

# Music and Identity:

Exploring the relationship between UK urban  
music and expressions of identity in youth-  
orientated black culture in North London

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between UK urban music, specifically genres such as drill and grime, and the formation of identity among Black youth-orientated culture in North London. Using a constructivist epistemology and grounded theory approach, the research aims to understand how music acts as both a medium for self-expression and a site for negotiating individual and group identities. The study draws upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) to investigate the ways music influences social dynamics, self-perception, and group belonging.

The main method of data collection was a compressed time mode ethnography which, involved interviews, observations, and informal conversations with young men aged 16–34 mainly from African or Caribbean backgrounds. This research reveals how UK urban music provides a platform for resisting negative societal stereotypes, reinforcing street codes, and navigating socio-economic challenges. Furthermore, the study highlights how self-stereotyping and media representations impact self-esteem and identity expression within this cohort. It discusses the dual role of drill music in both reinforcing and challenging cultural narratives associated with urban Black youth.

The findings indicate that while music is a powerful tool for expressing and asserting identity, it is also shaped by structural inequalities and media portrayal, which affect the participants' ability to see beyond culturally imposed limitations. This research contributes to broader discussions on race, culture, and youth identity in the UK, and suggests that music can play a pivotal role in both the positive and negative aspects of identity development in marginalised communities.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis is a qualitative study based on a constructivist epistemology using a grounded theory approach. In line with good academic practice, I need to outline my background and experiences, as these may influence my observations and interpretations (Tong et al, 2007). This thesis will give an account of how my understanding of identity and in turn, its relationship to music developed. This arose from an increasing familiarity with the literature and by taking a grounded theory approach to the data from the interviews and observations. As the *‘researcher is an instrument in a qualitative inquiry,’* (Patton, 1999), this section will provide the background context of myself as a researcher by describing my involvement in the community of Tottenham.

## Section 1.1 - The Influence of Drill Music and the Moral Panic:

### Why This Study Matters

*‘One in three gangland murders in London linked to drill music’*

*(Independent, 2021)*

Shocking headlines such as this have given rise to a public fear of drill music. Based on a 2021 Public Exchange Report, *‘How knife crime in the capital - how gangs are drawing another generation into a life of crime’* (Falkner, 2021), the media has capitalised on this sensational statistic (Odling writing in the Daily Mail, 2021) to create a moral panic. It is easy

to see a connection between rising crime statistics and rising drill followers yet as Lambros Fatsis, a criminologist at the University of Brighton points out in an interview with The Independent that the report has,

*'shaky evidence, uses contested terminology carelessly and risks wild assumptions that are based on falsehoods and misinterpretations.'*

*(Fatsis as quoted in Kinglsey, 2021)*

Despite Fatsis' reservations about the report the media has continued to encourage the public disdain for drill music. This particular public disdain towards drill music appears to be a smaller strand of a much wider political debate around race in the UK. There has been extensive research into music, groups and subcultures, which shows music can help shape the context-contingent nature of identity by providing expected behaviours and responses (Spracklen, K., 2018; Hawkins, 2015; Barton, 2018). The evidence suggests that music can influence our social identity. For example, there has been a clear influence of American culture on British music (Ilan, 2012) which has the potential for other influences such as fashion, politics and religion to be more easily transmitted. This was evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement that took place during the writing of this thesis in which the death of a Black American man caused public outrage across the UK particularly in black communities (Ashley & Stone, 2023). It seems as I conclude the writing of this thesis that the topic of race is once again at the forefront of social discussions with nationwide riots happening in the wake of the Southport stabbings. While there are significant social reasons for this research my own motivations are much more personal. In this section, I aim to provide the context for these motivations.

Firstly, I outline how I came to be interested in the topic of identity within Black youth-orientated culture. I recall an interaction with a drill artist I was managing, which sparked the initial inquiry and explored how this informed my epistemology. I then provide an overview of the research location, Tottenham. Finally, I provide definitions of music artists and music genres as used in this thesis to provide understanding for the readers.

