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# **Copping the Blame: The Role of YouTube Videos in the Criminalisation of UK Drill**

## **Music**

*Tilman Schwarze*

*School of Social & Political Sciences*

*University of Glasgow*

*Lambros Fatsis*

*School of Humanities and Social Science*

*University of Brighton*

## **Abstract**

UK drill music frequently features as a prime suspect in newsrooms and courtrooms that charge it with driving the ‘knife crime epidemic’ in Britain’s major conurbations. Such prejudicial assumptions about the role of drill in inciting violence are largely unfounded, but nevertheless inform criminal justice policy that leads to unjust and discriminatory outcomes. While drill rappers consciously post violent content on YouTube to increase viewership and gain popularity, the role of YouTube in facilitating and profiting from this traffic in violent imagery is rarely questioned in criminal proceedings — enabling, as it does, the weaponisation of such videos as “bad character evidence” in court. Drawing on a selection of YouTube videos that represent drill rappers as dangerous “criminals”, this article argues that such videos function as a resource for the criminalisation of drill by police and prosecutors who present drill lyrics as personal testimony that is robbed of its fictive qualities, and makes rappers vulnerable to prejudicial ruling and discriminatory treatment within the criminal justice system.

## Keywords

Criminalisation of UK drill, online infamy, violent YouTube videos, rap lyrics as criminal evidence

## Introduction

UK drill music has gripped the popular and penal imagination as a veritable social problem that generates noisy headlines and attracts heavy-handed criminal justice system responses (Fatsis, 2019b; Ilan, 2020; Lynes *et al.* 2021). Described as ‘the knife crime rap’ (The Sunday Times Magazine, 2019), pursued as ‘the soundtrack to London’s murders’ (Knight, 2018) and charged with ‘spreading a message of hatred and violent revenge’ (Boyle, 2021), UK drill quickly became a byword for “criminality” – in ways that don’t just demonise drill rap(pers), but also capitalise on its ability to titillate audiences with lurid imagery of “criminal” lifestyles. Reflecting on the dual nature of this latest rap subgenre – as both a target of criminal justice policy and a source of voyeuristic pleasure – this article explores how YouTube playlists of drill-related content play on the music’s violent content to attract audiences, increase viewership and generate profits through the criminalisation of drillers’ creative output. Such hyperbolic clickbait, however, doesn’t just traffic in the ‘the many sensually explosive, diabolically creative, realities of crime’ (Katz, 1988: 314) for material gain. It also serves as a magnet for an ever-widening police dragnet by treating drill music videos as evidence of criminal wrongdoing in court proceedings (Quinn, 2018; Nielson and Dennis, 2019; Owusu-Bempah, 2020; 2022). We therefore argue that while the curation and consumption of drill-related YouTube playlists is excused as an innocent thrill-seeking pastime, the production of drill music is accused of glamourising crime and policed as such. Moral double-standards aside, the selective criminalisation of Black cultural expression serves as a reminder of stereotypical associations between “blackness” and “criminality” (Gilroy, 1987; Young, 2014; Lammy, 2017;

Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Williams and Clarke, 2018; Phillips *et al.*, 2020; Fatsis, 2021a; 2021b; Paul, 2021) – but also alerts us to how the police, prosecutors and judges translate drill music videos into incriminating evidence in ways that put an entire music genre on trial (Fischhoff, 1999; Fried, 1999; Dennis, 2007; Kubrin and Nielson, 2014; Dunbar and Kubrin, 2018; Lerner and Kubrin, 2021).

Trawling through YouTube channels that depict drill rappers as “dangerous criminals”, we demonstrate how such factually inaccurate and sensationalist representations contribute to a punitive public culture that targets Black music (sub)culture(s) (Fatsis, 2021b), ignores the artistic conventions of the genre (Kelley, 1994; Krims, 2000; Quinn, 2005; Stoia *et al.* 2018) and does violence to high standards of evidence (Ward and Fouladvand, 2021; Fatsis, 2021c). To do so, the remainder of this article will briefly introduce UK drill music and illustrate YouTube’s role as a major broadcaster of the genre – foregrounding the tension between drillers’ reliance on outlaw narratives to promote their music and the exploitation of such content by digital platforms and criminal justice professionals as sources of revenue and targets of racialised state-sanctioned violence.

### **UK Drill Music: A Brief Introduction**

UK drill music is the latest subgenre or stylistic branch in the rap family tree. It originated in Chicago in the mid-noughties, but travelled across the Atlantic and took root in the UK rap music scene soon after. Unlike other rap music, UK drill is moodier and darker in sound and more graphic in its violent imagery, posture, lyrical and sonic qualities. Its lyrics depict fictional larger-than-life personas who tell their story in the first person and pose as violent, not unlike similar thematic formulas found in gangsta rap (Kelley, 1994: 183-300; Quinn, 2005). As such, rap lyrics are often (mis)taken for real-life descriptions of crimes committed, rather than as first-person narratives that may be partly or purely performative, fictional, hyperbolic or

fabricated even, as is the case with many other music lyrics or literary works. Crucially, drill rappers consciously exploit stereotypes of violence, gangsterism and “ghetto life” as a sought-after commodity to be consumed online by followers whose clicks, views, likes and shares can and *do* yield material rewards (Stuart, 2020; Evans, 2020). Rather than offering a simple “authentic” voice rappers are attuned to the commercial relations of their work; deploying themes of violence and crime that they know to be very marketable (Quinn, 2005; Stuart, 2020). A central impetus and theme of the music is the desire to become a successful drill rapper to escape poverty and the violence in drill is part of the genre’s conventions and part of its commercial appeal too. UK drill enjoys a huge popular following among young listeners as evidenced by festival line-ups, club events, the proliferation of YouTube and Spotify playlists and chart-topping hits (Mohdin, 2021). As such, drill music should not and cannot be understood in ‘exclusively racial/ethnic terms’ (Gunter and Watt, 2009: 520) – especially in the context of contemporary urban multiculturalism. The (kin)aesthetic, linguistic and musical codes that define it, however, are nevertheless informed by and borrow from Black or Afro-diasporic culture(s)<sup>1</sup>. Were this is not so, drill music would sound radically different and would indeed be policed differently – if at all – if its aesthetics were the cultural product of ‘unpoliced populations’ (Fatsis and Lamb, 2022: 17) – namely, white, affluent people whose physical and cultural presence is simply not ‘the prototypical targe[t] of the panoply of police practices and the juridical

