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'We [mostly] carry guns for the internet': Visibility labour, social hacking and chasing digital clout by Black male youth in Chicago's drill rap scene

ABSTRACT

Much negative attention has been given to the 'drill' music genre, a subgenre of gangsta rap that was born in Chicago's underground hip hop scene in early 2010s. Previous scholarship has highlighted how social media has shifted how gang-affiliated youth in Chicago carefully manage their street reputations, communicate with peers and fuel gang rivalries through platformed creation. Yet still, in the context of drill, I argue that social media self-branding practices also provide these youth a way out of containment and sequestration to gain visibility in the music industry and empower their neighbourhoods. Based on interviews with drill recording artists and their support workers, I explore the content and character of their work, the centrality of work ethic to their racial identity construction and the way they use social media work to build and maintain status, authenticity and

KEYWORDS

hip hop
drill music
social media
media literacy
microcelebrity
platformed creation
popular music

cultivate connections with fans, friends and other cultural producers. Bridging traditional theories of urban sociology with emerging new media scholarship, I suggest this group of artists is a representative case of how the digital practices of disadvantaged Black youth have typically gone mischaracterized in the literature. This study offers new insights into 'capping' as an important tenet to hip hop's visibility labour on social media and how the 'always on' nature of digital labour adds another dimension to the typical utilization of street authenticity in narratives of hip hop music. This article concludes by illuminating the many deep contradictions and misconceptions about technological ingenuity, Black youth agency, hip hop culture and street credibility in urban communities.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In December of 2018, I attended a private 'silent party' at the famed Chicago Recording Company studio located in downtown Chicago (see Figure 1). The posh and historic recording studio, frequently used by high-profile recording artists like Kanye West, Fall Out Boy and Jeremih, was the site of a listening party for rapper G-Herbo's first full-length album, *Humble Beast*. A fair cross-section of the local hip hop scene turned out, along with Herbo's family members, childhood friends and a few members of the local press. The mirrored partitions in the bar's seating area – actually panels of one-way glass concealing flat-screen monitors – displayed a video slideshow that was mostly photos of the MC.

Herbert Randall Wright, better known by his stage name 'G-Herbo', is a 25-year-old African American male rapper from the South Shore area of Chicago.[1] Standing almost six feet and weighing a wiry 165 pounds, Herbo's physical appearance hardly matches the intimidating gangsta bravado that has become a signature within his music. I was introduced to Herbo in 2017 through his manager, Mikkey Halsted,[2] amid a cloud of marijuana smoke, clear cups of Hennessy and a sea of flashing neon glow lights from the myriad of headphones given out to attendees upon arrival. Herbo stood idly by as Mikkey spoke on the microphone to attendees, almost like a little brother impatiently waiting for his older brother to finish introducing him to people. Mikkey boasted to the crowd about Herbo's newfound success:

> We doing this all independently. He's the foundation […]. He's under 25 and no one is fucking with him. He's got almost three million followers on Instagram and Drake retweeting his music. He was doing it for fun, doing tape records on a cellphone.

During Mikkey's speech, it may have appeared he was overstating the virality of Herbo's content on the internet as being overnight. To the contrary, throughout Herbo's decade-long relationship with Halsted, it has shown him to be far more than a budding artist with a fleeting social media following, but a bona fide strategic marketer, legitimate businessman and sought-after cultural influencer. Herbo, whose net worth is now estimated at over 3 million dollars, personifies a new kind of path for an underground rap artist: one who is self-employed and has amassed sustained celebrity and a diversified commercial business through the strength of industry co-signs, a consistent dissemination of online content and loyal community engaged in his musical offerings.

1. South Shore, a once thriving and affluent African American neighbourhood in Chicago at the southern edge of Jackson Park, where the Obama Presidential Library and Museum are to be built, now faces serious economic erosion and violent crime.
2. Mikkey Halsted is a rapper from Chicago. Coming up around the same time as Kanye West, he got signed to Cash Money Records, but was neglected in favour of other artists. He was notable as a guest on songs by Lil' Wayne. Now, he is a local businessman, investing in real estate and restaurants, and an independent record label owner.

