Article

Criminalising Black Trauma: Grime and Drill Lyrics as a Form of Ethnographic Data to Understand "Gangs" and Serious Youth Violence

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Abstract: Background: The criminalisation of drill music, a rap-based genre, is a recent chapter in a long history of policing "Black" music. The association of drill and other rap music with "gang" violence has a direct impact on the treatment of Black boys and men in the criminal justice system. However, critics argue that, rather than causing violence, violent lyrics reflect the lived experiences of marginalised communities. Method: Using a qualitative approach, this study analysed the lyrical content of 90 drill, grime, and other rap-based songs by UK artists, using thematic analysis. Findings: The following themes were found: social issues in the local area and community, involvement in crime, social status, coping with adversity, social support network, police, and escaping. Collectively, the themes highlight a narrative of Black boys and men who have experienced a range of adversities such as poverty, racism, child criminal exploitation, and community violence. Conclusions: Artists who make reference to drugs and violence in their lyrics also discuss adverse experiences and the impact of these, supporting the view that violent lyrics are a reflection of lived experience. Thus, focusing on criminalising rap music may be deflecting attention from risk factors for serious youth violence that are evidence-based.

Keywords: drill music; ethnography; gangs; grime music; rap music; trauma

1. Introduction

Is drill music to blame for gang violence? Over the last decade, there has been an ongoing, often heated, debate between the police and their critics regarding this question. Drill music is a genre of UK rap that emerged in the 2010s from Chicago drill music and has since been under scrutiny from authorities (Fatsis 2019; Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards 2018). Based on the assumption that drill music is a causal factor in serious violence, the police have removed music videos from social media and drill artists have been given criminal behaviour orders that prohibit certain activities, for instance using social media, making music, associating with specific people (Dearden 2018; Fatsis 2019). Despite this, a sentiment trajectory analysis of 549 drill songs (from December 2013 to November 2018) and violent crime data (homicide, robbery of personal property, and violence with injury) from the Metropolitan Police within the same time frame found no causal link between drill music and actual violent crime (Kleinberg and McFarlane 2020).

Artists and fans of this music genre and scene argue that drill music is merely an outlet and reflection of the artist's reality and that criminalising drill music is scapegoating the real issues that cultivate serious violence (Dearden 2018; White 2018). Critics also argue that the criminalisation of drill is viewed as part of a long history of policing Black music, similar to the persecution of an earlier genre of UK rap-based music: grime (Fatsis 2018, 2019). Thus, to understand this conflict of perspectives, it is important to first understand the history of grime.

1.1. The Digital Generation and the Birth of Grime

As a musical genre, grime emerged in East London in the early 2000s, stemming from predominantly inner-city marginalised communities (Ilan 2012). Its growth as a genre has been facilitated by inexpensive distribution through social media and other advances in digital technology, with a hidden economy of self-produced CDs and mixtapes and pirate radio stations such as Rinse FM (Dedman 2011; Fatsis 2018; Ilan 2012). Grime has been aptly described as a "product of the digital generation" (Woods 2018, p. 10). Focusing on everyday living (e.g., home, work, neighbourhood, and peers) (White 2017), grime typically features "fearless musical and lyrical content that sounds as rough as it is intended to" (Fatsis 2018, p. 3). As a musical genre, grime is "home-grown"; artists tend to be friends from local neighbourhoods or schools using illegally downloaded software to sample and reuse existing content to create new "beats" (instrumentals) (Adams 2018a; McGrath et al. 2016).

Through developments in technology, producing music has become more accessible to those who would otherwise not have the resources to record, perform, or produce and provides a platform for such individuals to express their lived experiences to a wider audience. Woods (2018, p. 6) argues that urban music as a whole is "both a reflection of, and response to, the pressures, injustices and aspirations of inner-city life". Grime, in particular, facilitated by digital technology and social media, enabled citizens who would previously have been unheard to communicate their perspective of inner-city working class life in terms of power and inequality (Woods 2018).

Merging the musical influences of Jamaican sound-system culture, hip-hop, and R&B with the lived experiences of the working class in the UK (Adams 2018a; Perera 2018), grime is a multicultural hybrid not only in terms of the music but also the language used; white vernacular is combined with Black vernacular to create a sociolect that sociolinguists refer to as Multicultural London English (MLE). In addition to musical influences taken from other Black genres, grime is also associated with young Black males due to stemming from marginalised inner-city areas (Adams 2018b), where Black ethnic groups appear to be overrepresented. Due to this association, grime is often considered to be a Black genre of music.

1.2. The Criminalisation of Black Music

Fatsis (2018) highlights how the policing of Black UK music has been happening since at least the 1950s, when house parties and venues playing ska and reggae music would often be raided by police. Prejudicial perceptions of Black music and its perceived links to criminality (that is, it promotes and is a factor in knife crime, riots, drugs, and gangs) has in the past resulted in restrictive legislation. For instance, Form 696 was a risk assessment form introduced in 2009 by London's Metropolitan Police for live music events that was eventually withdrawn in 2017 following controversy about discrimination towards ethnic minorities (Fatsis 2018). Music events with predominantly Black artists and fans (e.g., grime, rap, R&B, and garage) were shut down by police with the intention of controlling gang conflict. Grime was particularly targeted as a genre (Fatsis 2018; Ilan 2012). However, Fatsis (2018) argues that, while there may have been some violent crimes at urban music events, there is no causal link and such incidents are misrepresented as being typical due to the prejudice surrounding Black music.