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<sup>1</sup>The terms “Black” or “Afro-diasporic culture” are used here to refer to cultural practices that are rooted in, evolve from and establish a dialogue with cultural traditions of the African diaspora. Although the term “Black” has come to include ‘African, African-Caribbean, Asian and other visible minority ethnic communities who are oppressed by racism’ (Maylor 2009: 373), it is used here to exclusively refer to ‘African Diasporic Blackness’ (Andrews, 2016: 2063-4). This is not meant to deny the term its coalitional meaning or potential in global anti-racist movements, but to apply it more narrowly to Afro-diasporic culture(s). Much of such usage draws inspiration from Stuart Hall’s (1993, 1975) extremely insightful thinking about the “Black” in Black or Afro-diasporic (popular) culture.

infrastructure built up around them' (Sexton, 2010: 48)<sup>2</sup>. Rather than a mere music genre that is currently in vogue, however, drill music should be understood as a cultural ecosystem, a resource for community-building among drillers and a space where the experience of social life in society's margins is articulated, negotiated and resisted through beats and rhymes (Rose, 1996; Perry, 2004; Fatsis, 2021: 452-6).

### **“Drillers”, “YouTubers” and “Coppers”**

In an era where digital platforms, social media and smartphone technology blur conventional distinctions between 'online' and 'offline' social life, the production, reproduction and policing of cultural activity becomes entangled in a complex web of considerations about what constitutes social reality and how it is mediated, interpreted and monitored; by whom and for what. Drill rappers (or “drillers”) upload their music to share it with a wide audience, YouTubers reorganise drillers' output into thematic compilations to promote the music and their channels, while police officers closely monitor such activity: as “evidence” of gang-affiliation and ‘bad character’ (CPS, 2021), as confessions to already committed offences and expressions of intent, or as motive for offences to be committed. In the context of such a new (social) media ecology, YouTube functions as a digital infrastructure for staging and consuming graphic tales of gang rivalry, shootings and violent personas, but it also becomes a site for gathering intelligence (Bloch-Wehba, 2021). The worlds of ‘digital economy’, ‘urban poverty’ and police surveillance, therefore, do not just ‘collide’, as Stuart (2020: 3) observes, but also merge seamlessly into each other. The same tool that allows drillers to create a scene, make a

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of how rappers “across [and beyond] lines of color” (Kelley, 2008: x) engage with the music, but do so in and through the sonic and poetic signature(s) of Afro-diasporic culture(s), see Perry (2004: 12, 13 and 25). For a critical argument of how Black music is policed against aesthetically, culturally and politically, see: Fatsis, 2021b.

name for themselves and potentially earn a living through music, also renders them vulnerable to misrepresentation by YouTubers – who seize on drill’s transgressive capital in search of profit through ad-generated revenue (Kim, 2012; Auletta, 2018) – and police officers who browse the web looking for ‘Internet-based “threats”’ (Nielsen and Dennis, 2019: 146). Such convergence of divergent interests by “drillers”, “YouTubers” and “coppers” in the same digital space, doesn’t just highlight the difficulty of disconnecting online life from its offline effects. It also demonstrates how digital platforms can be turned into policing and prosecutorial tools – in ways that complicate our understanding of rap music as inherently “criminal” (Fatsis, 2019a; 2019b; 2021b), YouTube broadcasting as “innocent” (Burgess and Green, 2018) and policing as “neutral” (Fatsis, 2021a; Fatsis and Lamb, 2021).

To illustrate that, we show how video-sharing platforms like YouTube indirectly contribute to a police-heavy public culture that stigmatises UK drill music artists and audiences as violent, criminal and gang-affiliate. This ‘culture of control’ (Garland, 2002) is fuelled by sensationalising and misinforming news media representations about the alleged relationship between drill music and knife crime in cities across the UK, that feed on ‘dangerous myths’ and ‘comfortable untruths’ about drill music, knife crime and the relationship between the two (Fatsis, 2019b; 2019c; 2021c). Building on such a critique of the unholy alliance between amateur broadcasters and law enforcement professionals that serves to target, monitor and suppress drill music, we argue that YouTube videos – which portray drill rappers as violent, gang-associated and deviant through a series of different tropes – consciously or unconsciously serve a punitive agenda that criminalises drill music through the reproduction and reinforcement of public imaginaries and stereotypes that make rappers vulnerable to criminal injustice and social marginalisation.