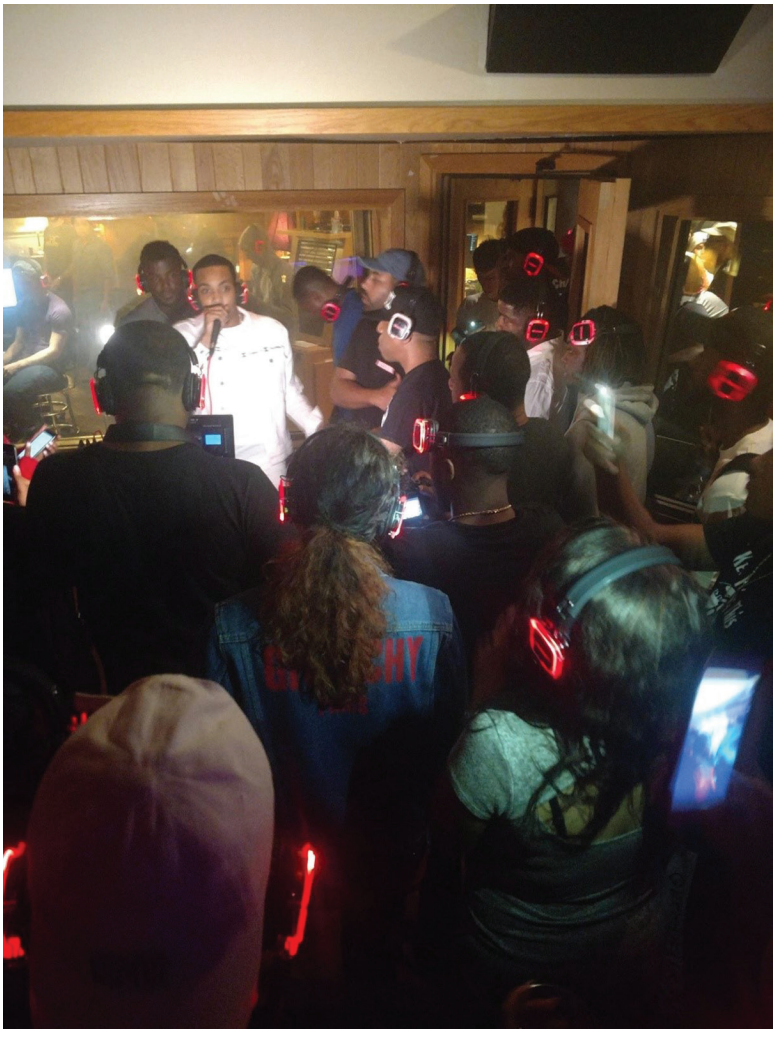

Figure 1: G-Herbo addresses the crowd at his 'silent' listening party at CRC Studios. Photo courtesy of author.

This is quite a prodigious feat considering outcomes of young Black men in Chicago have been historically stymied by spatial segregation, poverty, street violence and lack of job opportunity (Harkness 2013). In response to these conditions, drill music is Chicago's own unique iteration of gangsta rap.[3] In this subculture, drill rappers like G-Herbo carry a great deal of cultural capital. Though many of these artists leverage gang identities to build local reputations, gangsta rap artists generally strive to achieve the highest strata, that of 'umbrella gang identities' (Lopez-Aguado and Walker 2019) – being highly visible group symbols that are only loosely connected to the actual cultures (e.g. disputes, values, beliefs, places) from which they originally derive. Recent studies have examined the intersection of Chicago's gang culture and hip hop music, taking an interest in how digital media complicates reputation management of participants in both worlds (Stuart 2020), tying paratext metadata to

3. While most acknowledge drill music originates in Chicago, a separate drill scene emerged in London and, by the mid-2010s, has gained mainstream popularity. UK drill music evolved its own distinct style of production compared to Chicago drill but maintains much of the lyrical themes of nihilism and gang rivalry (Stuart 2020).

criminal lifestyles (Patton et al. 2014), promoting negative representations of Black life (Moore 2016) and negatively impacting their physical well-being on the streets (Harkness 2013).

Social media has resulted in a world where the expression of creativity is available to everyone in real time. Since there are more lines and layers of communication, urban youth now have new demands to communicate, manage and pace their relationships with digital tools. These new overlapping realities of the digital and physical streets have changed the way urban teenagers interact with each other and have had wide-ranging implications on their public displays of social, racial and gender identities (Lane 2018). In particular, the modern monetization of these identities on social media serves to celebrate and reinforce long-standing constructions of racism, classism, essentialism against Black people in the United States. More recent research has argued that disparities in engagement with these tools have historically hindered Black and Latino youth, leaving them highly visible further behind in educational achievement and twenty-first-century job skill development (Watkins et al. 2018). Despite coming from a digital disadvantage, the success of drill rappers (drillers) in the broader attention economy has been striking, and their technological savvy and ingenuity has largely been overlooked in the academic literature.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to empirically examine the self-branding practices of participants within Chicago's drill rap scene. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and several interviews with drill-associated members of Chicago's hip hop scene, this study explores the role of social media as a resource in their self-branding and connecting to fans. Bridging traditional theories of urban sociology with emerging new media scholarship, I describe how various artists in Chicago's drill scene have translated their visibility into digital clout.[4] Gained through constant engagement on social media, digital clout is the by-product of relational labour (Baym 2018), visibility labour (Abidin 2016) and aspirational labour (Duffy 2018) of drillers, which allows them to create loyalty from fans to produce metrics needed to validate their status in digital spaces. Thus, this article focuses on the social hacking of these drillers, wherein they use inventive social practices (strength in numbers, collective reputation) to succeed in the attention economy.

4. Digital clout is the power in hip hop communities of practice yielded by visibility work situated in mastering the youth-driven tech ecosystem anchored by social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram. This clout allows them to compete, collaborate and connect within the larger hip hop community of cultural producers and fans to build a creative economy for their micro-celebrity despite being largely invisible to the wider public (Evans 2020).

Aspirational, visible and infamous: Hip hop's young and digital

Pathways to careers in the United States that provide value and meaning for young people have historically been stubbornly tied to race and socio-economic background (Watkins et al. 2018). Prior empirical studies have suggested that it is through popular music that the social, professional and technological aspirations of Black youth often come together (Sefton-Green et al. 2020; Watkins 2019). Black youth from urban communities have been also identified in statistical research as early and unlikely adopters of popular mobile communication devices and power users of the internet (e.g. Clark et al. 2017). Nowhere is this more evident than in the context of hip hop culture, which is 'a complex cultural terrain marked by various consumption and production practices of Black youth' (Watkins 2011: 3). The origins of hip hop have a long legacy of innovation bearing a striking resemblance to the participatory norms and relational practices of early twenty-first-century digital media culture. Black and Latin youth in NYC during the 1970s invented hip hop by developing social and creative uses of technology to build awareness

for a new musical genre from scarce resources. These practices demand tremendous handle on what Baym (2018) calls relational labour, or the ability of musicians to use technological ingenuity and do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos to relate to and maintain connectedness within audiences and social networks.