Findings from a psychological experiment suggest that there is prejudice against rap music and Black artists: specifically, Black rappers are more likely to be perceived to be offenders and gang members (Dunbar and Kubrin 2018). This has implications for Black men and boys, considering that police actively monitor shared drill and grime music videos in an attempt to identify possible gang members (Amnesty International 2018; Fatsis 2019). Individuals perceived to be gang members are then documented on police databases such as the Gangs Violence Matrix, where young, Black males are overrepresented in the data (Amnesty International 2018). Racial prejudice towards rap music and artists then continues in court proceedings and the presentation of lyrics and videos as evidence of intention, motivation, bad character, and gang association is almost exclusive to Black boys and men on trial (Owusu-Bempah 2022). Consequently, the gang narratives constructed through

such evidence can lead to the increased likelihood of joint enterprise prosecutions, which again are known to disproportionately impact young, Black men (Clarke and Williams 2020; Williams and Clarke 2016).

1.3. The Therapeutic Benefits of Music

Contrary to criticisms of rap music, it is suggested that rap music can have a number of therapeutic benefits. Hart's (2019) analysis of rap music, including grime, reveals that mental health has been addressed through lyrics throughout rap history, with healthy coping mechanisms being promoted more commonly within the last decade. Additionally, rap workshops have been shown to be an effective way to engage with prisoners, providing a platform for the prisoners to construct and negotiate their own identities (Bramwell 2018). Cobbett (2009) explains how using rap in music therapy can be used to engage with adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Adolescents with SEBD who are from deprived inner-city areas seem to resonate with the emotions (such as anger) expressed in grime lyrics, which may reflect the violence in their own lives (Cobbett 2009). Furthermore, Dickens and Lonie (2013) claim that creating music provides a coping strategy for the emotional issues of young offenders (or those at risk of offending) and can be used to express emotions and to reconstruct their identity from that of an offender. Drill music, in particular, has been used by The Children's Society, providing young males who have been criminally exploited with the resources to produce drill music as an outlet for their experiences (Lamrhari 2021).

Thus, there are contradictory perceptions of rap-based music genres. On the one hand, it is used by practitioners as a medium to engage with young people and is encouraged as a coping strategy, yet, on the other hand, when young people express themselves through rap music independently, they face scrutiny and persecution within the criminal justice system.

1.4. The Current Study

Because grime lyrics document experiences of living in urban inner-city areas (i.e., the artists are directly involved and document what they experience and observe in their environment), grime is considered to be a form of ethnographic data (Barron 2013). Barron (2013), argues that grime itself is an ethnography and that the artists themselves could be considered to be ethnographers due to how the artists are embedded within the communities whose experiences they discuss in their lyrics, stating:

> "Just as the various ethnographers . . . were concerned centrally with the character of their city . . . so too are grime artists: that of London and further urban spaces. It is difficult to cite another contemporary mode of music which authentically achieves such a consistent geographically and socially distinctive focus on localised urban experiences . . . Popular music can be utilised as ethnographic tools, but some forms of popular music are distinctly ethnography: most manifestly, hip-hop and British hip-hop as exemplified by grime." (Barron 2013, p. 543)

Perera (2018, p. 88) also echoes this sentiment in her work, describing grime and other UK rap artists as having "a unique position in their communities as social commentators". Barron (2013) proposes that such music should be utilised as a dataset as it provides the listener with access to unfamiliar social environments and researchers with a means to study a culture that may otherwise be difficult to access. At present, there appear to be few psychological research studies of grime and drill music. However, there is a clear argument within the social sciences (e.g., criminology and sociology) that grime music is used by marginalised communities to address the social issues affecting the lives of themselves and those around them.

Furthermore, Ross et al. (2019) argue that street cultures are often overlooked as worthy of study in academia due to "othered" status. Ross et al. (2019) recognise that there are barriers to accessing street subcultures, ranging from ethical concerns to the tendency for some street culture practices being purposely hidden from authorities. Therefore, Ross et al. (2019, p. 533) argue that any ethical research method should be used, stating that is "impor-

tant to analyze documents, Facebook-posts, videos, blogs or flyers for events or simply the text of a song." The latter suggestion, song lyrics, will be used in the current study.

Based on the research discussed, it appears that, rather than being a causal factor in violence, grime and drill music may hold key information relating to young people and their lived experiences. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the lyrical content of UK rap-based music (including, but not limited to, grime and drill) to establish the utility of such lyrics as a form of ethnographic data. Secondly, assuming that lyrics do provide valuable information, this study aims to investigate what can be learned from grime, drill, and other rap lyrics in relation to "gangs" and serious youth violence.

Although there is evidence to show that girls and women are associated with, and exploited by, gangs (Disley and Liddle 2016), victims and perpetrators of gang-related murders are typically young males (Goldson 2011). Additionally, those identified on the Gangs Violence Matrix are almost exclusively male (Amnesty International 2018). Therefore, the current study focuses on male artists only.

2. Method

Data were sourced in the form of song lyrics from rap-based music (e.g., drill and grime). To overcome restricted definitions of grime and drill, in terms of musical elements, songs were included in the dataset providing that they were: (1) predominantly in the form of rap, (2) performed by male UK-based artists, and (3) made reference to topics that are typically associated with gangs such as drugs and violence. Both drugs and violence are recognised as being key features of gangs (Disley and Liddle 2016; Goldson 2011) and are behaviours that grime and drill music have been accused of promoting or glamourising (Fatsis 2018).

Data collection began with the researcher listening to music posted on YouTube channels such as SBTV (active since 2006) and JDZ Media (active since 2012). Both SBTV and JDZ Media are YouTube channels that provide a platform for upcoming music artists from across the UK and include rap-based genres such as grime and drill. These channels were used as a starting point and further songs were listened to, identified, and collected using a snowball sampling method via the related videos' suggestions. Songs that met the three aforementioned criteria were then compiled in a database to be added to the dataset.

Lyrics for selected songs were sourced from the lyric website www.genius.com (accessed on 28 August 2020) (if available) with any missing or unavailable lyrics transcribed, amended, and then analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher familiarised themself with the dataset by reading each set of lyrics multiple times. Initial codes were developed for each line of lyrics. Lyrics that were repeated throughout songs (e.g., choruses) were only coded once at the first occurrence. Lyrics that were not full or partial sentences (e.g., ad libs and onomatopoeic words) were not coded. Once the initial coding had occurred, the codes were then grouped into themes that were reviewed and refined.