### 1.1.1 - Researching Black Identity as a White Scholar: Navigating Positionality and Reflexivity

I am going to start by ripping off the plaster. I was born to a white father from Northern Ireland and a white mother from Oldham. I grew up in predominantly white areas of the Wirral and Norfolk. On the face of it, my background can only raise the question, *'Why on earth are you studying black identity?'*. This question is often asked in two manners. One is genuinely intrigued as to how someone with my upbringing would end up studying this topic, and secondly, in a way that questions my integrity and ability to understand such a subject. Naturally, I would prefer it to be the first approach; however, I completely understand the position of the second approach. It is a question I have wrestled with myself, do I have the right to discuss someone else's experience? Do I have a white saviour complex? Am I simply perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing societal division? In this section, I aim to provide some context around my decision to undertake this thesis to help inform your own answers to these questions.

At sixth form in Norfolk, I met my close friend Vertex. The school was a public boarding school, one of the two in the country. While I was a day pupil, Vertex was a boarder who went back to London in the holidays. We bonded over a love for UK urban music, and it wasn't long until I went to visit him in Tottenham. I can vividly remember my first visit to his

housing estate. I got off the train and rang Vertex who told me to walk past the chip shop, past the petrol station and through the middle of the flats. I made my way towards him expecting to see his smiley face waiting for me. Instead, I was greeted by a group of around 30-40 young guys walking towards me. Fortunately, before I could even react Vertex pushed his way out to the front and saluted me in front of everyone. Even though he had validated me I could feel the stares of 30 faces on me. Over the next few years, I visited the estate several times and even shot my first music video there for a sixth-form project.

I moved to Northumberland Park, Tottenham, when I was 18 to pursue a career in music videos. Vertex and I had attempted university to study film and video but were disengaged and left after six months. Without much going for us, our lucky break came when Vertex attended a recording studio called Always Recording. While he was recording a track he heard the owner state that he needed someone to make a website and a video for the studio. Vertex volunteered our services and started the beginning of our music video career.

The community, for me, was a diverse collection of parent cultures that had amalgamated into a new identity for the young people of North London. This new identity enabled the young people to cope with the challenges of the socio-economic environment in which they found themselves (Visser, 2020). The new identity allows the young people to navigate an understanding of both British and their parents' cultures simultaneously. It allows young people to connect and share a commonality with peers from different parental cultural backgrounds. Music seemed to play a vital role in forming this new identity within this community. My involvement in music allowed me to see its ability to unite a community through shared lived experiences. I witnessed first-hand how music dictated fashion trends, such as Dappy's famous Sherpa hat or Stormzy's red Adidas tracksuit, and words such as *safe*

being accepted in wider society's common language. Music seemed to solidify and document this rising new identity within inner city London. It was around this time I became interested in the psychology of culture. I noticed myself almost addicted to telling people I worked in the music industry due to the positive responses I would receive. I was intrigued by this concept and decided to undertake a degree in business psychology. For my dissertation, I explored this concept and questioned whether non-creative professionals felt there was a positive social response to working in the music industry.

While in Tottenham, I worked with a successful drill artist whom a major record label had just signed. There was one day in particular that stood out for me. We had rented him a recording studio that charged £2000 per hour. The artist, however, turned up two and a half hours late for this session, wasting a significant amount of money. As a manager, I discussed this with him to try to make him understand his shortcomings. During our conversation, I stated that he had been given the '*golden ticket*', a way to make a lot of '*legitimate*' money, an important distinction in Tottenham. He responded, '*I would rather be a hood millionaire than live in a house in the hills*', indicating that he would prefer to stay in Tottenham and have relative wealth rather than so much money that he moved away. This confused me for a moment as my understanding of urban culture was that the house in the hills symbolised having made it out of the *hood*, supposedly the ultimate dream for any young black *rapper*. I had recently read a paper exploring domestic abuse victims and why they stay in relationships (Cravens et al, 2015). The paper spoke about how low self-esteem and self-perception are contributing factors to decisions about staying and leaving the abusive relationship. In many settings, it is suggested that abuse can confirm an individual's low self-perception about themselves. Therefore, the abuse is seen as valid as they perceive themselves as a person who deserves it. This proposed a link between identity and self-



perception of worth. In this situation, the drill artist wanted success, however, he seemed to be limiting his potential scope in line with his own self-perceptions. At the time this felt like an injustice that a young man would limit himself based on negative stereotypes thrust on him by the mainstream culture. Watching the media I did not feel there was sufficient representation of young black men to counter the negative media stereotypes. I believed my ability to tell people's stories would be more beneficial in the world of academia than that of entertainment so I decided to undertake a PhD.