Our analysis focuses on a sample of YouTube channels which have – in recent years – become important platforms for shaping the public image of UK drill music. These channels are less

involved in uploading original music videos by drill artists, but rather broadcast their content through curating compilation videos *about* drill music. Like the curator of an art exhibition who chooses to organise the exhibition around specific themes, these YouTube channels pre-determine how drill music should be viewed by YouTube users who just have to sit back in front of their computers and click on the next suggested video on drill, like walking from one painting to the next in an art gallery. The compilation videos we analysed mobilise tropes which suggest that UK drill is a music genre closely intertwined with the violent lifestyle of street gangs that exacerbates violent crime on UK's streets. Through these tropes, these compilation videos don't just shape public opinions and perspectives of drill music. They also provide further justification for the discriminatory suppression of drill by the UK criminal justice system (Quinn, 2018; Fatsis, 2019b; 2021b; Ilan, 2020; Owusu-Bempah, 2020, 2022). Such punitive silencing of drill mainly plays out through relying on drill-related material as evidence of the defendants' involvement in violent crime. To introduce such "evidence" in court, prosecutors present such material in conjunction with witness statements that are produced by relevant "experts" (usually police officers, "gangs experts" and forensic linguists), who may also be instructed to give evidence in court. The arguments that such cases are usually based on involve a matter-of-factly presentation of drill-related material – without adequately interrogating the artistic, literary or fictional nature of the "evidence" that is brought before judges and jurors. As such, what is fictional or literary is (mis)judged as factual or literal by legal penal professionals and jurors who are rarely conversant with the music's genre norms (Fried, 1999; Dunbar and Kubrin, 2018; Stoia *et al.*, 2018; Nielson and Dennis, 2019).

As a result, drillers find themselves in a highly vulnerable position within the YouTube economy – as they do not have influence over the ways in which their lyrics and videos are used by others in YouTube compilation videos. Although drill artists are responsible for the lyrics of their music, which can undoubtedly be violent, they cannot control how other

YouTube users use their music videos to produce playlists that foreground criminality, violence, gang affiliation and delinquency when portraying drill music. The flow of such violent imagery, we suggest, serves three agendas. Firstly, YouTubers benefit from producing compilation videos which generate profits through paid advertising. Secondly, these videos give further authority and legitimacy to a public discourse and narrative that singles out drill music responsible for “the knife crime epidemic”<sup>3</sup> (Fatsis, 2019b; 2021c; Fatsis *et al.* 2021). And thirdly, such narratives serve law and order agendas that turn YouTube videos into testimonies of drill rappers’ involvement in “criminality” in court (Quinn, 2018; Fatsis, 2019b; 2021b; Ilan, 2020; Owusu-Bempah, 2020; 2022). Thus, drill rappers’ public image is not only determined by their own lyrical content, but also influenced by the processes and structures of the YouTube economy and criminal justice policy.

This is vividly illustrated by dominant representations of the drill music scene that portray drillers and fans as being ‘more interested in crime – and specifically murder – than music. On YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, fans have been known to post “scoreboards” awarding points to drill rappers for their alleged involvement in attacks on opps’ (Davies, 2021). Ironically, it is *this* interest in violent imagery that also fuels the production of evermore creative and hyperbolic YouTube compilation videos about the alleged violent nature of drill music to which we turn in the following section. This tension between the simultaneous rejection and exploitation of the music’s violent content monopolises our discussion in turn. After outlining the methodological foundations of our analysis, we delve deeper into the very violent motifs that are reproduced in YouTube compilation videos; laying the empirical ground for our critical reflections on the relationship between ‘images of deviance’ (Cohen, 1971),

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<sup>3</sup> For good, critical discussions of this popular(ised) – but often misleading and misguided term – see, Squires (2009), and Williams, E. and Squires (2021)

(social) media and criminal (in)justice systems that stigmatise, exclude, marginalise, criminalise, prosecute and confine Black Britons by policing their artistic output.

## **Methodology**

In his recent work on UK drill music and ‘digital street culture’, Jonathan Ilan (2020) builds on Conquergood’s (2005) concept of ‘street literacy’ – renaming it ‘street illiteracy’ – to explain ‘how British authorities (police, courts and local authorities) misread drill and as a result act in a manner that is counterproductive to crime control’ (Ilan, 2020: 994). Ilan conducted an extensive analysis of YouTube music videos uploaded by drillers, to show how their music is perceived and pursued as incitement to violence. Like Ilan, we also took a close look at how YouTube videos reproduce the criminalisation of the music, but ‘follow[ed] the [YouTube] algorithm’ (Airoldi, Beraldo and Gandini, 2016) to guide our consumption of drill music.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Ilan, however, we focused less on channels that host videos by drillers themselves – turning our attention instead to channels that compile existing drill music videos into thematic compilations, namely: Cheetah, DrillDon, Drillas, UK Drill Mile, Ydottyz Drill News, UK Drill Tv, BEEPEE UK and YGM. Combined, these channels have over 187,000 subscribers and over 41 million views on YouTube (22 June 2021) which make them important (re)sources for shaping public representations and imaginaries of drill music and artists in the UK. We systematically analysed their video content, particularly focusing on how those channels depict the drill music scene. We identified themes in how drill music is represented by, firstly, looking at the titles of the compilation videos. Video titles already told us a lot about

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<sup>4</sup> By “YouTube algorithm” we refer to what Airoldi, Beraldo and Gandini (2016, p. 2) describe as: ‘an automatic system that recommends “related” videos of potential interest, based on site activity [...] – that is, in principle, an attempt at guessing users’ music tastes. Concretely, a list of related videos is shown to the side of any visualised content, and this strongly influences users’ consumption pathways on the platform’.

the focus of the video and how drill music is represented. For example, references to “gangs”, “crime”, or “violence” in the title provided a first opportunity to categorise videos into different themes. In addition to focusing on the titles of the YouTube video compilations, we also analysed thumbnails, headings and images used in the videos to decipher how specific images and imaginaries about UK drill music are produced not only through lyrical content, but through visual choices too. This involves using graphic images of alleged crime scenes, as well as images of masked-up drill artists to (re)produce imaginaries of UK drill music and artists as intrinsically violent and “criminal”. Through our analysis of lyrical and visual elements, we were able to reconstruct three main themes in how drill music is represented across the YouTube channels analysed, and which will be discussed below in more details: 1) drill music and gangs; 2) drill music and violence; and 3) drill music as a “true-crime” subculture.