To establish an ideal sample size, the data collection and data analysis stages were conducted semi-concurrently. An initial sample of 50 songs was coded and preliminary themes were formed from these songs. Additional songs were then added to the dataset in blocks of ten, then coded, and the initial themes further developed and refined. These steps were repeated until information redundancy was achieved, that is, no new themes were found. Information redundancy was achieved at the 4th additional block, providing a final total of 90 songs included in the analysis.

The researcher who analysed the data is a white working-class woman from the North West of England who has a BSc and MSc in Forensic Psychology and is, at the time of writing, completing a PhD in psychology, investigating risk and protective factors for young males at risk of being involved in gang-related criminal activity. Additionally, she has several years of experience of working directly with vulnerable young people, including those who have been perceived to be gang-affiliated or gang-involved and who have committed drug-related and violent offences.

3. Findings

After completion and finalisation of the thematic analysis, a total of seven themes were found: social issues in the local area and community, involvement in crime, social status, coping with adversity, social support network, police, and escaping. Each of these themes are discussed in detail below.

3.1. Social Issues in the Local Area and Community

Social issues in the local area and community was one of the most common themes that emerged from the dataset, being referred to in more than half of the songs. Almost a third of all songs made reference to a specific geographical location, most commonly London, in general, specific areas of London (e.g., Tottenham, Brixton), and some referenced specific postcode areas or road names:

> "I'm from SE4, that's South London, I'm a Brockley boy from young, Mumsy lived in ghetto dere from Deptford, some man called it slums". (Novelist, "Rowdy Riddim")

References to local areas are a popular trope in grime lyrics. For example, grime MCs will often "rep their ends" in music videos, associating themselves with specific city locations (Ilan 2012). Making references to specific areas may explain why grime music can be perceived as gang-related. However, McGrath et al. (2016) explain how the use of local imagery and geographical reference in music videos is a "digital stamp of authenticity", not dissimilar to how other products are stamped for quality. Thus, overt references to specific neighbourhoods appear to be a means to establishing and protecting local identity rather than the physical territory of the neighbourhood itself.

Songs also discuss social issues that affect a local area and community such as poverty, drugs misuse, drug dealing, unemployment, guns, and violent crime:

> "And you don't see the problem, cause everybody's selling it, and everyone around you's on some sort of benefit . . . community's thriving off of drug misuse". (Potter Payper, "Daily Duppy")

Of all social issues discussed in the song lyrics, poverty was the most common, being referenced in over a third of all songs. Artists used their lyrics to explain how their families and others in their community struggled to "make ends meet", often living in council housing and having little money for basic necessities such as food and clothing:

> "I grew the same as your average Black yute [youth], council flat 2 bedrooms weren't much we made do". (Skrapz, "Who Am I")

Two artists discussed the intersectionality of poverty and education:

> "tripled uni fees, stopped EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] like it was cool, all that says to me is you don't want poor kids to go to school". (CASIS-DEAD, "You Might Be Scared")

> "and teachers wonder why I don't work well, I'm broke as hell". (Dave, "Fire In The Booth")

Longitudinal data spanning 14 years show that poverty can increase the risk of involvement in "delinquent" behaviour, after controlling for other factors including family structure, family interaction, and peer influence, but only for those experiencing persistent poverty (Jarjoura et al. 2002). Swain (2018) argues that grime music has been used as a scapegoat for social issues plaguing inner-city areas. Artists discussed several social issues within their community such as poverty, funding cuts, and unemployment, all of which are recognised risk factors for youth violence (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2020). This is a similar sentiment expressed by Black youth in London in relation to drill music, who believe that blaming drill is "cheap" and that social factors such as unemployment, poverty, and poor housing are more likely to blame for gang violence (Debo-Aina 2021).

Lyrics were also used to illustrate a notable divide between social classes, with all artists who discussed this appearing to identify as working class:

> "this isn't for the upper class, this is for everyone that lives in debt, that mortgages and bills effect, that work away and live in sweat". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

Songs also discussed political issues and were critical of the British government, particularly the long-serving Conservative Party, discussing issues such as inequality, austerity, and systemic oppression:

> "politicians tryna' do us up the arse again, that dirty cunt David Cameron . . . they're putting taxes up and making cuts, and shifting blame, they rinse our cash on their expense accounts, they've got no shame". (CASISDEAD, "You Might Be Scared")

> "Out of 63 million, Blacks only make 3 percent, and we have no say, when you think, cause you refuse to vote, like Conservative policies ain't been a problem for the yutes on road". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

There is evidence to suggest that in some cases, violence stems from a feeling of rejection (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2020). In the context of poverty, the feeling of rejection comes from disparities in wealth (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2020). The political influence of grime artists was notably demonstrated in the 2017 UK general election. Jeremy Corbyn, the new left-wing leader of the opposition party, was publicly supported by a number of influential grime artists such as Novelist, AJ Tracey, and JME, with the latter coining "#Grime4Corbyn" as a hashtag trend on the social media site Twitter. As a result of this, 58% of grime fans are reported to have voted for the Labour Party in the 2017 general election (Perera 2018).

Some artists also highlighted the intersectionality between race and class:

> "and the government, deceiving the white working classes, into believing they're supportive to us Black bastards". (Akala, "Welcome to England")

In particular, artists discussed the lack of concern for the adversities that affect marginalised Black communities and how tragedies affecting Black communities are seen as just "another": "another young Black statistic" (Skrapz, "Who Am I?"); "another Black boy is doing a stretch" (JME, "Punch in the Face"); "another Black man in a hearse before his 21st" (Akala, "War").

