

***From entertainment to clothes, pimp is in  
Another negative stereotype is co-opted  
by popular culture***

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Even before rap group Three 6 Mafia's stupefying Oscar win this year for best song for the film "Hustle & Flow," pimps have been making the climb from subterranean purveyors of human flesh to celebrated pop culture figures. The flashy style and smooth talk no longer are solely owned by those wearing purple gators and large fur-trimmed hats. No, today anybody with the power to persuade, the ability to achieve or the bucks to bling can be considered a P-I-M-P.

Jared Parsons, 31, a suburban Portland, Ore., father of three, caused a stir when the online Drudge Report reported on his children's clothing line called Pimpfants. Mr. Parsons has defended his company name, saying the word pimp, in this case, refers to the way it is commonly used today, meaning hip and stylish. It might still be hard out here for a pimp, but it's not nearly as hard as it used to be. Even before rap group Three 6 Mafia's stupefying Oscar win this year for best song for the film "Hustle & Flow," pimps have been making the climb from subterranean purveyors of human flesh to celebrated pop culture figures.

The flashy style and smooth talk no longer are solely owned by those wearing purple gators and large fur-trimmed hats. No, today anybody with the power to persuade, the ability to achieve or the bucks to bling can be considered a P-I-M-P. Last month, Jared Parsons, 31, a suburban Portland, Ore., father of three, caused a stir when the online Drudge Report reported on his children's clothing line called Pimpfants. "Pimpfants is more than a name, it's a movement!" reads the company's Web site. "Our clothing bridges the generation gap between parents and kids, allowing babies and tots everywhere the opportunity to hit the playground with fresh gear and street cred."

The line includes velour track suits, T-shirts emblazoned with the words "bling" and "diva" and the "Pimpfant" logo and sleeveless T-shirts called "lil' beaters." Mr. Parsons has defended his company name, saying the word pimp, in this case, refers to the way it is commonly used today, meaning hip and stylish. But that's not the only definition. These days, anything and everything can be "pimped." In large part, we have MTV's popular show "Pimp My Ride," to blame -- or thank -- for the use of "pimp" as a verb. The New York Times ran a Sunday lifestyle piece May 28 headlined "Pimp My Grill." The Toronto Star held a contest this year for gardeners called "Pimp My Garden." And a Web site dedicated to

outrageous treats is called "Pimp My Snack."

There's even a humorous book and kit by Master Pimp Rev. Smoothello G. Debaulous called "Pimp My Cubicle: Take Your Workspace from Boring to Bling!" As innocuous as that all seems, much of today's pretend pimping still is based on the stereotype of a black man in outlandish clothing controlling a stable of prostitutes. But how did pimps get their diamond-in-the-back Caddies from urban to middle America? The answer probably lies at the feet of chart-topping hip hop artists such as Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, Nelly and 50 Cent, who not only paved the road but also chauffeured the pimp culture across it. Hip hop is in its third generation of bridging the cultural and racial divide, and rappers have become its greatest ambassadors.

Rap's starring role

In the video for his jaunty steel-drum infused 2003 hit "P.I.M.P.," 50 Cent earns his rhinestone-encrusted cup and cane while two women are walked wearing leashes, a feat Snoop repeated for the MTV Video Music Awards that year. Also in 2003, St. Louis rapper Nelly released his album "Pimp Juice," which included a single by the same name. He also launched an energy drink called "Pimp Juice," which has become a big seller despite protests from some who thought the drink glorified the pimp lifestyle.

But even before all that, real pimp-turned-rapper-turned-actor Ice-T detailed the benefits of pimping in his 1987 song, "Somebody's Gotta Do It (Pimpin' Ain't Easy)." In 1999, Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin' " was a hit receiving heavy airplay. That same year, HBO debuted the documentary "Pimps Up, Ho's Down," an inside look at the pimp world that few everyday people had ever seen. The film included the infamous Player's Ball, during which the Pimp of the Year is selected.

"Music has always had a fascination with lifestyles that were considered glamorous or edgy or outside the mainstream," said Jeannine Amber, a senior writer for Essence magazine. "In the '70s and '80s, rock stars were all about debauchery. In the '90s, 2000s, pimps are representing excess and masculinity and the most glamorous lifestyle there is for men to aspire to. It's absurd and offensive, but that seems to be what we're holding up now." The Bishop, a so-called spiritual adviser to Snoop, has parlayed his connection to the rapper into videos, award show appearances and cameo roles in films such as "S.W.A.T.," "Old School" and "Starsky and Hutch."

