	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p	Y	$\hat{Y}$	$\hat{\tau}$	p
Overall								
All deaths	3.11	2.89	0.22**	<0.01	3.03	2.91	0.13**	<0.01
Between-Death Differences								
Iconic deaths	2.90	2.63	0.27**	<0.01	2.85	2.65	0.21**	<0.01
Non-Iconic deaths	3.73	3.65	0.08	0.36	3.58	3.69	-0.11	0.42
Within-Genre Differences (Iconic Deaths)								
Discredited subgenres	2.40	1.93	0.48*	0.02	2.38	2.07	0.32*	0.02
Credible subgenres	3.15	2.99	0.16**	<0.01	3.09	2.94	0.15**	<0.01
Y = **Valuation Dispersion (s.d.)**								
Discredited subgenres	1.06	0.92	0.14*	0.01	1.19	0.99	0.21*	0.01
Credible subgenres	0.66	0.74	-0.07**	<0.01	0.74	0.75	-0.02**	<0.01
Y = **Audience Attention (logged)**								
Discredited subgenres	4.64	4.28	0.35**	<0.01	4.61	4.33	0.29**	<0.01
Credible subgenres	4.36	3.59	0.77*	0.01	4.27	3.80	0.47*	0.01

Note:
Y refer to the observed variable in treated units (pooled). $\hat{Y}$ refers to the estimate from synthetic controls (pooled). $\hat{\tau}$ refers to the estimated death-induced changes in the variable. P-values are pseudo p-values from placebo permutation tests. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Conclusion

In a recent video essay, Anthony Fantano, described as "the only music critic who matters if you're under 25" by the *New York Times* (Coscarelli 2020), re-reviewed *Swimming*, a record from the late Mac Miller. When *Swimming* was first released, Fantano had panned the record as "about as fun as rush-hour traffic." Five years on, Fantano confessed that his thinking had changed:

> Just a month after the album's release, Mac Miller passed away in what was said to be an accidental drug overdose. Suddenly the record's themes of inner demons, depression and substance abuse came into a fuller and much more intense view ... in retrospect there is definitely credit I should be giving to these tracks. (theneedledrop 2023)

Fantano's avowed change of heart is far from an anomaly. The death of an artist can produce a profound and enduring transformation in how audiences receive their work. In this study, we have provided an empirical demonstration and explanation of how this can be so. Drawing on novel longitudinal data of audience valuations, we show how the deaths of artists durably transform audience reception of their music through the costly signaling of authenticity. These death-induced changes in audience valuation endure in the long-term, and cannot be explained simply by an audience's tendency to eulogize or changes in the audience itself after tragic passings.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of the semiotic dimensions of death within hip-hop, and cultural fields more broadly. While this paper has focused on the signaling of iconic street authenticity in hip-hop, deaths can carry other valuable forms of symbolic capital in other cultural fields. For example, death may still act as a costly signal of aesthetic beauty by revealing the personal turmoil behind an artist's work, and invoke associations of the "tortured artist." Early scholarship on "death effects" have tended to make the strong simplifying assumption that death can be treated simply as an exogenous supply-side disruption that irreversibly ends production of a particular good, service, or activity (e.g. Ekelund et al. 2000). While such assumptions have been both necessary and productive in many fields and instances, much of the contemporary scholarship has revealed their fragility and limitations (e.g. Azoulay et al. 2019; Oettl's 2012). We complement such scholarship by showing how the symbolic meanings of death matter. While our focus has been on the communication of authenticity that is emic to hip-hop, death may also be received by audiences as a heuristic for desired aesthetic attributes. Deaths pierce through the front-stage presentations of certain artists, and may lead audiences to mythologize them into tor-

tured artists – best exemplified by totemic figures like Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath – and change the way their antemortem work is perceived (Heinich 1996). Audience reactions to the deaths of beloved figures such as Anthony Bourdain and Robin Williams serve as a cases-in-point. Bourdain and Williams' poignant suicides made public once more their continual struggles with addiction and depression (Gilbey 2014; Hayward 2018). For many, it was precisely their brushes with such darkness that lent their dramatis personae in television and film the air of sincerity and authenticity (Trilling 1972).

Second, we find that deaths can produce positive and persistent improvements to audience valuations of an artist's work, and that such death-induced inflations are attributable to the costly signaling of authenticity. Previous studies of death effects in cultural domains have found that deaths cause real if fleeting changes in consumer behavior around a deceased artist's work (e.g. Ekelund et al. 2000). Contrary to such studies, we find that the death effects on artistic reputation to be persistent and long-standing. In this respect, our findings echo Azoulay et al.'s (2019) and Chan et al. (2019) studies of death effects within the biomedical research communities. However, the death effects in these fields are produced by different mechanisms. Azoulay et al. had find that the deaths of scientists "stimulate a long-lasting positive increase in citation rates," and that these long-term valuational effects are attributable to death-induced changes from posthumous recognition efforts from the deceased's associates (2019: 820). Because of this, death effects were more pronounced among the deceased who had been more memorialized. We observe similarly durable death effects within the cultural field of hip-hop. However, the death-induced changes in valuations in hip-hop are instead attributable to the costly signaling of authenticity. Deaths, in particular iconic deaths, within hip-hop are symbolically laden events that transform how audiences understand and appraise the deceased's antemortem work. We find that artists from discredited subgenres of hip-hop benefit more from such costly signaling, experiencing pronounced increases in audience valuations. The effectiveness of such costly signals is also conditional on thresholds of excellence and quality. Costly signals of authenticity amplify and exaggerate pre-existing preferences and valuations – cultural producers must demonstrate reasonable quality of their work before audiences are willing to accept their authenticity claims.