3.2. Involvement in Crime

Several artists discussed their criminal behaviours, with some discussing their time spent in prison and the process of their court cases. Some artists only vaguely alluded to their involvement with criminal activities:

> "that's why we cover our faces, still doing no-face-no-case shit". (Abra Cadabra, "Pon Dem")

Others provided more detail about their criminal activities, including violent crimes, robbery, and burglary:

> "kidnap yutes for a ransom. When I poured that bleach in his eyes weren't making the boy look handsome". (A6, "Blackbox")

> "it didn't take long for a drop, three hours later, the yute got [kid]napped, tied him up to a chair, rusty Mossberg [type of shotgun] up in his mouth, boiling water all on his face, how do you think that I caught this case?" (Young Dizz, "12.5")

Over half of all songs made reference to selling drugs, which is to be expected given that reference to drugs or violence was one of the inclusion criteria. Much of this was descriptive, with artists talking about volumes and types of drugs. However, more than half of all songs that referenced drugs also had lyrics that appeared to refer to the county lines model (a model of drug distribution):

> "gripped an old Nokia and I got a popping line. Started a proper grind. Food [drugs] and I'm copping mine. No more corned beef from winter to summer time". (Izzie Gibbs, "Warm Up Sessions")

> "trap [sell drugs] until the foods done, out early, birds chirping on the school run, and I'll be back when schools done. Then back to the trap with the cats until the foods done". (Mist, "Warm Up Sessions")

Although artists did not make explicit mention of the term "county lines", artists did talk about "older's looking for lads to recruit" (Aaron Unknown, "Warm Up Sessions"), "trips up country" (CASISDEAD, "Cook It Up"), and spending "long nights in the trap" (6th, "Time Will Tell"). These terms and phrases are known to relate to county lines (Robinson et al. 2019), suggesting that some artists may have been criminally exploited. Teenage boys, known as "runners", are commonly used by county lines groups to store and transport drugs (Dadabhoy 2017; Robinson et al. 2019; Hall et al. 2022). Given that over half of the songs referred to drug dealing and some artists referred to selling drugs from a school age, it is probable that child criminal exploitation was more prevalent than is discussed in the lyrics.

Knives were referenced in approximately one third of songs. Some artists described regularly carrying knives, from a young age (14–15 years old) and some claimed to have stabbed others. Guns were referenced in almost half of all songs, and the majority of these referred to the artists own use of, or involvement with, guns. The majority of artists who discussed carrying guns typically just described owning guns. However, some made threats to use them and other artists claimed that they had been convicted for gun crimes. One artist explained how, to evade being caught by police, they would leave weapons in easy-to-access areas of the local community:

> "the feds [police] are on us so we can't roll strapped [go around carrying a gun], we just have them scattered in parts of the ends [local area]! You know that easy access to grab them, ready for use". (Remtrex, "Elite Sessions")

Some lyrics that referred to acts of violence had a lack of personal pronouns, thus making it difficult to establish whether the artists were referring to acts committed by themselves or by others:

> "why these man keep dashing? Jump out; rambos [knives] out, that's [blood] splashing". (410, "Fire in the Booth")

> "guns pop off and man start whiling, If there's a ting where it's gotta be silent, put more shanks in you than a pop up pirate". (CASISDEAD, "Adolescence")

While it is possible that artists were describing their own crime, it is also possible that artists are discussing events that they have directly witnessed or have heard about. This raises concerns for the use of such lyrics as evidence in criminal cases.

The most common reason that artists suggested for carrying knives was to protect their own life:

> "and if a n*gga die young how you gonna tell my mumma don't cry for me, that's why I always got gun and got knife on me". (Skrapz, "I Try")

> "my mum don't like how I play with knives. Well, I'm real sorry mother but I won't have no joke boy take my life". (SL, "Tropical")

Violent conflict seemed to be escalated by a cycle of revenge attacks, with artists explaining how they would seek revenge for an attack on themselves or their friends and likewise their friends would also seek revenge on their behalf:

> "if I get touched [attacked], my bros will defo leave your strip [area] taped up". (Abra Cadabra, "Daily Duppy")

Another motive offered through the lyrics was "survival": the need to make money to provide basic necessities such as food and to "make ends meet" (Potter Payper, "Mad Years"), with money being referenced in over half of all songs. Some artists explained they had become involved in criminal activities such as drug dealing in order to provide for their family:

> "done 4 years and I still had my graft phone, so I could look after my bird [girlfriend] and give my mum dough [money]". (Jordan, "Lifestyle")

> "And the gang do crimes cause crime pay, can't wait for the day we don't have to". (Berna, "Council State of Mind")

Some artists also explained that there was a lack of positive role models for young males and younger generations are instead influenced by criminals in the local community:

> "all I wanted was some words of wisdom, guidance and the love is real, all them olders showed me how to do is steal, sell drugs and kill". (Dave, "Warm Up Sessions")

> "Where I'm from the drug dealers are glamorised, and if you die by the cannon, you're canonised". (CASIDEAD, "Phone Call")

One artist also suggested that pride may play a role in violence:

> "pride will be the end of me, I'll just lose my cool and lose a tool over petty beef [conflict]". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

> "we clutch a knife for different reasons, most for pride". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

The majority of artists involved in criminal behaviour indicated that this was not by free choice and that their lifestyles were shaped by their environment:

> "I didn't wanna be involved in the life . . . but man got forced in the hype". (A6, "Blackbox")

> "they wanna know why I talk this violence, talk this road, but the end of the day that's all I know. The same problem with kids, we can't stop how we live especially if life ain't offering shit". (Rival, "Talk That")

There was a minority who did not appear to share this view: "I love guns, I don't really care what it costs (no way)", (Young Dizz, "Kermit"). However, ethnographic fieldwork with minority ethnic young men (King and Swain 2022) indicates that displays of masculinity such as appearing to be threatening and being prepared to use violence stem from feeling vulnerable and a need for protection. Therefore, considering that the music is performed publicly, such claims may be a bravado to create a masculine image in order to protect themselves.