Through the accumulation of hip hop-inflected cultural capital, these youth gain social status and mobility in their peer community and participatory digital media cultures.[5] Though sometimes associated with deviance and crime, digital tools and technology have emerged as a main source of social capital in low-income urban communities of colour (Lane 2018). This form of social capital within Black communities is often context-specific and acquired depending on the situation (Hall 1992). To that point, recent scholarship has written about how hip hop served as a form of resistance for marginalized Black youth in urban America (Forman 2002; Harkness 2013; Lee 2016; Perry 2004; Quinn 2004; Watkins 2019; Williams 2011).

Through the accumulation of hip hop inflected cultural capital in digital spaces, Black youth can often bypass the two-step flow to gain social status, recognition and visibility within their peer community and various social media platforms (Watkins 2019). For example, Williams (2011) detailed the ways in which young Black males used MySpace to bypass corporate-controlled imagery of Black manhood and cultivate hip hop identities that encapsulated and specifically addressed their everyday struggles. Not surprisingly, social media continues to be central to hip hop's community of practice and, in many ways, has developed as a formidable source of self-empowerment for its most visible cultural producers (Evans 2019).

Though the presentation of self on social media is largely important for personal identity and social life generally, it is increasingly important for someone with aspirations in navigating today's creative workforce (Abidin 2016; Baym 2018; Duffy 2017). By allowing DIY hip hop musicians to manage their reputation to audiences well beyond their locale (e.g. Born and Haworth 2017), the digital age has particularly brought on new considerations for the recording artists in that they must now act like social media influencers to secure and maintain a fanbase (Sefton-Green et al. 2020). Within hip hop culture, self-expression often specifically fulfils a need for self-exile from everyday hassles of the physical location of the ghetto and provides opportunity for reinvention of oneself to various publics. For many male participants in drill rap specifically, they are encouraged to use social media to market the material aspects of their gangster social formations and document evidence of street infamy online, as well as to expand their options for social performativity and upward mobility (Stuart 2020).

Thus, social media engagement by hip hop communities, cast in the digital register, can bring visibility to people whose everyday lives would typically be overlooked. Watkins (2019: 19) has referred to this process as social hacking, or the re-engineering of social situations to do something that one was not originally in a position to do, such as creating or publishing digital media content to garner influencer work for corporate brands, monetize audiences of one's online video content and/or secure major label recording contracts. And after content has been produced, users are 'aggregated' by posting, promoting and advertising content on, or via, a wide range of social platforms. These social media circulation efforts, in turn, generate relevant data on user engagement and retention in the form of social referrals, comments, search rank and page views. Such metrics are employed to calculate whether it is profitable to further edit and optimize content, and invest in paid-for promotion or halt

5. In his prominent literary work, 'The forms of capital', Bourdieu (1986) identifies cultural capital as forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages that a person has that give them a higher status in society.

the engagement–optimization–retention–acquisition cycle (Van Dijck et al. in press).

Though discussions of the internet, social media and the public sphere often tend to stress new technologies' transformative power, several recent contributions have focused on how the 'platformization' of cultural production has reinforced structural racism, spatial segregation and political polarization (Fuchs 2014; Noble 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018). Within the hip hop generation, a narrow range of hypermasculine cultural images (e.g. thugs, players of women), characterized by toughness, flamboyance and sexual prowess (Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boles 2013), serves as a 'standard for authenticity' for Black men (Shimeles 2010: 14). Stuart (2020) argues that this standard practice has become more exaggerated for rappers because the capacities of social media disrupt the key impression management practices associated with the 'code of the street' (Anderson 2000), and confirming someone's authenticity now includes doing intensive cross-referencing of their digital footprint with the narratives in their music.

Additionally, realness is the ultimate claim of a successful hip hop artist, while fairness, or appearing to be 'safe', is the ultimate insult to one's character and credibility. Though these forms of authenticity can be seen as problematic, research has largely ignored how this form of digital participation has also given many Black youth the ability to gain global musical reputations while also preserving an authentic reputation in their local neighbourhood.[6] In this study, I will argue that by advancing pioneering principles and often unremarked genius that emerge within marginalized communities, the initial drill hip hop musicians of Chicago ultimately elevated the liminal spaces of cultural knowledge and understanding, spaces often overlooked or misinterpreted by the mainstream media.

METHODS

The interviews for this project took place over a two-year period and relied on fieldwork, including attendance at twenty live performances and the observation of recording sessions, podcasts and local industry tastemaker events. I also relied heavily on the archival data provided by a number of local hip hop websites, particularly FakeShoreDrive.com and SoManyShrimp.com, microblogs as well as the social media profiles of key members of Chicago's drill rap scene.

From the outset, I utilized traditional qualitative methods such as participant observation and interviews, but I also incorporated newer modes of inquiry such as digital ethnography on social networking sites and web-based snowball sampling. Initially, I recruited participants through traditional snowball sampling: I interviewed drill artists in my existing social network and then asked to be introduced to others in their networks who would be willing to participate in the study. Within months, I began employing a virtual variation of this method: I used my Instagram and Twitter pages to offer brief information about my research and encouraged rappers to contact me to be interviewed for the project. My established network of contacts on social media provided further interviewees who often recommended others, helping me construct a large potential sample of interviewees: Chicago-based rappers, label executives, tastemakers, DJs, producers and artist managers.[7] Finally, a key piece to this network were two local filmmakers I met who were producing a documentary on the history of Chicago hip hop. In addition to my initial

6. In proposing the conceptual term of the 'digital clout' in this study, I aim to introduce a term that specifically singles out the reward system in social media ecologies of urban youth of colour. It also harkens how Carter's (2005) 'Black cultural capital' is wielded through communication in online spaces. Building upon Stuart's (2020) concept of online infamy, it focuses on the exaggeration and conversion of negative stereotypes deployed by poor African Americans to be respected and admired on social media among their peer group.

