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Digital Street Culture Decoded: Why criminalising drill music is street illiterate and counter-productive

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Abstract

Authorities in the UK censure 'drill rap', the artistic expression of disadvantaged urban youth, citing its connections to serious violence. This is shown to be based on a thin, 'street illiterate' understanding of the genre that ultimately rests on stereotypes of young black men as violent 'gang' members. In place of this misreading, a street literate' interpretation of drill is offered from a deep and nuanced analysis of YouTube videos and below the line discussions. It is demonstrated that it is inaccurate and unhelpful to view drill videos as evidence of violent crime or as attempts to glorify or precipitate it. Instead the stylised videos and violent lyricism are shown to be forms of artistic performance that reveal an ambiguous relationship to criminality. Marginalising the excluded further, video removals and restrictions on performance are shown to be counter-productive from a crime-reduction perspective. New developments in technology and culture can take shape around existing patterns of criminalisation.

Keywords:

Introduction

In January 2019, the drill rap duo AM and Skengdo were handed a suspended sentence of nine months for breaching the terms of an interim gang injunction (Keith 2019). Their crime consisted of performing a particular song at a London concert that the police felt could provoke violence. This level of censorship and punishment is uncomfortably jarring in a society that largely assumes freedom of speech and artistic expression. Drill rappers have been subject to injunctions, bans, supervision orders and the use of their lyrics as evidence against them in criminal trials. Exploring the censorious treatment of drill rap in the UK allows for a reconsideration of longstanding criminological themes (urban youth violence, street culture and the drug trade together with the policing of these phenomena) within the context of new technologies (the internet, social media, and cheap, widely available media production equipment and software). Taking a cultural criminological perspective, this paper develops the novel concept of 'street illiteracy' to explain how British authorities (police, courts and local authorities) misread drill and as a result act in a manner that is counter-productive to crime control. Against this, the paper decodes UK drill rap, providing a deep and nuanced understanding drawn from an immersive analysis of YouTube videos and online discussions. It locates the treatment of drill within wider patterns of criminalisation against the marginalised (in particular young, black people). Ultimately by demonstrating that the censuring of drill music ignores the ambiguity, braggadocio and fact-fiction-hybridity that are

characteristic of the genre, and neglects the caveat that web-material must be read critically, the paper shows how new technologies can become embroiled in pre-existing patterns of criminalisation.

UK drill is a genre of rap music that has proliferated in London since the mid-late 2010s. Unlike 'grime' the distinctly UK urban music genre (Ilan 2012; White 2016), it takes inspiration from the US, specifically the drill music of Chicago, a city associated with high rates of murder and gang activity (see Harkness 2013; Thapar 2017). Musically it shares much with the 'trap' rap of the southern states but is noted for a more stripped-down sound and for a possibly more 'direct' relationship to crime and violence. It has also emerged in the UK alongside rap sounds such as 'afro-swing' and some subcultural nous can be required to determine what subgenre particular tracks or artists belong to. UK drill as an underground form of music has relied on relatively new production and distribution technology to flourish away from mainstream label investment. Publicly available, YouTube is an ideal platform. The site features thousands of UK drill videos, some with multiple-million views. Whilst law enforcement agencies (and researchers) can easily access drill music and videos, this does not mean that they can necessarily accurately discern their meaning. Drill rappers would seem to overwhelmingly belong to a particular demographic: young, male, black and underprivileged, a demographic group with a long history of tense relationships with the agencies of criminal justice. It also seems to have moved beyond London to various other urban areas.

In October 2019 a minor London rapper Rico Racks was convicted of drug offences (Beaumont-Thomas 2019). In addition to his prison sentence he was issued a five-year criminal behaviour order prohibiting him from uttering particular slang words in his music: 'bando', 'trapping', 'connect' and 'whipping' – all potential references to selling drugs, and all very much part of the *lingua franca* of drill. Police forces, courts and municipal authorities in England have for some time targeted urban musicians and rappers with censorious measures – from requests to YouTube to remove videos, to banning live events and allegedly attempting to prevent record deals (see Ilan 2012; White 2016; 2017; Fatsis 2018; 2019; Waterson 2018). This has rested on an assumption that these (predominantly black) music genres 'glorify', procure, precipitate or otherwise commend violent and/or criminal behaviour. UK authorities have arguably followed US practices where online communication (including rap videos and lyrics) are mobilised as evidence of criminal/violent intent and/or behaviour (Kubrin and Nielsen 2014; Quinn 2014). Questions of racism have been raised around the ways in which 'joint enterprise' involvement in criminal activities have been evidenced in part through appearances in music videos (Williams and Clarke 2016). The UK courts have heard how lyrics have been part of a process of mutual 'taunting' that lead to lethal violence (Press Association 2017). In another case the courts heard that rap lyrics described in advance the way in which an accused individual would carry out a murder (Badshah 2018). On the one hand the plethora of online drill videos have become something of a law enforcement 'database' (Rawlinson 2018), a means of monitoring street cultural youth. On the other hand, the police have been active in the mass take-down of videos they believe are linked to violence (Watterson 2018). In June 2018, in addition to convictions for weapon possession offences, court orders were granted against (some) members of drill rap group 1011, compelling them to inform the police of any future intentions to make music (Cobain 2018). This was accompanied by requests to YouTube to remove their existing material, which was then frequently reposted by fans in various formats.