Anecdotally, I pondered on the topic of identity. I wanted to understand why the drill artist seemed to have developed these self-limiting perceptions. Another example of this perception was his reluctance to eat in '*fancy*' restaurants. After signing his deal, he requested to go to a *chicken shop*, something he felt more comfortable doing. While understandable, it seemed in contrast to the extravagant ethos within urban music (Whitley, 2011). This raised two questions: 1. Can self-perception limit ambition? 2. What is my own understanding of how identity is formed and reinforced?

### 1.1.2 - The Role of Self-Perception in Limiting Ambition: Reflections on Identity and Opportunity

Elster (2020) explored youth voices in Tottenham post-riots. In this paper, he uses the reflexivity of the young people to explore their situation. This reflexivity highlighted a clear us vs. them scenario. The young people felt disconnected from mainstream society and saw the media as reinforcing these stereotypes. The participants noted that the media and wider society:

- *tend to misrepresent them;*

- *have no real sense of 'what [they're] going through' (to quote one of the participants); and,*
- *portray them as a homogeneous entity.*

(Elster, 2020)

During my own experience within the community, I recognised these concepts. These are not individual views but a position held by the majority of the community I interacted with. In a report commissioned by the UK government, Moore et al (2011) confirmed that *'the media distorted perceptions of young black people's involvement in crime'*, by exaggerating the likelihood of them being involved in crime. The misrepresentation of minorities is a recognised problem with the media (Cannizzaro & Gholami, 2018; Crichlow, 2009; 2014). This is analogous to research carried out by Gordon (2018), who, when looking at the way Northern Ireland reported on young people, found that two-thirds of articles mentioning young people did so in a negative light, referring to them as the 'perpetrators'. This discernment can create a self-perpetuating cycle in which the young people state, *'if I am going to get blamed on this, then I might as well do it'*. Gordon attributes this to labelling theory, the idea that an individual may behave in a particular way based on the labels given to them by others. This appeared relevant to the drill artist, who seemed to be conditioned by the portrayal of a stereotype of young black men in the media. At the time, this seemed conflicting; why would an individual adopt a negative stereotype rather than reject it in favour of their own positive image? This question sparked a desire to understand how an identity was formed and maintained.

### 1.1.3 - Exploring Identity Formation: Integrating Personal Experience with Sociocultural Theory

My time working as a music video director gave me an appreciation of identity. I would be given a brief from a record label that outlined the budget, the target audience and the 'vibe' the artist wishes to portray. For example, I would be told that I would have a £30,000 budget, the target audience is teenagers, and the vibe is a fun, happy summer song. It was then my job to produce a 'treatment'. This was a proposal for the video that would outline my vision. It was vital for me to use the right imagery in order to relate to the artist's fans. To do this, I needed to think about stereotypes within identity. The video had to appeal to as many people as possible from the target audience; therefore, I needed to identify the characteristics that helped view them as a homogenous group. This positioned me with a sociological perspective looking at how groups operate. So, applying that perspective to the current conundrum, it seemed natural to view this as a conflict between two groups: young black men and mainstream society. One of the most notable psychological theories on conflict is Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT seemingly provides a framework for understanding how groups are formed and then how the interactions between these groups affect the individual (Huddy, 2004; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Brown (b), 2020). Social Identity Theory recognises that individuals will adopt group identities necessary to maintaining positive self-esteem (Iacoviello et al, 2017; Martiny & Rubin, 2016). It then highlights the cognitive approaches involved in achieving positive self-esteem which are understood within SIT as identity management strategies, a concept I will explore in more detail further in the thesis (Ellemers, 1993). These processes were seen most visibly during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. However, due to my

background in the music industry, I wanted to combine the concepts of Social Identity Theory and music. This thesis aims to explore how music may influence the processes involved within Social Identity Theory.