3.3. Social Status

References to social status were common in the lyrics. Artists used their lyrics to make social comparisons to (non-specified) others, typically claiming to be better than them, and in some cases would insult or mock others:

> "How can you switch and think you're bad? Was a bitch back then, still a bitch in your gang, running away, you're screaming out". (410, "Mad About Bars")

> "Them man wanna G check me, but can't do it to my face, cause I've got killers in the cage. Show, party or a rave I bring gorillas on the stage. There ain't a rapper or a singer in my lane, a musician in my league". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

Masculinity is an important component of grime music and demeaning others is commonplace (Swain 2018). However, diminishing the masculinity of peers is also a common behaviour of young inner-city males with complex trauma (Reynolds et al. 2019).

Artists also emphasised the value of authenticity, which is a key component of grime music (McGrath et al. 2016), with some explicitly stating that their lyrics were based on "realness" (Aaron Unknown, "Warm Up Sessions") and the "truth" (Bugzy Malone, "Confessions"). Artists used their lyrics to express that they were genuine and that their lyrics reflected the reality of their lived experiences:

> "I ain't got a made up past, I ain't one of these artists that gotta make up bars [lyrics]". (Ghetts, "Troubled Man")

Some drill artists will exaggerate their links to criminality in their lyrics (Debo-Aina 2021). Artists in the current study were critical of this, and would discredit others who capitalised on an image of struggle, hardship, and involvement with illicit activities:

"you kids act for the fame, but the road ting ain't a game". (Balistik, "Who's Next")

"fuckboys in real life but gangsters when they're on YouTube". (Potter Payper, "Filthy Free")

"And I don't listen to these guys and their lies, cause they don't move big coke, they just fantasise". (Krept and Konan, "Fire in the Booth Part 2")

A small number of artists talked about gangs explicitly and made reference to specific gangs. For example, in "12.5", Young Dizz associates himself with 6th gang: "Young Dizz, I'm the Prince of the 6, I gotta make sure that no one forgot". However, the majority of artists talked about rivalry without claiming to be gang-affiliated. When discussing rivalry, artists talked about "politics" (Skrapz, "Players") in the local community, the division of communities, and conflict between different areas or postcodes:

"Most of the mandem rep [represent] the postcode, but I don't know why we like the postcode". (Novelist, "1 Sec")

When talking about rivals, or "opps", artists explained how going to "opp blocks" (rival territories) or "opps" coming into their area would often result in violent conflict:

"but I'm a hypocrite, Black lives matter, when I see an opp, everything scatter, everything shatter if he try run, hit him with the hammer". (410, "Fire in the Booth")

Some artists further explained how "a friend of an opp is an opp" (Berna, "Council State of Mind"), implying that anyone who is seen to associate with their rivals would then also become their rival. Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards (2018) argue that there are blurred lines between performance and crime and while not all gangs create music, a significant number of gang members do. Furthermore, while some artists are genuinely using these platforms to showcase their talent, there are some (who are in gangs) using music videos to provoke rival gangs and to publicise their gang identity (Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards 2018). An extensive body of psychological research has established that in "cultures of honour"—where reputation is highly valued and disrespect is not tolerated—people are more likely to justify the use of violent conflict escalation as a means to defend their honour (Cohen et al. 1996).

3.4. Coping with Adversity

Some artists were vague about adversities they had experienced, without going into detail, saying that they "grew up on pain and aggression" (Kidavelly, "Storytime"), they had "felt bare pain" (Abra Cadabra, "Blackbox"), and how "life's hard" (Skrapz, "Letter to My Fans"). Other artists were more specific about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):

"'99 they said my mummy went on holiday, I found out my mummy was in Holloway". (Potter Payper, "Warm Up Sessions")

"I've been through a hell of a lot, so I just say it how it is, and most of this stems from getting bullied as a kid, my mum shoulda stopped her boyfriend from tryna' split my wig". (Bugzy Malone, "Confessions")

Some mentioned the impact of absent fathers and discussed how this affected their family's financial situation, with single mothers becoming the sole provider:

"my dad was a no show, so me and mumsy had no dough, living off benefits". (CASISDEAD, "Cook It Up")

The loss of loved ones to either death or imprisonment was mentioned in almost a third of songs and some artists discussed the effects that this had on them:

"the feds got like ten of the gang, free R1, free Max, free Taz, rest in peace all my brothers, RIP Jetz, RIP T Bandz". (SL, "Tropical")

> "when they killed Reece (RXR), I cried for whole weeks, trapped in my cell again and I felt like I couldn't breathe . . . between guns, knives and judges I keep losin' all my G's". (Potter Payper, "Filthy Free")

Artists discussed how they have been forced to "grow up so quickly" (CASIDEAD, "Cook It Up") due to how their experiences "never let me be child" (Potter Payper, "Too Much Years"). Findings from the longitudinal research of 104,996 US juvenile offenders revealed that ACEs significantly increase the risk of gang involvement by the age of 18 (Wolff et al. 2020).

Race was referenced in almost a quarter of songs, with artists describing having to endure racism while "living in a country when IC3 [Black] ain't as important as IC1[white]" (Ghetts, "Red Pill"). There is evidence to suggest that forms of discrimination can increase the risk of anti-social behaviour and is linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Asmussen et al. 2020). One mixed-race artist also refers to racism he experienced from his own family:

> "dad's side hate me cause I sell crack, mum's side hate me . . . cause I'm Black, to them I'm just some dirty n*gga". (CASISDEAD, "Demi God")

Furthermore, a number of artists suggested that there is an element of everyday risk of community violence and feeling unsafe in the areas that they live in and how "you'll get killed at a party for the smallest reason (Dave, "My 19th Birthday"). Some also used military-themed terminology such as "war", "trenches", or "civilians" when discussing violence in their communities, portraying life in their community as not dissimilar to living in a warzone. A number of artists explained how they had been a victim of violence, including stabbings, with two artists explaining that they had been stabbed as a child:

> "I'd already been stabbed by the time I was year nine". (Bugzy Malone, "M.E.N")

> "was about thirteen years old, at that time is when I got poled [stabbed] to the lung". (Novelist, "Rowdy Riddim")

Both witnessing and being victims of violence are shown to be risk factors for engaging in violent behaviour (Asmussen et al. 2020; Brady et al. 2008; Frans et al. 2005; Irwin-Rogers et al. 2020; McAra and McVie 2016). Findings from McAra and McVie's (2016) study of approximately 4000 UK youth suggest that violence can be a coping response for young people to overcome experienced adversity and feelings of vulnerability.