Taking place against a backdrop of increasing incidences of, and concerns about urban youth violence, critics have noted that music represents an easy target for those wishing to be seen to be doing something about crime but who are unwilling to discuss growing socio-economic inequalities and government 'austerity' policies that have drastically cut youth services (e.g.

Bassil 2018 and academically, Fatsis 2019). To complicate matters, some active drill artists have been convicted for violent offences that chime with their lyricism (Horton 2018; Fatsis 2019) and there have been some infamous fatalities within the drill community[1]. Other UK rappers have been jailed for drug offences that are described by authorities as 'county lines' operations (organising drug trading in rural and provincial towns through operations based in major urban centres) (see e.g. Morris 2019). That rap and drill rap have these connections to criminality, and contain all-pervasive lyrical references to crime and violence, perhaps go some way to explaining the reaction of authorities. Whether the actions described above are justified by these ostensible assumptions, whether they are conducive to controlling crime and whether artistic expression can reasonably be relied on as evidence in a criminal trial all merit examination.

Below, the most relevant literature on the relationship between digital media and street crime/violence is discussed. This is followed by a consideration of the methodological approach utilised to produce this paper's analysis. Themes from the analysis are then presented with explications of the following key concepts: normative economies of violence; taxonomies of authenticity; spatial practice and street potency; and ambiguity, where the blurring fact and fiction seems to have become such a defining feature of the late 2010s (Sismondo 2017). It will be argued that a proper understanding of the digital street necessitates moving beyond a 'street illiteracy' based on stereotypes, to recognise where seemingly violent language belies a deeply ambiguous relationship to violence and a desire to achieve status and recognition by lawful means.

Understanding Street Culture, Crime and Criminalisation in the Digital Era

Street culture refers to the ways of being, systems of meaning and modes of expression associated with the most disadvantaged sections of marginalised communities (see Ilan 2015). As a concept it explains how poverty and exclusion underpin street criminality, criminalisation and cultural forms such as rap music. Significantly more nuanced than 'gang discourse' it recognises the complex and contingent ways in which violence takes place amongst the most marginalised urban populations, as opposed to assuming behaviours and pathologies. The concept furthermore understands that negative perceptions of the marginalised and their cultural expression manifest in criminalisation that can attach to modes of being as much as to specific behaviours. Ironically, however, the marginalised inspire fascination as well as fear and thus street culture plays a key role in the contemporary culture industries (ibid.).

Producers, performers and promotors of predominantly black, inner-city music forms such as rap and grime have faced a legacy of criminalisation in the UK, and the treatment of drill is another iteration of this (White 2016; Fatsis 2018; 2019). This itself is arguably one component of the ways in which black people in Britain have faced over-policing and under-protection, a dynamic process of criminalisation lent force by the suspicion that exists between the police and black communities (Hall et al. 1978; Gilroy 1987; Whitfield 2004; Bowling, Parmar and Phillips 2012). There has been a noted tendency for authorities, in particular the police, to view young, black men via the damaging stereotype of the inherently criminal and violent 'gang' member (Williams 2015; Gunter 2017), best dealt with through muscular tactics such as stop and search (see Bowling and Philips 2007). It was famously concluded that the London Metropolitan Police was 'institutionally racist' (Macpherson 1999) hampering its capacity to police the black community in a just and balanced manner. There tends, moreover, to be social concerns around the behaviour of the young and

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[1] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-45039590 accessed 12/09/18

disadvantaged and alarm over new forms of social media/technology use (boyd 2014). Where the police, courts and local authorities began to encounter online material heavily couched in slang and seemingly referring to crime, a tendency to stereotype may have played a role in the interpretations that were reached.

There is not an abundance of academic literature to help the authorities with their interpretation. The proliferation of online street culture is a relatively new phenomenon and academic research on this topic is at an early stage. There is some evidence to suggest that online communication can lead to violence IRL (in real life). As with many spheres of social life (see Miller 2011), street culture has been deeply affected by the advent of digital media and social networks. Jeffrey Lane (2016) in his hybrid online/real world study of young people and street culture in Harlem shows how conversations, interactions and performances take place across both spaces. Questions of identity and reputation are now negotiated within a framework of omnipresent digital recording devices and all-saturating social hgmedia platforms. As Lane (2016) demonstrates, evidence of humiliation can now be readily posted online to serve as a challenge. Where Anderson's (1999) 'Code of the Street' suggests that violence can be a key response to challenge and humiliation, there is a clear possibility that online activity can precipitate real-world consequences. This situation is further complicated by the existence of online troves of street-cultural expression. Indeed, Urbanik and Heggarty (2018) have demonstrated the extent to which these forms of hybrid virtual-real world conflicts can be tied to participation in the rap music scene/industry in Toronto.

The possibility for digital communications to precipitate IRL violence is central to the conceptual analysis advanced by Desmond Upton Patton and others (2013) in their examination of 'internet banging[2]' in an urban US context. Celebrating and communicating gang identity, involving the provocation and denigration of rivals is seen to extend the logic of 'banging' to social media practices. This study was followed by more empirically grounded considerations of youth outreach workers' knowledge of the links between social-media use by gangs and incidents of violence (Patton et al. 2016) and a South-side Chicago gang member's Twitter communication (Patton et al. 2017a). Qualitative interviews with youth workers familiar with these issues add important context to these findings (Patton et al. 2017b) and highlight the importance of local knowledge and familiarity with people and places to interpret the threat levels in online communications.