Central to our approach has been an emphasis on linking the representation of drill music in YouTube videos to the consequences of such representations for drill artists as targets of the criminal justice system. Following Cultural Criminology’s invitation to ‘intellectually reorient’ and ‘radically repoliticize’ the study of crime and media (Ferrell *et al.*, 2008: 129), we see social media as essential in shaping public imaginaries and discourses about drill music and artists, as well as influencing the political agenda of the UK criminal justice system which relies on YouTube videos and other social media content as evidence in court proceedings; a phenomenon that Kubrin and Nielson (2014), Nielson and Dennis (2019) and Lerner and Kubrin (2021) have dubbed: ‘rap on trial’<sup>5</sup>. In surveying such material, therefore, we remained

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<sup>5</sup> This practice has alarmed UK-based rap scholars across various academic disciplines and professions – including one of the authors of this article – who have formed the Prosecuting Rap Expert Network to share good practice as expert witnesses for the defence in criminal trials that rely on rap lyrics to bring charges against defendants. Such concerns about the admissibility of drill lyrics as evidence, however, are not limited to academic research, scholarship

conscious of the political agendas and criminal justice practices that shape how social media content becomes surveilled to control young Black people and their forms of creative expression.

### **Staging the Crime Scene Online: Drill, “Gangs”, Violence and “Criminality” on YouTube**

Having thoroughly searched a selection of drill-related playlists in eight different YouTube channels, three dominant and recurring themes, motifs, and tropes toward drill music leapt out of the screen; all of which depict the music as associated with gang membership, violence and “criminality”. Each of these highly stereotypical and deeply problematic portrayals of drill will be discussed in turn, pointing at how such imagery leaves little room for approaching, understanding, listening to or even appreciating drill music outside the language, allure and menacing undertones of irresponsible “crime talk”.

#### *Drill Music and Gangs*

One of the most frequent tropes that saturates YouTube compilation videos on drill music facetiously likens drill artists to gang members, suggesting a close link between drill music and gang membership, despite the dearth of evidence to suggest any such link (Fatsis, 2019b: 1303-5) — if high standards of evidence are to be respected and upheld. Examples of video titles such as: ‘UK DRILL: GANGS THAT SPLIT’<sup>6</sup>, ‘UK DRILL: MOST HATED GANG’<sup>7</sup>, or ‘UK DRILL: THE MOST DANGEROUS GANG IN LONDON’<sup>8</sup> clearly illustrate that

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or advocacy work. They are also shared by leading legal professionals; including the Garden Court Chambers (2020) and a recent report by the law reform and human rights organisation JUSTICE (Paul, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s16ixgQoH\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s16ixgQoH_w) (last accessed 17 July 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zexq7yWtUfE> (last accessed 17 July 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbR5BnRIO9o> (last accessed 17 July 2021).

point. As does a video entitled: ‘UK DRILL: GANGS THAT ALMOST BEEFED’<sup>9</sup>, where viewers learn about how different gangs in the UK – and London especially – have been involved in violent altercations with each other. Superficial information about the circumstances and origins of their conflict are blended in and out of the video, against a background of short clips from music videos produced by alleged members of those gangs the video talks about. Occasionally, screenshots of news headlines on violent incidents and CCTV footage are also included in the video – in a desperate attempt to validate the claims the video makes about the relationship between street gangs, violence and drill music. Through its combination of clips from music videos by drill artists and references to violent gang conflicts, the video unmistakably implies that UK drill music cannot be understood *outside of or away from* references to “gangs” and that drill artists need to be considered as gang members *because* they are involved in this specific music genre. Furthermore, the fact that each video title starts with the words “UK DRILL” reinforces the narrative that drill music and street gangs are necessarily and inevitably correlated, if not fatally linked to each other.

These videos contribute to and reproduce popular representations of drill music in mainstream news media *and* criminal justice rhetoric (Fatsis, 2019b: 1301, 1304) as intrinsically associated with street gangs. Such representations give credence to prejudicial and baseless claims that treat ‘musical commodity and street life’ as ‘intertwined and indistinguishable’ (Ferrell *et al.*, 2008: 140). Connecting drill music with “gang violence”, however is ‘street illiterate and resonates with patterns of stereotyping and criminalization’; especially ‘in the absence of excellent local context and knowledge, as well as specific evidence’ (Ilan, 2020: 1005). Worse still, using the label “gang” all too loosely to describe – or rather, condemn – drillers ‘leads to further stigmatisation of already disenfranchised young people and communities’ (Irwin-

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<sup>9</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dqu5Ay-FJDw> (last accessed 17 July 2021).

Rogers and Pinkney, 2017: 12-13)<sup>10</sup>. YouTube video compilations which equate drill music with gangs, therefore, erase complex and complicated socio-economic factors behind violence (Lee, 2016) in favour of over-individualistic, ‘hyperbehavioralistic’ (Rose, 2008: 7), simplistic, oversimplified and misleading arguments about drill music’s involvement and responsibility in “causing” (youth) “crime” and “gang violence” that spills over into the streets of Britain’s major conurbations.