Almost a third of songs made some reference to their state of mind and mental health. Drugs were discussed as a coping strategy as a "temporary escape (CASISDEAD, "Drugs Don't Work") and to "take the pain away" (Skrapz, "Faith in My Killy"). Two artists discussed suicidal thoughts:

> "looking out on London bridge, thinking about throwing myself off". (CASIS-DEAD "Drugs Don't Work")

> "I got n*ggas in the bing doing life, some have even told me they've considered suicide". (Ghetts, "System")

Some descriptions appeared to be consistent with symptoms of PTSD. For example, feeling "cold. . .numb" (Novelist, "Rowdy Riddim") and "emotionless" (Bugzy Malone, "Confessions"). Some artists also referred to an element of paranoia or hypervigilance due to feeling unsafe in their community:

> "every car that drive by gotta question. . .head on a swivel anytime a n*gga bent through the corners of this concrete jungle". (Tiny Boost, "Trenches")

> "man I can't put my mind at ease ca' bare n*ggas think they're bad with the 'Rettas on these streets". (Abra Cadabra, "The Roads")

One artist highlighted the prevalence of possible PTSD in their community: "so many man my age have got PTSD and I don't think that it's hit them" (Dave, "My 19th Birthday"). Exposure to community violence is well documented within the empirical literature to be a significant predictor of PTSD (Asmussen et al. 2020; Beresford and Wood 2016; Cooley-Quille et al. 2001; Fowler et al. 2009). A meta-analysis of 114 studies found that

community violence has the strongest impact on the risk of developing PTSD and externalising problems, with adolescents being more likely to externalise problems than younger children (Fowler et al. 2009). Research also indicates that boys are more likely to witness and experience community violence (Komarovskaya et al. 2011; Lewis and Wu 2021; Ng-Mak et al. 2004), and generally, with the exception of sexual assault, more frequently experience traumatic events than girls (Frans et al. 2005).

Gang-involved youth in the UK are more likely to have increased levels of depression, anxiety, and violent victimisation compared with non-gang affiliated youth (Frisby-Osman and Wood 2020). Other research indicates that there is a point at which the effect of depressive symptoms related to exposure to community violence plateaus. More specifically, depressive symptoms appear to increase as levels of violence increase to a moderate level, but then begin to decrease as the violence further increases (Gaylord-Harden et al. 2011; Gaylord-Harden et al. 2017).

Furthermore, a literature review indicated that experiences of community-based violence (e.g., being stabbed) can lead to PTSD-like symptoms and that there is a strong link between exposure to violence and violent behaviour (Beresford and Wood 2016). Gang members are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues as they are at risk of internalising PTSD-like symptoms, which can worsen due to their own perpetration of violence (Beresford and Wood 2016). Additionally, a longitudinal study of 1049 African-American adolescents found that both violent victimisation and behaviour significantly increases the risk of young people carrying guns, with violent victimisation being the stronger predictor of the two (Spano and Bolland 2013). This may explain why artists discussed carrying weapons for protection in the "involvement in crime" theme.

3.5. Social Support Network

Artists appeared to have a strong relationship with their mothers, using their lyrics to express acknowledgment and appreciation for her efforts to provide for them, with some explaining how their mothers had to work multiple jobs as a single parent:

> "I'm tryna give my mum a future, I'm tryna be mum's future, let them know that she's someone when she steps". (Abra Cadabra, "Rich and Famous")

> "she slaved three jobs yeah that's hard to believe, wouldn't ever see her till it's dark in the eve, lamb to the slaughter, mental and physical torture, she used to graft on her knees". (Aaron Unknown, "Warm Up Sessions")

Some artists also showed concern for mothers who had lost their children to violence:

> "when I think about their mothers, brings tears to my eyes". (Potter Payper, "Filthy Free")

> "all I wanna do is make my loved ones proud ... but my mum won't smile because her son's on trial". (Dave, "My 19th Birthday")

However, other types of relationships appeared to be much weaker. Only two artists made reference to having a supportive romantic partner. The majority of artists who mentioned romantic relationships indicated little interest in pursuing romantic relationships:

> "I don't got time to get close to a girl because I realised they ain't nothing but loose ... ". (Remtrex, "Elite Sessions")

Regarding friendships, there were mixed findings. Some artists appeared to have positive friendships, claiming that "my bros got my back in the hood man" (Abra Cadabra, "My Hood") and in return they would "really put my life on the line for my brothers (410, "Fire in the Booth"). However, others questioned the quality of their friendships and were critical of the intentions of their friends:

> "when I was banged up all my teens, most of my twenties, and man were sayin' free me but never sent me a penny. (Potter Payper, "Filthy Free")

> "Would you kill me for a million? Would you turn me for the p's? Would you lead me to die, if I got burnt in the beef? And if my name got tarnished, would

> you disown me for the roads? Or would you roll with me regardless 'cause you know that we are bros?". (Dave, "Warm Up Sessions")

Subsequently, a number of artists indicated being alone or having no one to rely on or trust:

> "that born alone, die alone shit nobody can own me". (A6, "Blackbox")

> "when I'm out and about, roll on my ones, cause man like me don't trust no one". (Novelist, "Ignorant and Wot")