7. Networking in underground hip hop communities has very thin lines between fans and participants (Harrison 2009). Thus, it was easy for me as a prominent actor in Chicago's underground scene to contact key stakeholders and collect a convenient but robust snowball sample.

data, these filmmakers collaborated with me and granted me access to their archive of interviews, which numbered over 300 interview subjects.

For the purposes of this article, I narrowed my focus to analysing fifteen in-depth interviews conducted with key musicians from Chicago's drill rap scene. I conducted or sat in on these interviews via phone or Skype, recording and transcribing them, before using an inductive, grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to distil recurrent themes. I continually cross-checked and questioned patterns as they emerged, testing my tentative conclusions as well as writing research memos as I went along.

All of the participants in this study's materials were African American. Only one of the subjects was a woman, reflecting the larger dearth of female involvement in hip hop. Participants ranged from 16 to 37 years of age; the average subject was around 28 years. While many subjects rapped, some participated in some other capacity such as music production or deejaying. The focus of this study's findings is centred around the time period of 2010–16, which retrospectively has been explained by my respondents as the height of drill music.

There was no incentive for interviewed or observed participants. Study procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the sponsoring institution of the researcher. Additionally, all names denoted with a * have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects. In the following sections of this article, I will discuss the findings of my interviews, the digital ethnographic data associated with a few illustrative cases and their implications for policy-makers concerned with connected learning, and researchers examining the digital divide in low-income communities of colour.

The clout chase

Many times during interviews, my respondents spoke about pursuing visibility as being about gaining clout. The performance for these various practices is what I refer to as the 'clout chasing' – a techno-social practice in the marketplace of attention built around Black youth sharing their 'performance of self' online in hopes for cultural capital and sustained microcelebrity. In the digital ecosystem, Black youth cultural production is characterized by its flow both online and offline and relentless pursuit of 'digital clout'. As an act of self-performance, clout chasing involves self-fashioning and building personal alliances for the accumulation of a loyal and engaged online audience. On the web, clout allows you to attract the right people and, at the right time, change what they think or do for your benefit. In recognizing the clout economy as the by-product of Black digital practices, this study demands new thinking and a new focus on the ways in which the youth of hip hop mobilize their cultural capital as 'off-label users' (Duguay 2020) to become professional tastemakers/influencers.[8] Clout chasing exposes how the dominant spaces of music production and the systems that coordinate its consumption are riddled with gender inequality and harassment, racism and essentializing, musician exploitation and corporate gains. Largely invisible and marginalized in the mainstream economy, the clout economy is full of youth who find their self-value in relation to the data their community generates in the digital street.

As I will soon illuminate, our subjects used their clout to bypass the gatekeeping practices within the corporate tiers of the media industry and gain

8. For more detail on the definition of clout economy, see Evans (2020).

microcelebrity through shadows of social networking platforms. Despite such variances in content creators' particular motivation, I identify deviance in drill as something that produced identities, communities and politics that operate as acts of resistance to invisibility of their local communities in digital spaces (beating the algorithms). Additionally, I discuss the practice of 'capping' – using the carnivalesque: drillers negotiate ways to strategically represent themselves as subjects of fetishistic desire and spectacle of cultural voyeurism (performing the outlaw persona).

The emergence of drill, Chief Keef and branding Chiraq on YouTube

Around 2008, Chicago's hip hop music scene gave rise to the term 'Chiraq', a controversial mash-up of the place names Chicago and Iraq, to describe predominantly Black neighbourhoods on Chicago's South Side (Cureton 2017). In many ways, Chiraq has become shorthand for capturing the life-and-death struggles and feelings of anger and alienation that poor people of colour experience within the city. The nickname stands in marked contrast to the optimism and sense of belonging found in many rappers' portrayal of this version of Chicago as their home. The renaming of Chicago as Chiraq among the most popular drill rappers and their local listeners represents a newer form of resistance initiated by youth who have experienced a lifetime of hyper-segregation, chronic poverty, poor education in overcrowded classrooms and a regular loss of loved ones to both prison cells and gunshots (Evans 2020). Rappers born and reared in the impoverished south and west sides of Chicago have collectively popularized the nickname; most notable of this group was Chief Keef (Levey 2017).

Before he was arrested in December in 2011, Keef (see Figure 2) was a 16-year-old local hip hop star, almost completely unknown outside of Chicago's South Side neighbourhoods. He had a song called 'Bang', which had more than 400,000 views on YouTube, and had made a mixtape in a friend's bedroom and a dedicated Twitter following amongst Chicago high school students. However, he was not considered a famous rapper to those outside of that network. His Facebook profile had less than 2,000 followers, and he still lived with his grandmother (Drake 2012).

In 2012, Keef cemented his national recognition following the commercial success of his song 'I Don't Like'. As the lead single for Keef's debut album, *Finally Rich*, 'I Don't Like' charted on the Billboard Hot 100, accumulated tens of millions of listens online and helped drill break into the nation's musical mainstream. Within months of the song's release, drill was seemingly everywhere, as international hip hop icons like Kanye West and Drake began co-signing Drill rappers, and record labels initiated bidding wars over the South Side of Chicago's budding rap talent.

