

What is the Clout Economy?

(Please cite: Evans, J. M. (2020, May 24-28). *We (MOSTLY) Carry Guns for the Internet: Relational Labor and Chasing Digital Clout in Chicago's Drill Rap scene*. [Conference presentation]. 2020 Annual International Communication Association Conference, Gold Coast, Australia. <https://ica20.vfairs.com>)

Black technoculture (Brock, 2020) considers Hip-Hop as a technology where various social, cultural, racial, sexual, economic, and political oppressions become remedied through innovative and inventive social practices. For example, the phenomenon of Drill rap provided a soundtrack to the collaborative survival strategies and coping mechanisms developed by Chicago's Black youth, who have continually been denied full access to resources (Evans, 2020). By advancing pioneering principles and often unremarked genius that emerge within marginalized communities, Drill musicians were among the first in the digital age of music to elevate the liminal spaces of cultural knowledge and understanding, spaces often overlooked or misinterpreted by the mainstream media.

Many times in conducting my field work within Chicago, my respondents spoke about pursuing visibility as being about "chasing clout." The arena for these various labor practices is what Evans (2020) has termed the "Clout Economy" – a techno-social system in the marketplace of attention built around Black youth sharing their "performance of self" online in hopes for cultural capital and sustained microcelebrity. An ecosystem where youth cultural production is characterized by its flow both online and offline and relentless pursuit of "digital clout," techno-social currency of influence and power recognized through the accumulation of a loyal and engaged online audience. On the web, clout allows you to attract the right people and, at the right time, change what they think or do for your benefit. Achieving clout demands new thinking and a new focus on the ways in which youth of Hip-Hop produce web content.

Through the accumulation of Hip-Hop inflected cultural capital, youth gain social status, recognition and mobility in their peer community and participatory digital media cultures. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has been credited by many as coining the term cultural capital and being the first to thoroughly critique its social use and impacts. In his prominent literary work *Forms of Capital* (1986) he identifies cultural capital as "forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has, which give them a higher status in society" (Bourdieu, 1986). In proposing the concept of the "Clout Economy" I aim to introduce a term that extends Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in order to better understand and describe the cultural sensibilities and social media practices of urban youth of color. It also harkens to Prudence Carter's (2005) "Black Cultural capital" in acknowledging the identity, music, style and fashion sought out by young African Americans to be respected and admired among their peer group. In recognizing that cultural capital is not exclusive to the wealthy class, the clout economy denotes that this digital capital is situated in a specific social context unique to young African Americans currently growing up in the 21st Century.