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Hip-hop pops a bubbly

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For his 28th-birthday soiree, Jason "Liva" Rodriguez wanted guests to leave with lasting memories of an upscale affair. So, of course, the champagne of choice had to be Cristal - 10 bottles of the bubbly at more than \$300 each.

"It draws attention because everyone knows how much it costs," Rodriguez said. "If it's Cristal, then you're really doing it big."

But now, Rodriguez, owner of Dat's What's Up urban wear store in Bear, Del., is siding with rap impresario Jay-Z and swearing off Cristal, saying, "If they don't want us drinking it, why should we spend our money buying it?"

This month, Jay-Z, chief executive officer of Def Jam Records and owner of the 40/40 clubs in Atlantic City, N.J., and Manhattan, New York, announced that he would no longer serve Cristal in his nightclubs because he believed remarks made by an executive of the champagne company were "racist." Cristal sells for \$400 to \$600 a bottle at nightclubs.

The flap over Cristal - once made exclusively for Russian czars in the late 1800s but anointed a hip-hop trendsetter in lyrics and music videos - could cost Cristal millions of dollars.

Hip-hop artists, flush with cash and a major influence over young consumers, have made the high-cost, once low-key Cristal a household name with a near-guaranteed spot in rap music videos, on concert stages, at nightclubs and almost anyplace hip-hop elite (and aspiring elite) gather.

The offending remarks appeared in a special summer issue of The Economist magazine. Frederic Rouzaud, president and chief executive officer of Cristal-maker Louis Roederer, said the company observed its association with rap with "curiosity and serenity." When asked if the hip-hop ties could hurt the brand, Rouzaud said: "That's a good question, but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it. I'm sure Dom Perignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business."

Not surprisingly, Rouzaud already has issued a clarification in a written statement: "I welcome this opportunity to set the record straight and express our gratitude that people from a diversity of cultures and countries have been enjoying our wine for so long and have allowed us to prosper since 1776."

Some cultural and marketing experts say the French company should be concerned because Jay-Z is part of the "new" hip-hop, a movement that is starting to flex its monetary and growing political muscle.

"Because Jay-Z is such a respected icon, it is certainly something that Cristal should not take lightly," said S. Craig Watkins, a media studies professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of "Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement."

"You're talking about a man who is head of one of the most prominent record labels in the world. The clout he has in hip-hop is immense, and it could bring a blow to Cristal as a product and as a brand that has appeal in those circles."

"Cristal, like other great fashion names," said Rouzard, "has earned greater renown by being adopted by some of today's most recognized artists, entrepreneurs and opinion leaders."

Ken Smikle, president of Target Market News, says the boycott is less about money and more about the dialogue that might be created to help ease the "love-hate relationship corporate America has with hip-hop."

"These episodes galvanize consumers and make companies aware of other people who are supporting them," Smikle said. "Any dialogue that results is a good thing."

Other companies in the past have experienced misunderstandings with hip-hop consumers. Tommy Hilfiger's company got into a jam in 1996 when rumors spread rapidly that Hilfiger didn't want black and Asian people wearing his clothing. Many urbanites began shunning the gear, and Hilfiger embarked on a rumor-control campaign.

In 1993, when Timberland boots were becoming the rage in hip-hop circles, a New York Times article indicated that the company wasn't enamored of urban America's latching onto it as a fashion brand. The company denied the allegation and pursued damage control.

As with many high-end names that hip-hop brings to a wider audience, notoriety first comes to the fore in lyrics touting Versace, Marc Jacobs and Bentleys.

Once-uncommon brands such as A Bathing Ape and Evisu clothing became popular after the names were heralded in numerous songs.

Jay-Z, like dozens of other artists, raps frequently about numerous luxury items, from Porsches (in "Dirt Off Your Shoulder") to Cristal (in 1996's "Can't Knock the Hustle"). He reportedly is planning to remove mentions of Cristal when performing.

"Rappers are trendsetters, and suburban America waits for Jay-Z and other rappers to say what's the latest," said Derek Frith, popularly known as Poochman on the 100.3 the Beat radio morning show, where callers overwhelmingly sided with Jay-Z.

Frith said Jay-Z responded quickly and as expected because he's the artist credited with bringing Cristal to hip-hop.

Some of these companies "don't respect the urban dollar, but the urban dollar has saved many companies," Frith said.

After Busta Rhymes' "Pass the Courvoisier" became a hit, sales of the cognac rose by an estimated 10 to 20 percent, said Lucian James, president of Agenda Inc., a San Francisco-based marketing company that each year lists the top brands based on hip-hop songs. In 2004, Cristal was No. 8 behind brands such as Nike, Mercedes and Rolls-Royce.

"The problem with Cristal is that it has, for years, allowed the brand to be used in hip-hop videos," James said. "But now they seem not to understand hip-hop and the money and influence behind it. Companies like Cadillac and Hennessy understand that they can be different things to different audiences."

Recently, another company, Lanham, Md.-based Maven Strategies, signed deals with

according to how often the songs are played on the radio. Petey Pablo's "Freek-a-Leek," which mentioned Seagram's gin, was one such song. Even 50 Cent reportedly is negotiating with Apple to attach his name to a line of low-cost computers.

Clearly, the experts say, hip-hop has become a force that cannot be ignored, whether in marketing, politics or policy-making. But in this case, some believe, Jay-Z could be wielding his influence for bigger causes, such as to denounce music videos that resemble soft-core porn.

"He's leveraging his influence when the stakes are fairly low," said Marc Lamont Hill, a professor of urban education at Temple University. "What he's doing now isn't going to stop the exploitation of hip-hop."