In 2012, however, drill music was still one of the only music scenes to exist almost exclusively via YouTube videos and free streaming sites like SoundCloud and DatPiff.com. This means of DIY distribution would set a precedent for the digital era in the rap music industry, driven by an ecosystem based around single songs, curated playlists, song snippets and low-budget music videos that could be edited and released instantly by artists direct to their audiences via social media platforms (Neff 2017). The most popular YouTube videos for drill songs were often shot in low-income apartments or on street corners, with the local crews standing behind the driller performing, pointing weapons

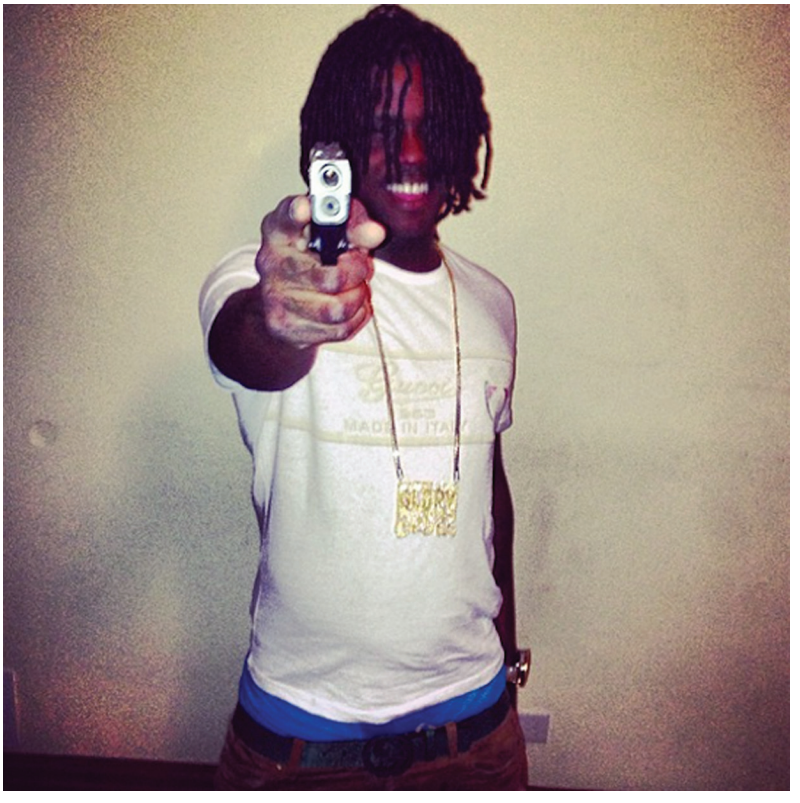

Figure 2: Chief Keef, aka Keith Cozart, points a gun at the camera. Photo retrieved via artist's Twitter profile.

at the camera and touting lyrics describing the recent events of ongoing street gang conflicts. Rapper Stage Wrecker* elaborated on the rationale behind the formulaic imagery and lyrics found in drill music videos:

> Guys were talking about, this is where they shot Lavell on the Southside blah blah blah and the YouTube video would be exactly where they shot Lavell. Drill was originally like the news source for the hoods you didn't live in. It's WWE for poverty. Make the wildest videos to get clout.

In considering the digital participation of urban youth of colour, friendship-driven practices and visibility labour that young people of hip hop find appealing can be recreational but also essential as they build social communities, peer relations and seek cultural capital (Watkins and Cho 2018). Besides providing entertainment, drill music cliques organized friendship networks and built 'competitive sociability' among teens to seek respect from their peer group in online and offline contexts (Stuart 2020: 186). Drillers often used their umbrella of popularity to traverse gang turf boundaries and avoid active gang conflicts within their neighbourhoods. To this point, I was surprised to find that many drill artists in my fieldwork corralled promotional teams that were purposefully composed of youth who identified with several different, even rival, traditional gangs.

For example, OG Scooter* posted a (since-deleted) picture to his Instagram profile on 21 August 2014 that showed him and three of his friends throwing up seemingly different gang signs while he counts money, and a caption under the photo that read 'Different sets, STILL my bruddas 100 #eatsquad' and a geolocation tag of 'Bank of America'. Beyond using the post as a way to validate his status as a successful mogul, it appeared that he was referencing his record label (Eat Squad Entertainment*) in his caption to indicate that his clique member's gang affiliations to rival gangs were less important than the business they conducted together. Scooter, an artist and owner of a recording studio where I conducted fieldwork, explained this further in an interview:

> This Chiraq thing, for us in the hood, became a badge of honour. Drill is like a movement that is bigger than the gangs. We squad in every hood so that our music is buzzing in every hood. We got folks from all over the city using the hashtags on social media and getting the algorithm to make us trending on YouTube, SoundCloud and IG (Instagram). Now, that's translating to interest in the music and more influence. Chiraq and Drill are both global brands that we built in our neighbourhoods for our neighbourhoods.

In this excerpt, Scooter's quote exemplifies that having a collective of support workers on social media was critical to gaining career opportunities for drill artists. This point was reiterated by artist and studio owner Young Benz* in his interview:

> The DIY/indie stage is where the intent has the most value […] maybe not from a monetary standpoint, but in regards to its purpose (to our city) it's priceless. The reason Keef blew up so big is because of all the people that came together to support him and build an infrastructure around his success online. Everybody in the crew ganged up on the internet to bring him attention. The iPhone leveled the playing field for hood dudes to control the narrative on the internet. Guns and money sell in hip hop and that's what we were selling everyday online.