A small number of artists were more explicit about their lack of support and the impact that this had on them:

> "I never had a helping hand when I came up, probably why I say I can't give the game up". (Skrapz, "Can't Give the Game Up")

> "I was asking for a bring in, no one tried to help me out, until I robbed half my hood just too help me out". (Young Dizz, "Life's Changed")

3.6. Police

Over half of all songs made reference to the police. Artists appeared to have an overall negative relationship with the police, with artists typically talking about being stopped and searched, feeling harassed, and experiencing racism from police:

> "get pulled over by them devils, racist pigs...I'm a young Black kid selling CDs, and tees, and you're a power trip prick in a colourful diesel neenaw whip". (Marleek, "Birth of a Winner")

> "how about you stop tryna shoot us in the head. Everyday they stop and search...if you are IC3 and you come from London, best have a bullet-proof head". (410, "Fire in the Booth")

Between April 2018 and March 2019, there were 38 stop and searches by police for every 1000 Black people in England and Wales, compared with only 4 per 1000 for white people. This was a consistent pattern across all police force areas that could provide such data, with Black people having the highest rates for stop and searches compared with all other ethnic groups (Ministry of Justice 2020). There is evidence to suggest that not only can over-policing increase the likelihood of a PTSD but also that this is an even greater risk factor than community violence (Lewis and Wu 2021).

Some artists made specific references to Operation Trident, an operation by London's Metropolitan Police that targets gang crime, indicating that they had been perceived by police to be gang-affiliated: "Trident tryna catch me for body that I didn't kill" (Skrapz, "Letter To My Fans"). Other artists suggested that there appear to be differing opinions surrounding gang affiliation, arguing that although they may not perceive themselves and their friends to be a gang, the police do:

> "and these are my friends but it's a gang to police". (Krept & Konan, "Ban Drill")

> "they don't give a damn about the mandem. Who's criminals? Us or them? They hate us and we can't stand them, a gang to them's what we are". (Novelist, "Street Politician")

The majority of artists who discussed their involvement with crime and police, did not want to go to prison: "but I don't wanna do another custodial sentence, in a four-by-four pad" (Bugzy Malone, "M.E.N"). However, for some, rather than being deterred from engaging in criminal activities, it appeared that they developed ways in which to avoid being caught by police:

> "half an eighth in my arse crack, don't give a fuck, there's feds about I gotta mask that. (CASISDEAD, "Adolescence")

> "they know my name and got my fingerprints, they know my face and even knows where my misses lives, and once upon my time they tracked my phone blud, so now I gotta change my number weekly, I ain't risking it. (Ghetts, "System")

> "we get watched by the five-O, so we gotta lie low, but feds can't track me 'cause I use old-school Nokias, and not iPhones. (Remtrex, "Elite Sessions")

Some artists, when referring to the police, also alluded to a code of silence or a rule of no "snitching":

> "and if they put me in a station then it's no comment, no comment, no comment. They can keep me to the sunrise, from littering to gun crime. The code that I live by I die by". (Dave, "Fire in the Booth")

> "loose lips sink ships and I ain't that dumb, I don't play them games. Tell a fed, I'd rather dead before I say them names". (Potter Payper, "Mad Years")

This code of silence appeared to be a cultural component of the wider community (i.e., not exclusive to the artist as individuals) and may have repercussions from the community if broken:

> "we don't snitch 'round here, bro, that's a next ting. ("Abra Cadabra, "Blackbox")

> "cause if you talk to the feds, your bredrins will go into skeng man mode". (JME, "Final Boss")

Another artist explained how he would rather deal with problems himself than go to the police:

> "If you put it on me you better put something over your face, cos I won't snitch, I'll tell the officer I don't wanna press no charges. I'm closing the case, discharge myself from the hospital, fuck the constable. Go home and deal with the beef like Sunday roast on a plate". (Skepta, "Same Shit Different Day")

This is a sentiment shared by other young people in London (Annan et al. 2022), who say that other members of the community are more likely to help with problems than police are and believe that the lack of trust in police is a contributing factor for gang violence. This view is supported by Palasinski et al. (2019) who, as part of a series of experiments, found that limited trust in authorities can increase the likelihood of knife-carrying. In comparison to white and Asian people, individuals from Black or mixed ethnic groups are less likely to have confidence in their local police (Office for National Statistics 2020). It is unsurprising, therefore, that young, Black males are unlikely to approach police for help out of a fear of being wrongly criminalised or due to negative childhood experiences with police (e.g., being stopped and searched) and would prefer to deal with problems themselves (Account 2020).

3.7. Escaping

Lyrics were used to convey ambition, not only to become successful but also to "find a way out" (Abra Cadabra, "Rich and Famous") and "to get up out the hood" (Krept & Konan, "Fire in the Booth Part 2"). Some artists expressed how making music had a been a "way out" for them: "had a little flip knife in primary, now we're on 1Xtra [radio show] finally" (410, "Fire in the Booth"). However, four artists also expressed how connections to their old lifestyle made it difficult to leave this behind:

> "even if I was rich, this the hood that birthed me, course leaving all this behind would burn me. (Abra Cadabra, "My Hood")

Artists were critical of the criminalisation and policing of music and explained the different ways that they have been prevented from producing music and performing. In one example, "I got 9 months suspended [sentence] for rapping" (410, "From South") and another: "I can't give the game up they cancel all my shows" (Skrapz, "Can't Give The Game Up"). Two artists, in one song, explained how they believed that the censoring of drill music is having the reverse effect and may push young people further towards a life of crime:

> "yeah, banning Drill, you're making the situation worse. Might as well give them life, or put them in a hearse 'cuh he could've been rapping but now he's still packing [carrying a weapon]". (Krept & Konan, "Ban Drill")

4. Discussion

The first aim of this study was to consider whether grime, drill, and other UK rap-based lyrics can be used as a form of ethnographic data. Throughout the 90 songs analysed in this study, artists consistently discussed the experiences of themselves and others in their local community and issues such as violence, poverty, racism, and involvement in crime. Clear themes were found following the analysis of song lyrics, with different artists sharing similar experiences. Themes included topics such as aggression, substance use, previously committed offences, family socioeconomic status, and living in deprived urban areas with high crime rates. These are long-established risk factors for serious violence and feature in the current Serious Violence Strategy (Home Office 2018). Thus, although this study included a mix of UK rap-based genres (including grime), the results support Barron's (2013) argument: that such lyrics can be considered to be a form of ethnographic data.