Whilst insightful, this research considers the US gang model of relatively institutionalised and durable street-cultural institutions that tend not to exist in the same way in the UK (see Hallsworth 2013; Ilan 2015). Moreover, its nuanced findings recognise that participation in, and audiences for digital street-cultural expression exist outside of the gang itself. The ultimate analyses point to the importance of local knowledge, context and familiarity, factors often invisible to a remote viewer (the general YouTube audience). Further US gang research analysing YouTube rap videos reportedly posted by members, mentions the role of exaggeration, persona and myth-making but arguably does not deeply interrogate the questions of truth raised, nor the significance of criminalising dynamics (Lauger and Densley 2018). Van Hellemont (2012; see also Van Hellemont and Densley 2019) in her analysis of gangs in Brussels explores how her participants use online communication in a broader fashion to draw connections between their experiences, identities and spaces to famously street-culturally potent parts of the US. Ilan (2012) pointed out the extent to which legal authorities might have difficulties distinguishing between artistic expression and criminal activity in slang-heavy 'hood videos' posted online. It can be very difficult to determine the

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[2] Participating in 'gang' activity via the internet

difference between hyperbole, braggadocio and true threats for those who lack the requisite knowledge.

Recent UK research on social media and youth violence has been more circumspect on the 'gang' issue, instead focusing on the role played by respect in conflict and reflecting on the way in which digital audiences can ratchet up the perceived stakes:

> It is the combination of this enhanced audience dimension alongside the lingering nature of online content that seems to play a central role in understanding why online disrespect is so effectual in terms of provoking face-to-face violence (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkey 2017: 24).

This research demonstrates that whilst street conflicts have been animated by rumour, gossips, taunts and challenges for a significant section of history, digital communication can add intensity by creating a record and audience. Other UK research considers 'trap' music (Storrod and Densley 2017), but arguably does not sufficiently unpack the relationship between crime, criminalisation, urban music and street culture in its reluctance to dig beneath problematic 'gang' conceptualisations and schoolyard/social media rhetoric.

The question remains whether state reactions to online street-cultural communications relate to a reasonable interpretation of empirical realities or to wider patterns of marginalising and criminalising young black men. Where once the public seemed concerned that 'old media' forms (e.g. movies, videogames) could precipitate 'copy-cat' crime, in the absence of evidence to support this form of 'media-effects' (see Jewkes 2015), there would seem to be a different premise operating now. Drill is instead interpreted as a form of coded communication amongst those who commit violent crime or to those who might be encouraged to do so. Overly simplistic and unable to explain the observable reality in most cases, this interpretation is generally unhelpful and inaccurate. This paper develops the notion of 'street illiteracy' to explain how this interpretation comes about. Dwight Conquergood (2005) developed the notion of 'street literacy', showing how gangs could read meanings and signs within graffiti that others were unable to accurately decipher. Police officers, prosecutors and judges operate within the juridical field and official culture and are thus 'street illiterate': unable to properly interpret what is being communicated by street-cultural communications such as drill. In the UK as is later explained, this illiteracy is both produced by, and contributes to the ongoing dynamic of suspicion between marginalised (particularly black) populations and the agents of criminal justice. In this way it facilitates policies and practices that are counter-productive from a crime-control perspective.

This paper advances the literature in a number of directions. It explores the implications of drill music as a hybrid of fictional artistic expression, loose autobiography and calculated social-media-style performance. Beyond the very limited notion that drill videos on YouTube are mere provocations, it shows how they are linked to personal and local campaigns to accrue status in a variety of ways (see Yar 2012). Where literature has begun to explore the link between 'the gang' and rap music this paper takes a broader perspective, appreciating the complex ways in which the lyricism and aesthetics of the urban disadvantaged draw on images of crime and violence in different ways and to different ends (see Quinn 2005; Kubrin 2005). The YouTube analysis offered here is novel in that it examines the material as a fusion of media production and social media within the context of digital street culture. The old argument that rap music does not cause street violence but is co-symptomatic of the same socio-economic factors that produce it (see Kubrin 2005; Ilan 2012) would seem to require restatement in a fresh context. The analysis of drill videos offered below reveals a tapestry of street cultural concerns that illuminate the grim challenges of existing at Britain's socio-

economic margins. It reflects on how the aesthetic appeals of UK street culture are being harnessed by the disadvantaged in an attempt to thrive legitimately in the culture industries.

Methods

Cultural criminology is concerned with how the dynamics of meaning inform crime and its control (see Ferrell et al. 2015). Well suited to informing the approach taken in this paper, it is dedicated to exploring a hyper-mediated world in which 'the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street' (Hayward and Young 2004: 259). Having recognised this complex interplay between representation and reality, cultural criminology has been challenged to further explore contemporary digital culture and social media use (Yar 2017). Cultural criminology is methodologically omnivorous, comfortable with fusing different approaches to best suit the phenomena under study. It dovetails smoothly with the attentiveness to visual material that has increasingly become a feature of criminological thought (see Carrabine 2012; Brown and Carrabine 2017). This paper draws from an immersive analysis of YouTube content and 'below the line' (BTL) comments left by viewers. The approach delivers depth, nuance, subtlety and accuracy, taking advantage of the public nature of YouTube posts but understanding them in a street literate manner.