For example, on 12 June 2012 (see Figure 2), videographer Azae Productions posted a promotional video to his YouTube account titled 'Chief Keef x Lil Reese x Fredo x SD x GBE Posted On Lamron', showing Keef and his associates hanging out on a summer day on Lamron.[9] The video, which is only two minutes and thirty seconds, simply shows Keef and his friends playing music while standing in front of a brand-new luxury SUV, counting money, smoking weed, holding semi-automatic weapons and talking to the camera about the dangers of everyday life on their block. The video garnered 1.4 million views on YouTube in less than two months. It would be the first in a series of low-budget 'lifestyle videos' that Keef and approximately twenty of his associates would cross-promote through various YouTube accounts and repost to their personal and 'burner' Twitter, Facebook and Instagram profiles.[10] One of Keef's friends and close collaborators, producer Young Chop, echoed how the many social media conversations around Keef's troubles with the law served as an opportunity for publicity:

> We figured we should capitalize off of the news and police attention (of Keef's arrest). We were not thinking about hit records. We was just

9. Lamron is normal spelled backwards and stands for 63rd Street and Normal Avenue, a street corner of Chicago heavily referenced in Keef's songs as his home 'turf' and gang territory.

10. Burner accounts are anonymous social media profiles used by individuals to post in third person about themselves, harass people or solicit encounters.

> thinking about making something that was gonna go crazy (when you search it) on the Internet. Make fake accounts, tag and @ each other to trade audiences. Get more views! We knew that if we had the clout, we could start doing shows and get a label to sign us.

Historically, streaming services have publicly presented themselves as a tool for independent musicians to subvert the barriers to entry erected by the traditional music industry (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018). Due to lack of access to these subscription streaming services, drillers relied upon co-generative data via social media to manipulate algorithms and recommend their music to audiences. Thus, drillers gained visibility by hacking the typical barriers of music distribution and exhibition. Artist and producer Good Boy* spoke at length about how he cleverly used titles of Keef's songs in the captions of his own YouTube videos as a way to harness a bigger audience online:

> Keef taught us that we didn't need to go looking for the labels. All we needed was a computer, a smartphone, and a popular director like DGainz. If we promote ourselves using Drill or Chiraq in the title of the video, then they will eventually put us in the suggested videos when people look for Keef. Then we get some of his clout just by being associated with his videos.

Another great example of this synergy was in October of 2012, when Chicago videographer DGainz uploaded a music video for a Good Boy song the same day as he uploaded Chief Keef's 'Love Sosa' to his personal YouTube account. The song, unsupported by a label, was leaked by Good Boy and his management team in an effort to capitalize off of the excitement surrounding the release of Keef's debut album on Interscope Records. With the help of DGainz's 500,000 YouTube channel subscribers, several of his friends began cross-promoting the video through message boards and various social media platforms. Good Boy's amassed almost 4 million views in its first three months of release.

Keef's co-manager, Peeda Pan, talked about the success of that video as a turning point in Keef, realizing that his personal success had spawned others to copy his expert technological skills and novel self-promotion tactics:

> More action happened when we all connected to push the narrative of Chief Keef together. We took ownership of Chi-Raq and Drill. We saw everyone's success as a positive. We saw it as rising above our opposition, or surviving a war and being proud of the force we represented. Keef went from designing MySpace pages for money, to selling Twitter followers to his high school friends and then making millions off monetizing YouTube. Everyone wanted in on it.

American mainstream media has historically constructed a schema of gang-affiliated Black youth that is synonymous with violence, crime, deviance and education disengagement (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003). In this case, however, Chief Keef and his affiliates used this infamy to commodify themselves on social media. What Peeda's quote illuminates is that drillers used their online attention to create not only a jumping-off point for voyeurism about ghetto life in Chicago but also a career pathway to lift themselves out of obscurity. Ultimately, drillers used strategy to make their content more legible in the digitized attention economy. This legibility gained them clout in a

unique system of benefits that afforded these artists the spoils (cash, housing, cars, business partners and corporate sponsorship) of sustained fame.

Capping: Exploiting stereotypes and curating street personas in the digital space

> To be nigga, or to express as one, doesn't need to be reduced to labor, resistance or morality but rather an expression of extreme pleasure in being Black without fear.
>
> R. A. T. Judy

Realness is the ultimate claim of a successful hip hop artist, while fairness is the ultimate insult to one's character and credibility. In hip hop, scholars have described authenticity as relating to demographic aspects including cultural blackness, 'hard' heterosexual masculinity, hypersexual femininity and coming from 'the streets' (Low et al. 2013). What is real and what is fake has grown increasingly complicated given the ability to curate online performances of self. In the marketplace of attention, people are increasingly able to use social networking sites to curate (and exaggerate) their physical realities and thus manipulate their social, professional and moral worlds for all sorts of benefits and incentives (Cunningham 2013). In this regard, hip hop artists often have been blamed as central to the violence, misogyny, pathology and resilience of the urban ghetto (Smitherman 1997: 7).[11] However, as bell hooks (1994) argued, sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in various forms of gangsta rap are largely a reflection of the prevailing values in American society, values that are sustained and rewarded by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (1994: 1).

That said, many of the drillers I interviewed described how they took joy in broadcasting their hyperviolent and excessive lifestyle on social media in hopes to build popularity and gain followers. They referred to this as 'capping', which I define as the willing pursuit to acquire attention in the eyes of a wide audience by means of exaggerating one's material wealth, sexual prowess or violent nature. Artist Big Ballin Homie* explained to me why he decided that he (and his clique) should exaggerate their gang involvement to gain more attention for their music:

> Cappin' is a weird thing to me. I don't really be cappin but it is entertainment. I just emphasize a certain part of myself that will get the most attention. I used to have photo shoots in the alley with different outfits holding a big ass gun. If a young ass kid posts different pictures everyday with a different gun, people gonna believe it's mine, right?