### *Drill Music and Violence*

Following the vicarious thrill that the word “gang” evokes, depictions of “violence” follow suit – in a bid to convince viewers about the (evil) nature, (sinister) motives and (bad) character that ostensibly pervade drill music, those who make it and those who listen to it (can this be extended – we wonder – to those, like us, who research it?). Various YouTube compilations devote their attention to drill artists who are seemingly involved in stabbings and shootings. Video titles such as ‘UK DRILL: VIDEOS THAT SHOWED GUNS’<sup>11</sup>, ‘UK DRILL: MOST BRUTAL DEATHS’<sup>12</sup>, or ‘UK Drill: Why Civilians Get Killed’<sup>13</sup> create the impression that all that drill music does, is trade in violence. Although drill lyrics themselves are frequently (and deliberately) violent – as the artistic conventions of the genre dictate – YouTube playlists makes violence intrinsic to drillers’ lifestyles, personalities and biographies. Through such videos, ‘[c]rime and transgression are [...] packaged and promoted as fashionable cultural symbols, with transgression thus emerging as a desirable consumer decision’ (Ferrell *et al.*,

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<sup>10</sup> For additional critiques of irresponsible and dangerous “gang talk”, see: Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Smithson *et al.*, 2013; Fraser and Atkinson, 2014 and Gunter, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKASLrvBaC4> (last accessed 12 July 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEI6sp5zVaU> (last accessed 12 July 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a75shgqudN4> (last accessed 12 July 2021).

2008: 140). Through this framing, it is not just the violent content of drill lyrics that becomes the focus of attention. Rather, it is the artists themselves who are portrayed as violent predators engaged in brutal murders, who kill innocent bystanders with knives and guns. Hyperbole is a common feature in these videos promising viewers that information about the ‘top killers in each gang’<sup>14</sup> is just a few clicks away. Writing on news media discourse, Bednarek (2006: 17) has called such exaggerations ‘superlatives’ that encourage portrayals that conform to the following pattern: ‘the bigger, the faster, the more destructive, the more violent, the more *x* the better’. Not unlike these YouTube playlists, newspaper headlines also traffic in such arresting imagery; littered in metaphors of ‘gang-infested’, ‘blood-drenched streets’ to discuss violence in marginalised urban communities (Schwarze, 2021).

To communicate the message that UK drill music is intrinsically violent and that drill artists are also violent and “criminal”, the YouTube channels whose content we analysed also use design elements for their videos to further boost the violent imagery in the content that YouTubers curate. Video thumbnails for example, aim to sensationalise through: letters that are displayed in bold type, provocative captions, colour choices, pictures of masked-up of hooded “youths” and blurry screenshots from CCTV footage showing alleged crimes (see figures 1 and 2). Such staging of violent content is accentuated further by images of drill collectives whose faces are hidden as they throw hand signs that could resemble gang signs or hand gestures that resemble guns or knives. Such signs of violent behaviour are also accompanied by concise and catchy phrases, such as ‘killed the same day’ in addition to other graphic depictions of violence through grainy CCTV footage and headshots of alleged shooting victims; all of which reinforce the image of UK drill as a mercilessly violent and violence-promoting music genre.

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<sup>14</sup> Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0F7gIQJ17YA> (last accessed 09 July 2021).

Such visual representations unmistakably communicate an image of drill music as “violent” and “gang-affiliated” regardless of the lyrical content of the music and paying scarce attention to whether consumers of this music genre are able to *contextually* understand the lyrical references and jargon used by drill artists when rapping about everyday life in highly deprived, marginalised, and racialised communities across the UK. For the creators of these compilation videos, such graphic images alone already serve their purpose of sensationalising, thereby misrepresenting, drill music as prone to and advancing a violent lifestyle where stabbings, gang fights, and criminal activities are portrayed as “normal” activities for drill artists and where rapping about these activities in music videos is considered to be the sole purpose of drill music. Other aspects of life, such as police harassment, the experience of racial oppression and the lack of employment, get lost in these visual representations, thereby providing a biased account of what drill music means to artists and how it evolved as a cultural expression and resistance strategy by people who have suffered the most under a penalising regime of racial capitalism and state strategies of social control and punishment.

#### *Drill Music as a “True-Crime” Subculture*

The third and final trope we identified in our analysis of YouTube playlists that generate drill-related content, amp the suspense by connecting drill lyrics to real-life events – implying that drill exists as a genre to record wrongdoing in rap verse; as evidence of autobiographical “life writing”. YouTube channel *Cheetah*, for example, features a video series entitled: ‘UK DRILL: LYRICS THAT REALLY HAPPENED’. In volume 6 of this series,<sup>15</sup> drill lyrics that mention stabbings and other violent incidents are highlighted; to show that drill music is not just a cultural expression of fictive events, but an actual reflection of drillers’ “criminal” life

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<sup>15</sup> Available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQF\\_Dwyt9ok&ab\\_channel=Cheetah](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQF_Dwyt9ok&ab_channel=Cheetah) (last accessed 19 July 2021).

(hi)stories. In the video, viewers “learn” about several stabbings referenced in drill lyrics by different artists, including further “evidence” of these events by displaying news headlines and footage that depicts the victims and police officers at the crime scene. The video explicitly seeks to “prove” that drill artists are not only aware of the violence that takes place in their urban communities, expressed through the lyrical content of their music. They also participate in “crime”; and not just *any* “crime” but “true crime”.

Such YouTube playlists don’t just blur the lines between broadcasting images of violent crime and recording facts. They capitalise on selectively choosing drill lyrics that reference real-life events for dramatic effect. In so doing, they misrepresent an entire music genre by stripping it of its artistic nature to simply create the impression that drill music isn’t in fact *music*, but a front for criminal activities. In so doing, such YouTube playlists inadvertently invite and legitimise political agendas of law and order and social control that are justified as valiant attempts to curb violent crime. Drillers, YouTubers and coppers, therefore, become participants ‘in a now decades-old dance between rap artists, record companies, local prosecutors, and moral entrepreneurs, all of whom find both problem and potential in the intermingling of ‘gangsta rap’, gangs, and criminal history. For the record companies and the rappers, a carefully crafted outlaw image, even a criminal record, moves product; for local prosecutors and religious conservatives, high-profile public campaigns against such images move product as well, if of a somewhat different sort’ (Ferrell *et al.*, 2008: 135).