The second aim of the study was to explore what can be learnt about the experiences of young people documented in grime, drill, and other UK rap lyrics. Collectively, lyrics told the stories of boys and young men raised in deprived areas affected by austerity and plagued by a wide range of social issues such as poverty and drug misuse, with little social support; many of whom feel at risk of violence in their community where it is easy to get caught up in local postcode wars, with some reporting having being a victim of violence, including being stabbed as a child. Even when exposed to, or victimised by, violence and other criminality, they are bound by a code of silence and a strained relationship with the police. For some of these young men, only two options to escape poverty and become successful may seem viable: selling drugs or making music. Patterns in the themes depict young men who have been victims of, or exposed to, community violence, which is likely to lead to the development of PTSD or PTSD-like symptoms. Considering the themes that emerge from the dataset, it could be argued that drill and grime music may be a particular type of trauma response.

Lyrics convey features of hypermasculinity, such as dominance and aggression (Corprew et al. 2014). Reporting on their experience of facilitating a cognitive behavioural group intervention, Reynolds et al. (2019) describe how displays of hypermasculinity and aggression were central to the group dynamics of inner-city boys with complex trauma. Boys with complex trauma may be less likely to disclose traumatic experiences (e.g., being victims of violence, witnessing violence or deaths of relatives and friends) to peers than one-to-one with professionals (Reynolds et al. 2019). For these boys, displaying vulnerability is perceived as a weakness and, instead, they appeared to minimise their distress in front of peers. Research from men with diagnosed PTSD suggests that masculinity may be an avoidance symptom of trauma; more specifically, men may adopt more traditionally ascribed masculine traits (e.g., physical strength) to compensate for their fears of being perceived as weak (Elder et al. 2017). Although some artists in the current study did disclose the impact of their trauma, it is likely that the true extent of this is much greater.

The performance of aggressive grime and drill lyrics may be a way for young men to mitigate threats, risks, and feelings of unsafety in their community by creating a hypermasculine image to deter those who may harm them. It should be considered that perhaps the violent lyrics may be less about inciting violence and more about protecting themselves from violence. If this is the case, it is vital that appropriate professionals work collaboratively with artists, fans, and communities, as cultures that foster traditional masculine ideology/beliefs can increase the risk and severity of PTSD (Neilson et al. 2020; Sitko-Dominik and Jakubowski 2021), which may subsequently lead to the continuation of a cycle of trauma and violence.

One limitation of this study is that the lyrics that were analysed were predominantly written and performed by Black males from London and therefore may not be representative of all young males. However, similar findings in terms of childhood adversity, gang involvement, and trauma have also been identified in study samples from Kenya (Im et al. 2016) and the USA (Quinn et al. 2017), suggesting that some of the experiences of young Black males in London may not necessarily be exclusive to that population. Furthermore,

the current study only focused on male artists. It would be beneficial for future research to adopt a similar approach to (1) understand the experience of girls and women and their experiences relating to gang activity (which is currently an under-researched area) and (2) explore how female rap artists use music to navigate their experiences and identity.

Another limitation of this study is that only the lyrics in the form of written word were analysed. Thus, the data has limited contextual detail (e.g., vocal tone, gestures, facial expressions), which can impede the analysis of the lyrics. Due to the large sample size, it would be difficult to fit a full in-depth analysis of the lyrics, as well as the accompanying music video for each song, into a single study. However, future research should consider exploring specific themes in more detail. For example, Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards (2018) used narrative analysis to explore gang narratives in three drill music videos (and lyrics). A similar methodology could be used to explore social issues, mental health, or narratives of other themes that are referenced in UK rap-based music. Additionally, focusing on specific genres (e.g., only grime or only drill) or limited time periods would allow for comparisons to be made. It may be that grime artists have different narratives to drill artists or that narratives within genres have changed over time. For example, Hart (2019) found that mental health has been more frequently referenced in recent rap music.

Additionally, the indirect access to artists through their lyrics removes the opportunity to ask further questions or to clarify any information. It is also difficult to ascertain the chronological order of events and experiences (e.g., whether mental health concerns emerged before or after violent offending). However, lyrics do provide a means to accessing a population that may otherwise be seldom heard (Ross et al. 2019). Artists are voluntarily posting information online in the form of lyrics that can be accessed by anyone with an internet connection. Thus, it makes little sense to disregard this as a data source when attempting to understand the culture and circumstances of young people. Similarly, future research should also consider exploring expressions of culture and lived experience conveyed through other forms of media in public spaces, for example, social media posts, blogs, and online videos or offline media such as street art, graffiti, and event flyers as highlighted by Ross et al. (2019).

5. Conclusions

The themes found in the dataset suggest not only a scope but a need to look beyond a superficial analysis of the lyrical content and the making of prejudiced conclusions that artists are glamourising gangs and violence, but rather that frontline professionals and academics alike should pay attention to the full content of lyrics through a trauma-informed perspective within the wider context of the existing psychological literature.

Findings from this study, along with previous research, raise concerns that current policing tactics may be having a reverse effect and are instead contributing to gang violence. It is necessary to further investigate the intersectionality of "gangs" and serious youth violence in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Findings of the study do not support current policing approaches of criminalising or rap-based music such as grime and drill, but rather indicate a need for more trauma-informed and racially and culturally sensitive approaches to tackling gangs and serious youth violence.

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