The internet is an increasingly important resource in criminological research (see Yar 2018). Modes of internet research, however, range from a more quantitatively driven content analysis (see Herring 2010), through more qualitative approaches to identified material (see Mann and Stewart 2000; Holt 2015), to more immersive and/or interactive ethnographic approaches (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010). This range speaks to the potential of internet material to be conceptualised either as data for analysis or as a space in which participants and social life might be observed and/or accessed. The methodology used to gather data for this paper involved on the one hand combining qualitative analysis of online texts (whether lyrical, visual or conversational) with an ethnographic-style immersion in UK rap media. Additionally, I analysed the 'conventional' and subcultural media: newspapers and broadcast news as well as UK rap discussion channels on YouTube to ensure that data was gathered on music scene understandings and wider social reactions to the drill phenomenon.

When using the internet as a vehicle for qualitative research, the usual issues of sampling, accuracy and ethics apply (Holt 2015). I became aware of UK drill music in early 2017 and was soon consuming large amounts of UK rap on YouTube daily. I systematised my practise by subscribing to the channels most associated with UK rap (Mixtape Madness, Pressplay Media, LinkUpTV, GRMDaily and SBTV) – using them and the YouTube algorithm to guide my consumption. I followed online scene gossip on various media and platforms online – predominantly radio shows and discussion videos. Over an approximate year and a half period I continued this process in earnest, effectively immersing myself in the drill scene as it appears online. The passive 'lurker' (see Kozinets 2010) or silent consumer of interactive fora, is a recognised internet persona, and one that maps closely onto the notion of the 'complete observer' in the ethnographic frame (see Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). Using the computer monitor as a 'two-way' mirror, I was able to observe the 'natural' behaviour of drillers (drill rappers) and their fans on YouTube (if internet behaviour can ever be described as 'natural'). The advantages of this approach are access and lack of participant reactivity. The disadvantage is that there are no opportunities to seek clarification or to speak to participants directly.

My YouTube history demonstrates that on workdays I tended to watch a minimum of five rap videos a day and have logged on some days in excess of 50 (the player continued in the background while I was otherwise working). In this way I engaged with many hundreds of

videos to varying extents. Purposive and opportunistic sampling was deployed to select videos to further analyse based on varying factors: whether its viewer count identified it as exceptionally popular, whether scene media had identified the song or artist as particularly noteworthy, when the artist had been publicly linked to criminal proceedings or whether particular themes or lyrics had caught my attention. Sampling decisions were thus inherently informed by the deep contextual knowledge of the scene that had emerged from my everyday immersal in it. Part of further exploration involved scrolling down through the 'top-rated' comments below the videos. The conversations that seemed particularly germane were 'screen-grabbed' and printed for later analysis. These records, together with lyrical and scene-commentator insight all formed the bulk of the data analysed. Video analysis was cumulative and holistic and did not rely on formulae or visual schemas on an individual level. When the public outrage around UK drill emerged in Spring 2018, I began to collect relevant references to the phenomenon from UK newspapers and websites. This further purposive and opportunistic sample also relied on the prompting of algorithms and aggregators.

The process of analysing the collected and highlighted material was guided by an attempt to provide an interpretation of drill and the wider UK rap scene that would be recognisable by those involved in it: an interpretation that is street literate as opposed to the street illiterate approach that seemed to be informing the response of the relevant authorities involved in interdicting the genre. An ethical protocol was adopted whereby individuals are only identified when song lyrics are directly quoted (as this is a condition of 'fair usage') or where they have gone 'on record' in journalistic material – otherwise no identifying information, whether stage names or internet handles are provided in order to protect those who posted material online (see Holt 2015). Immediately below a composite description of the drill genre is presented, followed by an analysis of the way in which it has been interpreted by relevant authorities such as the police. This is followed by a number of more 'street literate' interpretations that demonstrate how the genre might be differently and more accurately interpreted. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the genre's criminalisation.

Juug Life and the Contemporary Road Aesthetic

Drill videos tend to feature similar themes and aesthetics. Groups of young men with a range of face coverings cluster below towering council blocks. The tracksuits and streetwear are impeccable – Italian designer trainers, Trapstar sweatshirts, Canada Goose coats, Stone-Island and Northface alongside the more traditional Nike and Adidas. Balaclavas ('ballys') and masks with ghoulish illustrations conceal faces and judgements on ethnicity can only be made on the basis of thin strips of skin: 'no face, no case' many of the songs wrongly assure[3]. Swaying rhythmically, rappers languidly manoeuvre their hands as they proclaim: waving fingers, miming gunshots and knife stabs, signing letters, symbolising prayers for dead friends and crossing their wrists in tribute to jailed fellows. Their 'bros' engage in their own gestures. There are brandy and champagne bottles, and pots of specialist Californian cannabis. The lyrical themes are remarkably consistent (and similar to those first catalogued by Kubrin in 2005). 'Juuging and trapping' refers to hustling for income by selling drugs, theft or other primarily illicit enterprises (see Reid 2017). Drillers tend to profess an ambiguous commercial profile that blurs lines between criminal and legitimate business. As the rappers display 'bands' and 'racks' of sterling bank notes they can claim to earn 'both ways'. The videos inevitably feature stylised drone shots, where the camera sweeps up above the roofs revealing a bigger picture of the rappers' locality and locating their roots in

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[3] There has been a more recent trend for drill artists to appear without masks.

disadvantage. The artists often address pain, loss, difficult upbringings and shout out friends absent due to imprisonment and death.