The following and last section of this article, steps into this “decades-old dance” – that simultaneously commodifies and criminalises rap lore – discussing how the proliferation of such “gang-affiliated”, “criminal” and violent imagery prepares the ground for punitive criminal justice responses that puts rap(pers) behind bars. Reflecting on how the recycling of drill music by YouTube channels serves as a virtual police line-up that identifies and casts drill rappers (out) as suspects, we analyse YouTube’s role as a channel for the policing against rap;

in ways that set a dangerous precedent for the targeting, monitoring and manipulation of artistic expression as evidence of criminal wrongdoing.

### **Broadcast Yourself, Criminalise Others: YouTube as a Platform for Digital Policing**

YouTube is typically associated with the slogan that launched this video-sharing platform – namely, “broadcast yourself”. However, thinking of YouTube as a neutral dissemination engine where we post, upload, circulate and consume videos in ways that aren’t dictated by the algorithmic architecture of the platform would be out of touch with how digital platforms operate and ignorant of the politics that inform how they operate (Srnicsek, 2017; Lanier, 2018; Burgess and Green, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). While it is tempting to think of digital platforms like YouTube as idle tools that we can pick up and put down at will, doing so obscures their function as powerful systems that we operate within – in ways that exercise considerable influence over us, if not altogether dictate what we do and how we do it (Carrigan and Fatsis, 2021: 43-54). Apart from the obvious ways in which digital platforms vie for attention – by collecting data on our online behaviour to keep us hooked on content that appeals to us – using such platforms, cannot be likened to a full exercise of agency; independently of the restrictive design of such platforms. This is not to say that it is impossible to disconnect or disengage, but to stress that the addictive nature of this online ecosystem makes it difficult to step out of platforms that are predicated on an attention-grabbing economy that is designed to keep users to stand on them for longer (Marwick, 2013; Tufekci, 2013); rewarding us with enticing content for our newly acquired scrolling, clicking, liking, and sharing habits. In fact, digital platforms and the technology firms that operate them are built on a technological formula and a business model that approaches their users as ‘manipulable actors’ (Carrigan and Fatsis, 2021, p. 61); operating under pressure to demonstrate growing engagement, in the

absence of which significant penalties accrue – if investors lose confidence in a platform’s ability to attract, mine and sell attention (Lanier, 2018).

In such a sociotechnical context, the freedom to “broadcast yourself” or create YouTube playlists is not just bought and sold. It is also subjected to patterns of online surveillance by the state’s law enforcement institutions; turning acts of cultural production into targets of state regulation and social control. Unsurprisingly, the policing of such online activity is selective as it is discriminatory – creating a moral asymmetry of blame where only *some* activities are criminalised, while others are pardoned; in ways that mirror, ‘reproduc[e] and reforc[e] ... unequal power relations’ (Monahan, 2010: 114) and make online-offline distinctions difficult to maintain. The criminalisation of UK drill music and the role of YouTube in facilitating it, uniquely illustrates the dangerous liaisons between digital platforms and law enforcement institutions. YouTube’s algorithmic and political architecture as a site of and a tool for (re)producing criminal injustice, directly ‘facilitate[s] [...] law enforcement priorities’, by ‘offering itself as a vital partner to police’ (Bloch-Wehba, 2021: 110,111) – in response to requests to remove drill music videos (Dearden, 2018). But it also indirectly contributes to the policing against drill, by allowing the policing of such content; although similar demands have been resisted with impunity on other occasions (Bloch-Wehba, 2021: esp. 110-1). Rather than providing a neutral terrain where cultural performance roams freely, YouTube provides a fertile ground for punitive criminal justice intervention(s) that target drill rappers, but not YouTubers who curate drill music playlists or YouTube itself as promoters of “criminality” or purveyors of violence.

Such asymmetry of blame naturally creates disparities in law enforcement that are not only normalised or legitimised but legalised too – when digital platforms become technologies of policing and criminal justice reveals itself as a system of racial(ised) discrimination (Williams, 2014; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Williams and Clarke, 2018; Fatsis, 2021a; Fatsis and Lamb, 2021,

esp. 23-34 and 79-112). While it is true that drillers stage and broadcast tales of gang rivalry and shootings by posing as violent personas that are “authentically” dangerous and threatening, what is ignored is that such first-person story-telling is a performance that is consistent with the artistic motifs of drill music and other forms of Black cultural expression (Kelley, 1994; Krims, 2000; Quinn, 2005; Stoia *et al.* 2018). Indeed, much of the appeal that drill music enjoys comes from the allure of such graphic content and drill aficionados – unlike criminal justice professionals – can and do distinguish between artistic performance and factual reality; as do viewers who binge-watch the latest “true crime” series *as entertainment*, rather than as incitement to or glamourisation of violence. However, as Nielson and Dennis (2019: 114) pithily put it, rap is ‘the only form of artistic expression to be mischaracterized as pure autobiography [or] real world documentary’ and uniquely policed as ‘as aesthetically “out of tune”, culturally “out of place” and politically “out of order”’ (Fatsis, 2021b: 38). Instead of interrogating what makes violence culturally admissible in some contexts but not others, or indeed critically reflecting on why we endow some audiences with the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction but not others, an important and painful realisation is eluded. Drillers consciously exploit the seductive properties of violence and the attention-getting and self-branding opportunities that digital platforms offer, by branding themselves as “real”, violent gun-toting and knife-wielding gangsters – in search for infamy and material reward (Stuart, 2020: 80-1). Alas, seeking celebrity comes at the expense of cynically exploiting their own stigmatisation as “deviant thugs”, or at the risk of exposing themselves to negative police attention. As drillers consciously capitalise on a media ecology and cultural stereotypes that rewards the commodification of their experience of social marginalisation, it is *they* who are accused of celebrating or promoting violence without similar claims made against curators of YouTube drill playlists or YouTube itself. This asymmetry of blame exposes the discriminating selectivity with which drill music is portrayed as trading in violence, while the secondary

broadcasters (YouTubers) and hosts (YouTube) of such violence are exempt from condemnation – although they aim at making a profit from such violence. Such misplaced blame, however, also provides a window into the role of YouTube videos as an intelligence-gathering database that is relied on by the police, prosecutors and judges to bring charges against amateur and professional drill rappers.