Shortly after this statement, Homie then showed me a screenshot of his newsfeed, where he was calling out 'Opps' (rival gangs) online often in the caption, using a recycled photo of him holding his older cousin's semi-automatic weapon at a music video shoot. The photo had over 5000 likes on Instagram. I asked him why he chose to post a photo holding a gun he did not own, and he spoke to me about how capping helped his perceived authenticity:

> We gotta carry guns for the Internet. I did it for folks on the Southside to continue to respect me. (Social media and broadcasting) Stuff can be awkward because it can look like you're doing what you're doing for clout but in this era, if you don't show it, you lose.

11. In this article, I refer to the ghetto as a part of an American city, especially a slum area, typically occupied by African Americans and/or Latinos.

Rapper Mr Dollaz* also explained how the hunt for getting likes, views, followers and subscribers was a very strategic game with very high stakes for drillers:

> Big ass guns, lots of pretty chicks, money and tons of dope smoke. It doesn't matter if it's my gun or not, this picture let's people know I'm not to be played with. More and more clout. Who cares how you get it? Once, you get that million dollar deal, no one cares if you was capping on IG [Instagram]! (*laughs*)

Even once within the corporate tier of the music industry, respondents spoke candidly about still feeling pressure to post provocative things on social networking sites in order to keep their street reputations. Within this tension between authenticity and professionalism, artists carefully managed the actionable intelligence on their current whereabouts and street activities despite increasing the risk of being targeted for violence by their rivals. Sony Music recording artist Young Benz* elaborated on this:

> We would have meetings with the label and they made us go to Atlanta or Miami to lay low from gang wars at home. Still, I'd look on Instagram and my homies would be posting pictures of me back on the block as if he were still on the block. As much as I hated it, it made me look so real to his fans.

In constructing a reputation for toughness, there appeared to be several social media scripts drill rappers generally utilized in seeking to resonate with their imagined audiences. All of these scripts were set in the 'rap hustler' archetype, the high rolling gangsta who makes money within the backdrop of an urban war zone.[12] Though this impression management was largely done through seeking approval of their male peers through certain poses, scripts of toughness and broadcasted performances of entrepreneurial behaviours also were meant to tell a story of ghetto authenticity to spectators of ghetto culture. Benz further explained:

> Most days, I be just chilling in the studio or with my daughter, but that shit is boring. No one wants to see that. I'm going to do what I have to in order to feed my family. Like, if that means borrowing jewelry, showing Gucci, renting foreign [cars], posing with money or going on live or the snap [Snapchat] when I'm smoking dope with females […] I give them what they want to see. I don't show them the boring stuff. I'll lose followers because that kills the fantasy.

Literature on gangsta rap has continually described a tension between what artists perform authentically and what they do as a way to fulfil the expectations of their audience (Perry 2004; Quinn 2004). Andrew Barber, founder and owner of Fakeshoredrive.com, a Chicago-dedicated rap website, elaborated on this sentiment that the chase for digital clout transformed demands placed on drillers to participate in capping:

> Everyone [doing drill] is just from the internet age and they are constantly engaging with it for clout. All of the younger emerging artists [In Chicago] just seem to want internet fame solely rather than some

12. Scholars have previously pointed out the dichotomy of 'front stage' and 'backstage' work of creative labour (Goffman 1978; Grazian 2004), and others have noted the ability of social media to allow its users to present an 'edited self' to the public (Duffy 2017; Marwick 2012).

> local symbolic title within the city. These newer artists don't seem to want to represent Chicago. They just want to represent themselves, their clique, get money and get likes and followers. [Drillers] are unbounded from Chicago's limits when they broadcast their most violent and outrageous content.

According to hooks (2004), making money is the primary marker of individual success within Black male culture, regardless of how one acquires said money. To that point, many of the drillers who I interviewed chased clout as an effort to gain human worth and respect in a world they felt misunderstood in. Atlantic Records recording artist Young Tay* explained this to me one day while in his self-made home recording studio:

> Where I'm from we lean towards the money. We want to get rich. We never wanted to work no jobs. The gang stuff became stupid once there was no money in it. People were fighting over blocks we didn't own. I just started learning things about the internet to get ahead. If people was getting rich for jumping off of buildings, would you go jump off of a building? I would.

Though there are many budding drill artists who have succumbed to street violence as a result of the reputations made in their social media posts, many of the current popular Chicago rap artists on the corporate tier of the industry (e.g. King Louie Lil' Durk, G-Herbo, Lil Bibby and Chief Keef) reap financial benefits of the same poor, blighted, disinvested Black community areas of concentrated violence even in their physical absence.[13] Since they successfully use hyperlocal narratives about these neighbourhoods to rise to prominent stature, many aspiring drill artists feel the need to imitate their tactics as a promotional gimmick despite the risks involved. Later in his interview, Tay described:

> Now, people see that you can get famous. Once Keef and Louie did it, everyone decided they wanted to be a rapper […] get the groupies, the clout and the money. They think it's easy. They shoot pictures of themselves in the studio next to real rappers, flashing money and guns, smoking weed, sipping lean and they think that's going to get them clout. Now, (with the internet) some artists could come from absolutely nothing one week, you've never even heard of them – ten days after you first heard their name, their songs are charting, and they're the talk of social media. Like it only seems like guy comes out of nowhere. They work an entry point for 24/7, next thing you know, that's all you see on your timeline.