Stamps and Mastro (2020) tentatively showed that sensationalised news could create emotional group-based responses, particularly regarding race. During this thesis there was a significant social protest based on race, the Black Lives Matter Movement (Joseph-Salisbury et al, 2020). My social media feeds would be inundated with articles, images and discussions about race. I changed my profile picture to an all-black image to display my social position on the issue and set about engaging in said discussions. It was a fascinating time as a social psychologist to see topics in your PhD being displayed on a global scale. Debates on black identity, policing, the UK/US relationship, and the influence of music and culture were being talked about from pubs to parliament. There was a clear division between pro and anti-BLM protestors with many of the processes of SIT being displayed through the conflict.

It seemed natural to see the identity of youth-orientated black culture as being formed through the attrition with the mainstream culture. However, throughout this thesis, it seemed that the intragroup dynamics rather than the intergroup ones were more impactful. The participants seemed more defined by their interactions with other group members rather than the mainstream society. In order to examine the full scope of social identity the Social Identity Approach (Abrams & Hogg, 1990) which incorporates Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory, seemed to provide a more complete explanation as justified further in the literature review.

It would be ignorant for me not to recognise the fact the topic of youth-orientated black culture is a highly politicised debate and my role as a white researcher may be

questioned. I want to take this moment to clarify that it is my intention to relay narratives rather than having more insight into the experience of youth-orientated black culture that makes me well-positioned to carry out this thesis.

## 1.2 - Understanding Tottenham: Contextualising the Local Environment for Identity Formation

This section describes the landscape in which this study took place. It is important to not only obtain the data but understand the context in which it was produced. This section aims to provide geographical and demographic context to facilitate the understanding of the results. The study described in the thesis took place in Tottenham, which is in the North London borough of Haringey. The participants all self-identify as black and are aged over sixteen. London is a conglomerate of varied populations and provides one of the most affluent and diverse backdrops for the community this study focuses on. This will be compared to the demographics of Haringey to give insight into the socio-economic situation of the area. I will explore previous studies looking at the lived experience of young people in Tottenham (Elster, 2020; Visser, 2020). As these papers highlight the generational influences that have affected the lives of young people, I will also provide the historical context of how these communities were formed.

For this section, I could provide a statistical analysis of London and Haringey, the borough that Tottenham is in, to demonstrate the context in which this ethnography took place. However, most people know of the global position of London both financially and socially and this does not provide much insight into the lived experiences of the participants.

The world ranking of London does provide context for the juxtaposition between wealth and poverty which is most apparent in the capital city (DWP, 2023). There is close to double the average difference between the weekly housing income of the top and bottom ten per cent between London and the rest of the UK. There is a lot of discussion as to the difference in resources and the practical outcomes yet less discussion about how this inequality impacts the community and the individual in a social psychological manner.

One of the issues with the statistics is that they are based on government-defined boundaries. This means that statistics for Haringey include high-income areas such as Muswell Hill and Crouch End, which may distort the data for areas such as Northumberland Park and Bruce Grove and may not represent the lived experience of my participants. Despite this distortion, Haringey is still one of the worst-performing boroughs in comparison to its statistical neighbours such as Enfield, Hackney and Lewisham. While the statistics are based on the government definitions the lived experience is very different for the residents. My key informants suggested that many people would not consider themselves residents of Haringey but are more likely to refer to themselves as residents of Tottenham. The residents may define the area by housing estates. An example of this is Broadwater Farm, one of the most notorious housing estates in the UK, the young men from this area define themselves as 'OFB' – Original Farm Boys. Currently, in Tottenham, there is a gang war between OFB and Northumberland Park, NPK (Humphries & Simpson, 2018; Ryan, 2021). While Broadwater Farm is a housing estate, Northumberland Park is a ward. Both of these groups define themselves by the area which they represent. The formation of these groups not only helps create an identity for the participants but also for the geographical area in which they reside. This reciprocal relationship leads to further development of the identity of both the group and the area.