Suspected as drillers by police officers who search for inflammatory YouTube videos to remove, they are also monitored, tracked, profiled, arrested and prosecuted for producing and disseminating music videos which are used as “evidence” of criminal wrongdoing in court: without due regard for the fictive, literary or performative nature and conventions of rap music; without concern with the prejudicial impact of such “testimony” on the jury; and certainly without respect for evaluating the evidential weight or inadmissibility of such material even when the law would compel them to. Legally speaking, the use of rap lyrics as evidence can be challenged on legal grounds, contending that this may have an adverse effect on the fairness of the proceedings (citing Section 78, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984), due to the insubstantial probative value of rap lyrics (citing Section 101, Criminal Justice Act 2003) and concerns about freedom of expression of rappers (citing Article 10 of the Human Rights Act). Yet drill music videos feature with alarming regularity across Britain’s Crown Courts as evidence of: the defendants’ “bad character”<sup>16</sup>, involvement in “joint enterprise”<sup>17</sup>, “serious

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<sup>16</sup> Section 98 of the Criminal Justice Act, 2003 defines bad character evidence as: ‘evidence of, or of a disposition towards, misconduct’ rather than evidence which ‘has to do with the alleged facts of the offence with which the defendant is charged’.

<sup>17</sup> “Joint enterprise” refers to a legal doctrine that allows the court to show a link or association between defendants. Given the broad scope of such legislation, it is possible to convict individuals of crimes *without* committing the criminal act they are charged with, or even being at the scene of the crime. For a good critical discussion of joint enterprise law, see: Williams and Clarke, 2016; Clarke and Williams, 2020; Hulley and Young, 2021)

(youth) violence”<sup>18</sup> and gang membership, or as confessions to an offence and expressions of intent to commit an offence. The fact that drill rappers intentionally play (up) to images of “criminality”, “gangsterism” and violence for dramatic effect; to make money; provide entertainment; and deliberately shock mainstream society with images of ‘racial and class oppression’ (Stuart, 2020: 205), is routinely treated as irrelevant in court proceedings – despite the protestations of law reform and human rights organisations (Paul, 2021), leading legal professionals (Garden Court), defence counsels, the expert witnesses they instruct, or social scientists, rap experts and legal scholars who insist that rap should be used with extreme caution in the courtroom, if at all (Fried, 1999; Dennis, 2007; Kubrin and Nielson, 2014; Nielson and Dennis, 2019; Fatsis, 2019b; Lutes, *et al.*, 2019; Ilan, 2020; Owusu-Bempah, 2020; Lerner and Kubrin, 2021). This is a concern that has also been voiced by an open letter endorsed by sixty-five signatories from human rights organisations, as well as musicians, lawyers and academics who argue that ‘all artists should be afforded the same rights to freedom of speech and creative expression’ (*The Guardian*, 2019).

In such a public and political atmosphere that is charged with extremely negative perceptions of drill music as a (faux) enemy, whose emergence is blamed for turning city streets into cesspools of violence, it is important to pause and reconsider the logic and ideologies that inform such perceptions and the criminal justice responses that follow. The role of YouTube video playlists is crucial here, functioning as a resource that contributes to the criminalisation of drill by seizing on the music’s transgressive performative pose and translating it into content

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<sup>18</sup> The term ‘serious youth violence’, sometimes referred to as ‘serious violence’, has recently become all-pervasive in the criminal justice lexicon, political rhetoric and media coverage. It is used mostly as a shorthand for describing incidents of violence that are associated with “county lines” that are themselves defined as: ‘drug networks (both gangs and organised crime groups) who use children and young people and vulnerable adults to carry out illegal activity on their behalf’ (HM Government, 2018: 48).

that is curated to provoke public interest – at the expense of factual accuracy. In so doing, drill music is stripped of its artistic context and stylistic conventions and is repackaged as proof of “criminality”, in ways that have no firm basis in empirical reality and do violence to our understanding or appreciation of what drill music is, as well as who and what drillers are; (mis)taking an entire genre, its producers and audiences as “violent criminals”. As drillers tell exaggerated and often fabricated tales of violence to bolster their image of gangsterism and boost their online clout in search of stardom, YouTubers do much the same – but are exempt from the consequences of doing so. This realisation points to a hypocritical logic and moral calculus that selectively condemns depictions of violence as harmful when applied to drillers, but not when associated with YouTubers – or indeed YouTube itself. Without advocating for criminal justice policy that would expand its operations to also target YouTubers and digital platforms, we nevertheless highlight this asymmetry of blame and the discriminating and discriminatory treatment of *some*, but not all participants in ‘digital slumming’ (Stuart, 2020: 153) – to call for an urgent rethinking of the language and outlook we borrow from the criminal justice system to discuss cultural and socio-political issues; be they violence, “crime”, or the dangers of digital platforms.

Having demonstrated how both digital platforms and criminal justice institutions are far from neutral or evidence-based in the way they broadcast “facts”, handle “evidence”, or pursue “suspects”, it is important to remind ourselves that our understanding of what counts as “crime”, who is a “criminal”, what “justice” is and whether the criminal justice system serves the moral values we associate with it, is impaired – when we adopt criminal justice system thinking and terminology that disguise how the words we use to condemn people and their actions are the result of political processes; whose legacy has to be understood *in relation to* a long and disreputable history of policing against Black music genres (Fatsis, 2021b: 35-7) and an equally long history of police racism and racial injustice (Fatsis and Lamb, 2021: 23-34).