In the twenty-first century, all cultural producers must now learn how to self-brand themselves and present themselves to a public online (Abidin 2016, 2018). The modern hip hop mogul, repositioned as a social media influencer, still relies on the spectacle of the more impoverished masses to produce the raw material, for which, and upon which, his ascent is made even more emblematic (Smith 2003: 85). As the number of amateur cultural producers was exponentially growing in all facets of the media industry, Chicago's drill musicians found ways that have allowed them to find visibility despite doing so with less social and economic capital. Drillers exploited negative portrayals

13. Lil Jojo, Lil Mister, Young Pappy, Nuski, FBG Duck, Young Trell, King Von and Blood Money are all well-known drill artists who were murder victims during the course of my field work.

about the city's Black communities to amp up their popularity online. Social media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation (Marwick and boyd 2011) Exaggerating stereotypes and converting their negative connotations figured centrally in how respondents in this study networked and self-promoted, crafting their own scripts of toughness and using their ingenuity to successfully use the context collapse of digital spaces to their advantage.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

While previous academic studies on drill music's impact have focused on the narratives of street violence and conflicts among rival gangs in Chicago, this study aims to make visible the many issues related to how urban youth of colour are overcoming equity and participation gaps in technology usage amidst the trauma of poverty and violence. Erroneously, many have attributed how youth of colour 'put culture to work' as devoid of work ethic, ingenuity or savvy. Rather than viewing the media practices of these youth as merely being deviant, their practices should be viewed as adaptive and innovative. Particularly within their usage of cell phones, drill artists mobilized teams for the marketing and distribution of their media products. In the end, many would leverage their social networks to transform barriers keeping them out of the commercial music industry. These drill rappers were incorporating Black agency into the possibilities of blackness as technology or ,as Andre Brock (Amrute and Brock 2020: 11:30) suggests, 'Black folk as technical experts employing an ethics of care to make $1 out of 15 cents'. By framing these youths' engagement with social media platforms as aspirational labour, this reframes them as cultural producers who strategically found massive audiences despite the minimal resources they possessed.

However, I do not wish to reinforce 'new racism', in which Black Americans' inherent strength and will to overcome structural racism have only been slightly reauthored in ways that glorify personal resilience and resourcefulness (Hill-Collins 2004). In an effort to bridge the gap between the 'cultural' and 'transition' branches of youth studies, this study offers an example of how young people of colour build meaning and creatively shape their lives while attending to the 'structural limitations' they face within digital spaces (Woodman and Bennett 2015: 7). Through the promotion of a persona highlighting gangster motifs of exotic cars, promiscuous women, luxury clothing, expensive liquor and a 'never say die' attitude, my respondents spoke at length about how they utilized digital tools and technologies to transcend what Diawara (1994) has called the imprisoning common sense of racial 'immanence' that confines Black people to the immutable realm of the stereotype. That is, when participating in an online space, Blackness lives as an existential here, largely unrestricted by the fixity and pejorative reduction of the Black body that occurs offline (Brock 2020). Through the elements of empowerment, pleasure and subversive strategies, drill rappers were a new iteration of hip hop's penchant for inventive Black social practice: simultaneously leveraging social media to feel alive, important and visible.

In considering drill music's ascension into popular culture, I seek to broaden the palette of research looking at forms of online participation by youth of colour. As such, this study also raises insights into how individuals attribute different

meanings to the ways in which Black youth gather publicly as well as when they populate the 'digital street'. Content that mainstream media industry and search engine algorithms would typically flag as threatening or marginalized often are assumed to reflect the social values of youth in Black communities. The visibility labour practices of drillers provide an example of how race, class, gender and geography have influenced the innovation of digital content distribution in unintended ways. Though violence themes permeated much of their musical content, many drill artists sought to exploit their online infamy to build local businesses, accumulate resources, hire other local residents and become change agents for their home communities. Furthermore, this suggests that the energy and expertise of the participants in these types of hip hop movements could (and should) be better harnessed to help them build more positive social communities, peer relations and cultural identities.

Democratization of digital tools and technologies has made the barrier to entry into the hip hop music industry much easier, yet still as risky in finding actual success. The days of the hip hop artist selling millions of records by record labels promoting him or her through mass media have now given way to promotion in the digital street, chasing visibility through likes, reposts and followers on social media. This study suggests hip hop digital scenes can (and should) be more recognized by scholars and stakeholders as a legitimate site of labour for urban youth of colour. Since opportunities are not always available to men of colour in the formal labour market, many are distrustful of that system and opt to participate in more entrepreneurial endeavours. This allows them to control their image, create and promote their personal narrative, maintain individuality and find a sense of self-worth and belonging in something positive. It is in the attention economy that Black males demonstrate high levels of engagement, motivation and mastery.

To conclude, I believe this study illuminates social hacking as a skill required by youth of colour in low-income communities to sustain participation in digital media culture, and society at large could stand to gain by not overlooking their creativity and ingenuity to make new (and distinct) trend-setting media practices. Researchers, educators, administrators and policy-makers alike must reconsider the opportunities presented from urban youth and view the ways they currently use digital media tools in their everyday lives as a possible asset towards occupational success. There are many other settings in which young people of colour build spaces through social media in order to perform relational labour while navigating their everyday lives. As Black youth continue to evolve in how they develop and participate in digital communities, media scholarship that examines the specific concepts that distil attributes of their media ecologies will be necessary to fully understand how the democratization of digital technology is both positively and negatively impacting life in urban subcultures.

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