Their professed love of (and even marriage to) 'Lizzie'/'Elizabeth' brings the Queen incongruously into the picture. It is her face adorning UK banknotes. These are claimed to fund a lavish lifestyle – some videos are set in penthouse-style apartments – whilst lyrical references to 'foreign cars' accompany sometime cameos by continental sports vehicles. Drillers often sport diamond encrusted jewellery. On the other hand, references are made to 'bandos' – abandoned dwellings converted to drug workshops/distribution/consumption centres where powder cocaine is 'whipped' into crack. The 'trap line' is the (old style) phone that receives drug orders. These are filled by 'youngers' – referred to in possessive terms by rappers who clearly position themselves as boss-type characters – directing the labour of their underlings and retaining the greater share of the profits. The drug sales may take place in 'cunch' (country) or 'OT' (out of town) – in reference to a practice officialdom has termed 'county lines'. In more reflective moments the rappers consider their lot working in poor conditions, in these unsanitary spaces. A propriety attitude is taken to women who are referred to sexualised terms, the 'bad bs' who are viewed as sexually desirable but not suitable to 'wife' (form a long-term relationship with). Scantily clad women are another visual motif – their identity is rarely concealed. Consumables, status and romantic conquests are posited as the rewards for 'taking risks' and succeeding against 'the feds' (police) and 'opps' (opposition/rivals).

The police frequently appear in videos, captured fleetingly on their forays into estates. They are represented as enemies who try to keep drillers down through interfering with their crime and music. The anti-gang unit Trident are sometimes singled out. 'Bussing cases' or avoiding successful prosecution is celebrated. Running from police does not seem to be considered taboo and meriting of violence in the same way that 'informing' or 'snitching' is. Running from 'opps', however, is viewed as 'wet' (lacking in street cultural potency). The drillers vie to be the individuals who make their rivals run ('do ten toes'), never running from challenge themselves. Instead they present themselves as ready to mete out violence in response to challenges and violations, indeed sometimes they even profess enthusiasm for the prospect. Lyrics list firearm categories and highlight the rich terminology for knife violence that has evolved in London street culture. To stab is to 'dip', 'splash', 'ching' or 'chef', references are made to creating pools (of blood – within which the 'opps' might swim) and to creating holes in clothing. Violence is expected in defence of neighbourhood and 'bros' – abandoning either is viewed as contemptible.

Where violent crime exists as a key point of media interest and political controversy, it is not difficult to understand why such videos concern the authorities. Such fears are, however, based on literal (but street illiterate) readings of what is being represented. Academic understandings of urban music have viewed its relationship to violence as complex rather than causal. Kubrin famously wrote of US gangsta rap in the 1990s, that 'lyrics are discursive actions or artefacts that help construct an interpretative environment where violence is appropriate and acceptable…' but '…music do[es] not cause violence' (2005: 366). The lyrics have performative and symbolic qualities, communicating the norms governing violence in the US ghetto. Lyrics represent what many young, disadvantaged urban men experience as struggles and aspirations in the 'trap' – the subterranean world of illegal economics and criminal careers that is often felt to be the only environment in which the most marginalised might thrive (Reid 2017). Contemporary UK drill music is being treated as if what it speaks about is literal truth, that it is as a hybrid of art form and criminal communication.

This is problematic for a number of reasons. Even identifying what is part of the drill genre as opposed to wider forms of UK rap is difficult and decisions around interdiction seem arbitrary and capricious when stabbing lyrics feature on a rap song, recorded by a prize-winning artist, that reached the top of the UK charts in October 2018[4]. Moreover, the authorities can have difficulties interpreting the plain meaning of slang terms commonly used in rap music, regularly deploying expert-witness 'translators' (see Bostock 2019, Telegraph Reporters 2019). Even where professional linguists are required to explain the plain meaning of language, it would then seem that there is not sufficient recognition that the entire context in which the slang is used also requires accurate interpretation. This necessitates a detailed and accurate knowledge of street culture and street expressivity more broadly. Whilst it might be assumed that the police would draw on intelligence and local knowledge in their interpretations, intense crime-fighting motivations and institutional racism might discourage more circumspect readings. Interpreting drill music as nothing more than incitement to violence or online 'gang' conflict street illiterately substitutes stereotypes for deeper understanding. It dismisses the ability of the (particularly black) urban disadvantaged to produce and participate in abstract artistic expression and cultural complexity. Indeed, the black arts have been plagued with the racist assumption that they cannot reach the same levels of sophistication as their white counterparts (see Gilroy 1988). Overall, criminalising drill music would appear to be rooted in existing patterns of stereotyping rather than in the more contextual and street literate kind of understanding presented below.

Economies of Violence and Taxonomies of Authenticity

Analysing drill music and audience discussions around it suggests that there is significantly more evidence of violent discourse than there is of violence itself. It would seem, moreover, that a significant proportion of violent commentary is not specific provocation but 'phatic' (Miller 2008): part of social exchange as opposed to evidence of real intention. Whilst it is a convention of drill music for rappers to speak in the first person, this should not necessarily be interpreted as confession. Violent and crimino-entreprenerial lyricism is a means of identifying with the code of the street, establishing an artist as an authentic voice of the ghetto, with all the cultural acumen and 'cool' that attaches to this (see Ilan 2015). Lyrics frequently boast that whilst other rappers lie about their criminal acumen, this rapper is 'real' – authentic. For one example (amongst many), Harlem Spartans on 'Money and Beef' (2017) rap: 'they talk on us, they don't ride on man, them boy some neeks' (they denigrate us, but they do not venture out to confront us, they are not street cultural). Proclaiming their love of money and 'beef' (conflict) and announcing that they can be found 'on the street' – Harlem are not necessarily seeking to procure violence, but instead cultivating an image of street authenticity. Below the line discussions abound with fans praising their favoured artist for their violent reputation and denigrating those judged to be 'lacking'. For example:

> '…are they legit tho, or is he gassin?' (are they telling the truth or is he being hyperbolic?)
> '[name] everything he says in this is facts'
> … (similar claims that the lyrics are true)
> '[opposing rapper]'s nan is a know (sic) crack addict in west London [emoticons]'
> '[opposing rapper] ran him down so expect hella verbal on snapchat shortly lool' (he was beaten up following a pursuit so expect this to be spoken about at length on snapchat, with the implication that there will be no reprisal)
> '[opposing rapper] never ran him down you neek, he don't have the heart'

Here rappers are rated by authenticity and their relative merits are discussed in terms of who is the most violent. A rapper is being doubly denigrated with implication that he cannot stop his female family members being insulted nor prevent himself being caught and beaten. The response is that these insults cannot be true, because a large amount of street cultural power (or 'heart') would be required to best this rapper. Cultivating a violent reputation (as opposed to necessarily committing many violent acts) raises rappers in an economy of street-cultural standing, affirming them as more authentic. To accept that these discussions are necessarily referring to actual instances of violence demands accepting the smear about the opposing rapper's grandmother as literally true, something anyone familiar with teenage banter would be very reluctant to do. A street literate reading of drill videos and lyrics understands that rhetoric is being deployed. Violence is being discussed in more abstract and/or conversational ways, not necessarily threatening, procuring or referring to specific acts of actual violence. This is not to deny that crime and violence takes place involving drillers as either victims or perpetrators – rather it emphasises not to view the violence as directly related to, caused by or evidenced by the music.

A lack of street literacy would also seem to be a feature of certain drill music fans according to discussions 'below the line'. Commentators trade putdowns that include 'wet'/'moist' (weak, lacking in daring), 'neek' (nerd and geek, lacking in street cultural acumen) and 'white' (suggesting privilege and thus an inappropriate interest in street life). Rumours circulate that a certain proportion of the views and online discussion around drill is attributable to young, privileged individuals who consume digital, street-cultural communication as a kind of grim, reality soap-opera. As Blitz raps in *Tomorrow* (2018): 'these little net nerds and just fantasising, commenting and gossiping on which gangs are riding'. There is potentially a precarious excitement to be found by the privileged in digitally communicating around real-world violence. For marginalised young men living in violent environments, structurally discouraged from emotional expressivity, rap genres such as drill however provide an opportunity to creatively negotiate their relationship to hardship, danger, trauma and blocked opportunities (see Reid 2017). It would be cruel irony if the artistic expression of marginalised young people is censured/censored, whilst violence is being glorified in part by an audience that is not affected by it. The street illiterate reading of drill nevertheless finds the artists guilty of glorifying and precipitating violence.

Spatial Practice and Street Potency

Spatial practices play a key role in rap music and street culture (Ilan 2015) where locality tends to be 'repped' (celebrated) and reified. The occurrence of this phenomenon in drill could be interpreted as linked to territorial violence. In one example, scene gossip channels and a variety of *in memoriam* videos mourned the death of a well-known driller, connecting his murder to his groups' posting of a provocation in one of their music videos weeks earlier. In the introduction to the video, the group filmed themselves in their rivals' estate: their 'opp block'. They proudly pose with watches (including some very expensive examples), 'trap phones' and smart phones showing the time to be in the early evening. They ask where their 'opps' are. This is a common tactic in street provocations, suggesting that their rivals lack the 'OJ' (or street-cultural potency) to adequately guard their territory. Successful territorial violations can serve to generate 'stripes' (the respect afforded on road - see Reid 2017).

The territorial idea of 'postcode wars' is a common trope used to understand youth violence in London and it seems to be informing the street illiterate interpretation of drill. There is, however, a fluidity to street territoriality that is not always recognised (Ilan 2015) and street

music has been noted to foster conviviality and exchange between those in different parts of the city (White 2016). Without downplaying the tragedy of even one fatality or serious injury, it is important to recognise the extent to which talk (and rap) around the merits and demerits of sub-localities should not necessarily be read as part of violent territorial disputes. The relationship between locality, violence, violent rhetoric and identity is instead significantly more complicated.

> 'west is the most moist bit out of London and that's facts, Ladbroke Grove buildings look like mansions, Ealing is nice, south hall, just Lowe it g (let it be), south beef is dying down massively, east is popping, north/northwest is mad aswell (sic), sorry bro, but majority of west don't look like a hood whether u like it or not still akh (brother – from Arabic), iv gone west multiple times still Lowe it, can't lie tho west been dropping a few bodies, but it isn't from these rappers on YouTube' (YouTube comment, screengrabbed 27/02/2018).

Here, a regular commentator on rap videos criticises an individual who claimed that West London is a street culturally significant space. They claim it is too wealthy to be, although it gets recognition for the increase in murders linked to it although not attributable to its rappers. A direct link is made between an area's violence and street significance. Another joins the conversation to counter this assertion (refuting the facts, not the logic):

> 'ur saying beef is active based on what the scenario looks like? You're a dumb patty [laugh emoji] 2 bodies been dropped a few months and about a (stabbing) every week. U lot on the net wouldn't know what really happens [laugh emoji]'.