In a 2004 Salon.com article, The Bishop described the new outlook on pimping this way: "It ain't like it was in the '70s and '80s, when people were like, 'ooh, pimping -- that's a bad thing.' Now everybody wanna be a pimp. ... They even put me in the L.A. Times! Watch the E! Channel and you'll see a 'Player's Ball' -- and

it's all white folks there! This is a new mackallennium, baby!"

### Subjugating women

That may be, but the old millennium roles apparently still apply. "When you look at the dynamics in the video interplay between the male and female, it's anything but benign," said Ms. Amber, pointing out that it's still all about powerful men and subjugated women. "There's no equality there," she said. "Young girls look at that and they think that's how they're going to get close to the center of power, to sexualize themselves."

Valerie Smith, a Toronto activist, agrees. "The fact is, a pimp is a universal symbol of human misery. To have someone like that elevated to superstar status is tragic," she said. Ms. Smith has filed two complaints over Canadian phone company Bell Mobility's offering last year of "pimptones," ring tones that referred to women as whores, skanks and other derogatory names.

Responding to public outcry, Bell Mobility decided to stop offering them. In the United States, one can still access ring tones featuring Money Mike, the pimp character from the film "Friday After Next," announcing, "You have a ho on line 1." Ms. Smith said she puts most of the blame on the ownership and senior managers of record and entertainment companies. "Snoop Dogg would just be a loser whining away in his garage if he hadn't been signed to major record companies," she said.

As with anything else that's become a pop culture phenomenon, Madison Avenue and Wall Street have not shied away from putting a little pimp dip in their walks. Snoop, a major influence in taking rap from gangsta to pimpin', has appeared in commercials for Chrysler with former Chairman Lee Iacocca. He's also served as a pitchman for T-Mobile and Sirius satellite radio, among others.

Galpin Motors Inc. of Van Nuys, Calif., the world's largest Ford dealership, will serve as the new headquarters for the third season of "Pimp My Ride," hosted by cornrowed rapper Xzibit. Volkswagen has gone after the MTV car pimps with its commercial parodies featuring a German-accented, hip-hop lingoed character who un-pimps brightly colored hooties by replacing them with VWs. In one spot, he throws his hands up to form a V and a W. "V-Dub in the house," he exclaims. "Representing Deutschland." But there is a danger when mainstream culture makes the mistake of believing the shady subculture of an ethnic group is all the culture there is.

A March article on Diversityinbusiness.com pointed out that the Art Directors Club of New York may have ventured into "murky waters" with a call for ads for its awards program. The winning ad featured an African-American man dressed to resemble Ronald McDonald and holding a chunk of gold. The headline read

"Pimp My Brand."

Loaded words

Surprisingly, or maybe not, the directors club received very few complaints when the ad was posted to its Web site. "The title and image are parodic, and the work as a whole meant as a satiric, inside-industry comment on the co-opting of 'urban' culture by mainstream culture," said Myrna Davis, executive director of the club in an e-mail response explaining the ad.

"The word 'pimp' -- as in MTV's popular show, 'Pimp My Ride' -- is intended to suggest that brands, like cars, that are subjected to extreme makeovers can become preposterous and silly," she said.

Ms. Davis went on to say that proceeds from the Art Directors Club Annual Awards support scholarships, city high school workshops, exhibitions, speaker events and other programs. That's not quite enough to appease Jerome Williams, a communications professor at the University of Texas. "It's kind of a loaded word and, a lot of times, it's associated with the African-American community," he said of the word "pimp." He said that, in taking some of the negative characteristics associated with the African-American community and glorifying them, that, in turn, becomes the culture for those who don't know any better.

"I'm not a big hip-hop fan," he said. "I don't have anything against it, but what I don't like is people who think that all African Americans are about is hip hop." But why isn't there more of an outcry over the stereotypical images of black men as pimps and black women as gyrating hussies?

"White folks aren't going to say you've got to stop this," said Ms. Amber, the senior writer at Essence magazine. "And black women, a lot of times there's this idea if we criticize our men, we're some kind of race traitor." In the 1990s, however, there was a seemingly lone voice crying in the wilderness against the misogyny of rap, especially gangsta rap, the precursor to pimp rap. It was the late C. Delores Tucker, a fierce civil rights activist and Pennsylvania's first black secretary of state. Mrs. Tucker deplored sexually explicit rap lyrics, which, she said, were demeaning to women.

"You can't listen to all that language and filth without it affecting you," she told The Washington Post. She picketed stores that sold rap and bought stock in record companies such as Sony and Time Warner so she could protest at shareholders meetings. The current pimpification of America may go the way of high-top fads and shell-toed adidas. "I don't know how long we're stuck with it," Ms. Amber said. "It's come to represent money, power, respect and sex. That's a pretty heady combination for young men. I mean what else is there?"

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