Instead of thinking about drill as “criminal”, we therefore hope that our investigation into some of the ways that it is *criminalised* sheds light into thinking and criminal justice processes that make crimes out of rhymes. In so doing, we concur with rappers Krept & Konan, whose track *Ban Drill*, concludes: “Feds asked who's responsible, I just kept it real I said ‘Whoever banned drill’”.

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## **YouTube Channels**

Cheetah <https://www.youtube.com/c/CheetahDrill/videos>

DrillDon <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCctk9S3bP6mekwU4cZnfD4Q/videos>

Drillas <https://www.youtube.com/c/Drillas/videos>

UK Drill Mile

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdokwKCK9ThYRDWXdkxzCuw/videos>

Ydottyz Drill News

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvh4woiwIHgc3fNYIBuhSRw/videos>

UK Drill Tv <https://www.youtube.com/c/UKDrillNews/videos>

BEEPEE UK <https://www.youtube.com/c/BEEPEEUK/videos>

YGM <https://www.youtube.com/c/YGMUKDRILL/videos>

Figure 1: screenshots of YouTube channels: top: channel *Cheeta*, bottom channel *UK Drill Mile*

 <p><b>UK DRILL: RAPPERS THAT SWITCHED GANGS</b> 63.676 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: BIGGEST THREATS</b> 95.729 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: LUCKIEST ACTS</b> 81.004 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: WORST KARMA</b> 79.094 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: HEARTLESS ACTS</b> 59.955 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>
 <p><b>UK DRILL: DEADLY BEEFS</b> 93.875 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: SNAKIEST ACTS</b> 145.067 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: LYRICS THAT REALLY HAPPENED (Part 2)</b> 65.977 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: REVENGE ACTS</b> 88.957 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: CONFIRMED SNITCHES</b> 66.327 Aufrufe • vor 4 Monaten</p>

 <p><b>UK DRILL: MURDERS CAUGHT ON CAMERA</b> 1231 Aufrufe • vor 2 Tagen</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: RAPPERS THAT WERE ARRESTED RECENTLY...</b> 2719 Aufrufe • vor 4 Tagen</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: GANGS THAT REENACTED MURDERS</b> 7026 Aufrufe • vor 1 Woche</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: NEWS ARTICLES ABOUT LYRICS (PART 2)</b> 4444 Aufrufe • vor 1 Woche</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: DEAD OPP DISSES (PART 3)</b> 6503 Aufrufe • vor 2 Wochen</p>
 <p><b>UK DRILL: ACCIDENTAL BODIES</b> 3:19</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: MOST HATED GANGS (PART 2)</b> 3:06</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: DISSES AND REPLIES (PART 2)</b> 3:11</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: LONGEST BEEFS (PART 2)</b> 3:14</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: NEWS ARTICLES ABOUT DRILL LYRICS</b> 3:09</p>

Figure 2 screenshots of YouTube channels: top: *BEEPEE UK*, middle: *Ydottyz Drill News*, bottom: *YGM*

 <p><b>Best of UK Drill/Trap Of April 2018</b> 3238 Aufrufe • vor 3 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>Best of UK Drill Gangbangers Of March 2018.</b> 1042 Aufrufe • vor 3 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>(1011) VS #12World (Kill Confirmed and Kill Denied)</b> 5339 Aufrufe • vor 4 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>Worst UK Drill Gang bangers Of January 2018.</b> 1823 Aufrufe • vor 4 Jahren</p>
 <p><b>Best of UK Drill Gangbangers Of January 2018.</b></p>	 <p><b>Top 10 UK Drill Songs Of December 2017.(Week 2)</b></p>	 <p><b>Top 10 UK Drill Gang Songs Of December 2017 (Week 1)</b></p>	 <p><b>Best UK Drill Songs Of November 2017</b></p>
 <p><b>UK DRILL RAPPERS WHO WERE DE-RECRUITED</b> 4778 Aufrufe • vor 2 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>Active Gxng Strika - Freestyle (IG LIVE)</b> 158.663 Aufrufe • vor 2 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: MURDERS THAT ARE UNSOLVED</b> 2374 Aufrufe • vor 2 Monaten</p>	 <p><b>#CGM Digga D Sends For Russ Central Cee And Activ...</b> 205.695 Aufrufe • vor 2 Monaten</p>
 <p><b>UK DRILL GANGS THAT RUN COUNTY LINES</b></p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL RAPPERS WHO'S LOCKED FOR A BODY!!</b></p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: GANGS OPPS AND ASSOCIATES (PART ONE)</b></p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL: MOST DANGEROUS ESTATES TO WALK PAST AT NIGHT</b></p>
 <p><b>The Rise Of Loski</b> 53.076 Aufrufe • vor 2 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>UK Drill: Best Rapper x Producer Combos</b> 11.771 Aufrufe • vor 2 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>UK DRILL SONGS WITH THE SAME BEAT - WHICH IS... PART 2</b> 43.043 Aufrufe • vor 2 Jahren</p>	 <p><b>Cold UK Drill Songs You Probably Haven't Heard</b> 28.166 Aufrufe • vor 2 Jahren</p>
 <p><b>UK DRILL SONGS WITH THE SAME BEAT - WHICH IS...</b></p>	 <p><b>MY TOP 10 UK DRILL VERSES OF ALL TIME</b></p>	 <p><b>The Fallen Members: Moscow17 (EP.1)</b></p>	 <p><b>THE BEST UK DRILL PRISON FREESTYLES</b></p>