Proclamations about the violence of a neighbourhood and its residents (usually represented as the associates of the rapper) should not be understood as purely celebratory or necessarily as threats. A street literate interpretation recognises that rather than glorifying or precipitating conflict, there is a double-edged, bitter-sweet elision of deprivation-linked-violence and urban cool. Within street culture, communicating toughness and violent reputation is as much about preventing actual violence through creating a deterrence effect (Anderson 1999). Similarly, within street epistemology toughness and streetness are qualities that allow individuals to make knowledge claims. The word of a 'neek' is not likely to be accepted over someone 'certi' (certified or reliable). Ultimately the internet is another space in which knowledge is highly contested and thus the ability to appear authentic (considered earlier) and to be appropriately rooted in street space become important credibility resources. Rather than necessarily calling for, or celebrating acts of violence in defence of territory, there is significantly more complex personal and artistic branding going on. Connecting drill music with 'gang violence' in the absence of excellent local context and knowledge as well as specific evidence is street illiterate and resonates with patterns of stereotyping and criminalisation that pre-date the internet.

Hybridity and Ambiguity

New media are 'hybrid', combining what might previously have been thought of as separate media e.g. both video and messaging (Miller 2011). It is perhaps an implicit understanding of this that has the British authorities reading specific threatening messages within drill lyrics and videos. Being a democratic and participatory scene, facilitated by technology, it is certainly possible for those who participate in the street criminal 'trap' to communicate through drill. On the other hand, there are far more suitable and specific technologies to communicate with – messenger services or social media for example. Hybridity, moreover, applies beyond format/medium to older divisions between fact and fiction. Contemporary

media arguably blur lines between entertainment and news as 'infotainment' (Thussu 2008) increasingly takes over from traditional didactic media. There are compelling reasons to critically read web content generally and drill music specifically.

Given the extent to which 'snitching' (speaking to the police or sharing guilty knowledge) is taboo within drill music and street culture more generally, ambiguity is a central feature in street communication. Plausible deniability and vagueness become in-built in a manner that facilitates speech about people, deeds and events without the potential to incriminate. References to 'certain things' rely on shared knowledge and understanding in a manner that is hoped to be exclusionary. 'If you know, you know' the contemporary rap cliché states, with the clear implication that communications are only intended to be interpretable to the street literate. Street talk is knowing and can be ironic. The use of slang, metaphor, humour, rhetoric and innuendo thickens the obscure. It is difficult to determine what is true. One drill group is lampooned in the comments below one of their videos for allegedly claiming credit for a murder that they did not commit. More commonly, the taboo against snitching has strength to the extent that even 'self-snitching' is viewed as a treacherous act, although it involves 'baiting' oneself (making one's own misdeeds identifiable) as opposed to providing information about another person.

The importance of maintaining deniability and online discretion is lyrically discussed by Tottenham drill rappers Headie One and RV in 'Know Better' (2018), where 'shush' sounds are used in place of potentially incriminating words. The rappers indicate their disdain for those who might create criminal personas for themselves through their social media accounts: 'Everybody do it for the net so much they forget to go do the job properly'. In this context, the notion that drill (and rap) lyrics should be treated as literal truth and not art is particularly problematic. Indeed, many drill videos feature disclaimers at the beginning with the familiar refrain that these are works of fiction and any similarity to any individual living or dead is coincidental, in the mistaken belief that the police and courts might credit the disclaimer.

Ultimately, online genres have been tied to the rise of contestable knowledge or 'fake news' (see Marchi 2012). Whilst voting citizens are advised to be sceptical of what they read online and on social networks, it is arguably jarring to view authorities accepting at face value forms of expression that are clearly stylised and often explicitly labelled as fictional. Drill lyrics can be referring to videogames (in the case of 'Fortnite' by young artist Boopz) or indeed the pains of working as a real-estate agent (Kway or Clinch, 'Renting' 2018). As Jeffries (2011) has pointed out in relation to US rap music, there is a great 'dissonance' in a genre that often deals with contradictory themes near simultaneously. Thus a song can be at the same time both serious and humorous. Artists in the UK rap scene (generally not strictly speaking drillers themselves but some who have worked closely with those who are) will condemn violence strongly in some lyrics, whilst they profess it in others. They can call for an end to beef in one song, whist 'cussing' and threating 'opps' in social media postings. Looking for and finding simple, clear truths in street-cultural speak or ideas is a mistake made by the state which too often views its perceived opponents in its own image (see Hallsworth 2013). As made clear above, drill videos are better understood as evidence of particular processes and performances than the kinds of unequivocal, verifiable claims that should form the basis of evidence in a criminal trial or to underpin censorious measures.

Positive Opportunities

As Joy White (2016) illustrates in the case of the earlier grime music, there are ample artistic and creative careers in producing, promoting and performing urban music. There are associated careers in everything from graphic design to film-making that take shape around

seemingly illicit scenes (see similarly to Snyder on graffiti, 2009). 'On Your Block' (2017) a short YouTube documentary by journalist Mr Montgomery highlights the commercial mindedness of drillers. Indeed, the documentary depicts drill rap as a popular, aspirational route away from the criminal milieu. Although possibly more of a rapper than a driller, Abracadbra in 'Hood Politics' (2018) raps:

> Everyday ching, splash, clap, bang (Everyday stabbings and shootings)
> I'm sick of this shit
> I don't understand man
> Everyday I rap about the chinging and the splashing (stabbings)
> Funnily enough it got me out the trap (a place of practicing street culture)

Not only does he register his discontent with street violence in London in strong terms, he makes it clear that it was his use of it as inspiration for his lyrics that allowed him to distance himself from the violent street world. There is a distinct irony that videos can be removed by authorities, in which rappers explicitly state that they are seeking to progress from the violence of the road into the media industry (see White, 2016).