Third, our findings carry implications for the construction of genre categories in cultural fields. Artists from fledging music genres that are discredited by audiences – such as cloud rap – are the largest beneficiaries of costly signaling effects. We posit that it may be no coin-

cidence that the iconic deaths of beloved musicians became as important as they were for the development of genres in eras past, as was the case for Hank Williams with country music, and Luigi Tenco with canzone d'autore ("cantautore") (Peterson 1997; Santoro 2002). Audiences desire authenticity from music genres, and iconic deaths confer them exactly such (Frake 2017). Country music was a marginalized regional genre in early 20th century America. Its transition into a mainstream music genre – as the rural alternative to urban modernity – accelerated after Hank Williams' early death, when music executives from Nashville rebuilt and institutionalized the genre of country music around William's iconic representation as the cowboy who sang about hillbillies (Peterson 1997). We find a similar narrative in the emergence of the Italian music genre of cantautore. Cantautore in mid-20th century Italy was viewed as a genre of Italian popular music that lacked artistic legitimacy. The early death of Luigi Tenco's (an early star in the genre) in 1967 became "the main rhetorical tool for the social construction of the cantautore as an artist and his work as a work of art" (Santoro 2002:117). Tenco had committed suicide during a song competition over "the audience's inability to appreciate his work" (Santoro 2002:118) His iconic death dramatically inverted the supposed lightness of cantautore, lent the genre credibility as one where artists put intimate expressions of their persons into their work, and led eventually to a structural transformation of Italian musical and literary culture (Santoro 2002). Iconic deaths may not just communicate the authenticity of the deceased alone, but also spill over and benefit the broader field in which the deceased is embedded. As it was for country and cantautore, it may yet be for cloud rap.

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Appendix A: Deceased Artists in Our Sample

Nujabes (née Jun Seba) was a Japanese hip-hop producer from Tokyo. Known for his "jazz-infused, sophisticated take on hip hop beats" (Zafar 2010), Nujabes was a cult figure in the Japanese hip-hop underground who frequently collaborated with British and American hip-hop artists. He has become recognized for his pioneering influence on a number of hip-hop subgenres, most notably that of jazz rap and lo-fi hip-hop (Murray 2023). Nujabes passed away from injuries sustained in a traffic accident. He was 36.

XXXTentacion (née Jahseh Onfroy), or X, was an American hip-hop artist from Florida. X was among the vanguard of hip-hop artists who rose to fame on the Soundcloud streaming platform. This coalition of artists have been dubbed collectively as SoundCloud rap, "the most vital and disruptive new movement in hip hop" (Caramanica 2017b). By 2017, X had become one of rap's biggest new stars, feted by fans and critics alike for his creative melding of emo, hip-hop and punk conventions (Sisario & Coscarelli 2018). But at the same time, he had acquired a reputation as one of the most contentious figures in popular music (Hogan 2017). X passed away from gunshot wounds during a violent robbery. He was 20.

Lil Peep (née Gustav Ahr) was an American hip-hop artist from Long Island, New York. Described as "one of pop music's brightest and most promising young talents" (Caramanica 2017a) and "the fresh-faced avatar of post-emo angst that's not quite rap or rock" (Horowitz 2017), Lil Peep was known for his creative blending of emo, trap and grunge. Lil Peep's music was archetypical SoundCloud rap: sleepy lo-fi production coupled with bars that spoke candidly about his personal struggles with depression and substance abuse. He passed away from an accidental overdose from fentanyl and Xanax. He was 21.

Mac Miller (née Malcolm McCormick) was an American hip-hop artist from Pittsburgh. Mac started rapping as a teenager and released multiple mixtapes that attracted a cult following (Sweeting 2018). His debut album, *Blue Slide Park*, was the first record from an independent label to top the Billboard charts in sixteen years. While his debut and sophomore album releases were often denigrated as "frat rap," his latter albums attracted praise for their technical sophistication, with critics noting that "Miller's music has become exponentially better ... his rhymes got tighter and the beats trippier" (Garvey 2018). Mac passed away from an accidental overdose of cocaine, fentanyl, and alcohol. He was 26.

Juice WRLD (née Jarad Higgins) was an American hip-hop artist from Chicago. Described as "SoundCloud rap's best hope" (Caramanica 2019), Juice WRLD was considered one of the foremost exponents of emo-rap, a hybrid genre that draws combines the sensibilities of trap and mid-noughties emo rock. As with his emo-rap contemporaries Lil Peep and X, Juice made his name on SoundCloud. In 2017, his single "Lucid Dreams" made it to #2 on the Billboard charts, the first in a fusillade of commercial hits in the span of two years (Kreps & Klinkenberg 2019). Juice passed away from an oxycodone and codeine overdose in 2019. He was 21.

Nipsey Hussle (née Ermias Asghedom) was an American hip-hop artist from Los Angeles. He was an exemplar of contemporary G-funk, a subgenre of West Coast gangsta rap. Nipsey rose to fame on the back of a series of independently released singles and mixtapes (Robehmed 2013). His debut album, Victory Lap, debuted at #4 on the Billboard charts in 2017. Outside of music, Nipsey also received plaudits for his entrepreneurship and community activism (Horner 2019). Nipsey passed away from gunshot wounds from a violent personal altercation in 2019. He was 33.

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