Career prospects and improved socio-economic positioning are potential advantages available through the drill scene. Beyond this, however, scene insiders speak of the existential benefits (see similarly White 2016; Bramwell 2015): a space of belonging and a sense of voice. Carns Hill, one of the most important producers in the genre indeed speaks of involvement in the scene as a form of empowerment[5]. Drill can offer the opportunity for emotional reflection to those existing within a harsh, masculinist culture. The braggadocio of drill lyricism belies the extent to which there must be a sense of genuine accomplishment to produce music and visuals that can be viewed millions of times in some cases. Majid Yar (2012) has convincingly argued that posting about matters of crime on social media can generate media presence and celebrity/notoriety, elements desirable in contemporary culture. Drill can be read as a commodification of this kind of 'will to representation' where being understood as a tough, uncompromising criminal *type* can lead to success in the music business. As a means of generating status and income through performing strong street-cultural identity and engaging in street-appropriate practices, drill rapping is the epitome of 'street cool' (Ilan 2015). Real world violence is not necessary for this and indeed, can ultimately impede professional progress[6]. As the drill scene videographer Pacman states succinctly: 'When you're making music you can't be in two places at once – you can't be touring or in the studio and committing crime as well' (Virk 2018). A response to drill music that assumes it inherently precipitates crime is at odds with how many within the scene view it. It risks overlooking the opportunities that exist within the urban music economy and as is argued below, risks further damaging already frayed relations between marginalised young people of colour and the criminal justice system.

Backlash
The censuring and censoring of drill music videos has generated backlash, remained ineffective and ultimately provoked and further marginalised the excluded. As banned and taken-down videos reappear on YouTube, there are examples of 'the feds' (police) being prominently cursed in video taglines. The online platform and posters play 'cat and mouse' as videos go up and down, altered to defeat machine learning algorithms, and it has become

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[5] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_4G-9LdciA accessed 12/09/2018
[6] See the case of J Hus (Beaumont-Thomas, 2018)

common knowledge that banned videos can be accessed through a particular pornography gateway. Young, black, underprivileged men experience policing as unfair and oppressive (Sharp and Atherton 2007). Action against drill has become understood as an assault on their culture, underpinned by a sense that the authorities are so oppressive they cannot bear to see young, black men succeed by legitimate means. Drillers who state that they are responding to the violent milieu in which they live see the actions as silencing, and baulk at the notion that they should be forbidden from expressing themselves, and from undertaking successful commerce. The actions against drill ultimately contribute to the same marginalising forces that create the impetus for interpersonal violence: lack of recourse to an institution of security and arbitration viewed as legitimate (see Ilan 2015). When the London Metropolitan Police descended in force (including armed response and helicopter support) to question musicians filming a video in July 2018, not only did the filmmaker share his sense of degradation (Virk 2018), but the footage added considerable drama to the video that was ultimately produced. The filmmaker commented that the incident would have felt very differently had the police response been calm, respectful and proportionate (ibid.). It certainly would not have provided the same level of free content.

Conclusion
The use of videos and lyrics as evidence within the criminal justice system is a troubling practice that risks elevating internet boasts to the status of truth. It denies the marginalised the dignity of their own expressivity. As for censorship, in banning drill there is more to be lost in public relations than there is to be gained in disrupting criminality. It is important that authorities avoid the mistakes of the 'wet yutes' and 'keyboard gangsters' taking internet discussions of violence too seriously. Whilst the role of social media in catalysing some street conflicts and the involvement of some drill artists and rappers in some violent crimes no doubt raises the stakes and creates political pressure to 'do something', it should not be forgotten that it is possible to do more harm than good. Ultimately, interventions can be made from the position of deep knowledge and street literacy. The cultural criminological approach to immersive media analysis deployed in this paper has provided such a perspective.

Instead of street illiterately adopting a hostile stance to drill, the authorities could listen deeply to it (see Tharpar 2019). Should they do so, they would discover that the music sits within a wider ecology of music genres and online communication where there are varied attitudes to crime and violence – and where reflections on the pain of life and futility of criminality feature alongside the more numerous and obvious references to violence. By understanding that drill is primarily performance and that it is more likely a step away from violence than an attempt to precipitate it, the police may feel less pressure to disrupt it. A street literate policing could recognise how disproportionate criminalisation is a marginalising force and that the police have come to be despised within street culture. Instead of reinforcing the notion that the authorities are necessarily a source of interference and harm for young, black people in street culture, there is a possibility of beginning to disrupt this understanding. This would need to be part of a far reaching and radical resetting of historically antagonistic relations between the police and the UK's marginalised communities of colour. Ultimately, UK rap is increasingly communicating the message that there are opportunities for the marginalised in mainstream socio-economic life if they avoid the worst of the crime and violence that bisect with some involved in the scene. The authorities would be well advised not to dampen this message.

The drill phenomenon illustrates the extent to which too many marginalised young people feel that they can only attain a level of wealth and respect through the cultivation of criminal

personas, however accurate, historical or fictional. Although violence is a tragic aspect of life on road, it remains ultimately unhelpful to view drill as driving it. Certainly, the censoring of an artistic genre should not be substitute for searching debates about what is driving contemporary urban violence. The case of drill music demonstrates the extent to which historical patterns of racism and suspicion can be reproduced as new technologies emerge. Street illiteracy is tied up in this process, prompting the expressivity of the marginalised to be criminalised even if it might be understood in a far more nuanced manner.

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