### 1.2.1 - Tottenham's Cultural and Historical Landscape: A Hotspot of Urban Identity

Tottenham seemingly does not have the international recognition of its more fashionable *statistical neighbours* such as Brixton and Hackney, which are now benefitting from previous redevelopment projects. However, this may be changing after Tottenham Hotspur Football Club recently unveiled the new development of their impressive stadium which has led to regeneration in the surrounding areas as well as providing community projects. This regeneration has seen significant improvements to the 3 main commercial areas within Tottenham: Tottenham High Road, which is the main road which runs right through the centre of the town; West Green Road, an incredibly diverse area with many independent stores and Tottenham Hale, which is a retail park. The community projects that Tottenham Hotspur provide seek to increase engagement with the local youth presenting them with opportunities within sport (THFC, 2020). The club have created over 3,500 new jobs in the area, they have also provided funding and connections for Percy House, a training and job opportunities centre for the local people. While this is commendable it remains to be seen whether it has a substantial impact on the social needs of the area. It is unclear how many of those 3,500 new jobs are zero-hour contracts or long-term careers that will change the fortunes of the employees.

Regrettably, Tottenham is not only known for its football club, in 1985 it received front-page attention after a riot which culminated in the decapitation of a police officer in Broadwater Farm (Jefferson, 2012). In 2011 there was a second riot after the shooting of Broadwater Farm resident Mark Duggan by the police. After relations broke down between police and the community the violence that ensued spread across the country increasing

Tottenham's notoriety. The riots are defining moments in the experience of the black community in Tottenham. Rival gangs and areas came together to show their support against the actions of the police. Reicher and Stott (2011) highlighted the sense of unity even between previously warring groups in a series of interviews with one participant claiming,

*'So I respect that. Tottenham stood up, dropped whatever problems they had with other people in their neighbourhoods and that and became as one.'*

The phrase 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' seems most apt to capture the meaning of this statement. However, this community feeling was limited to the period of the riots. As soon as the riots died out the internal politics of the area started to rise again (Dillon & Fanning, 2015). The government saw post-riots as the time they could gentrify Tottenham. However, 'Plan for Tottenham' even if successfully carried out,

*'it is unlikely that a transformative improvement in community cohesion that benefitted existing residents of Tottenham's deprived localities would occur.'*

*(Dillon & Fanning, 2015)*

Although elements of the plan have been successful I have been unable to find any formal evaluation to contradict Dillon and Fanning's predictions. Tottenham has its negative elements that the media likes to focus on but there is also a rich vibrant community which is at the forefront of urban music and style. The adversity that this community faces is revealed through its cultural output. By examining the role of music in this cohort I aim to provide insight into how the cohort embodies social identities both internally and externally generated.



## 1.3 - Defining Key Terms: Music Artists and Genres in the Context of Urban Identity

The definitions of the terms music artists and music genre are fundamental to the purpose and approach of this thesis. Each of these terms has a commonly accepted definition but they carry a particular meaning within this cohort. To avoid confusion it is important at the outset that I define the way the terms will be used within this thesis as these concepts provide the foundations for understanding the topic. However, there is also a glossary section which defines all of the colloquial terms used by the participants.

### 1.3.1 - Defining a music artist

The world of music has several definitions for the same role (Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). For example, Stormzy may be defined as a *rapper*, an *emcee*, a musician, an artist or a singer. Each of these terms has subtle differences, yet they are used interchangeably. I have adopted the term 'music artist' for this study to define the participants. In common language, 'music artist' is often used to describe the likes of Michael Jackson, Beyonce or Ed Sheeran, the upper echelons of the music industry. However, many of the participants saw themselves as music artists, with very few identifying as *rappers* as this description seemed to carry more kudos within the cohort. Possible reasons for this are explored later in the thesis. For this study, the definition is based on three tenets:

1. They must create and perform music – Understandably, a music artist needs to make music, yet the crucial word in this definition is 'perform'. Performance in this context is not simply a live appearance but the use of any medium to present the material to an audience. One participant would use TikTok to disseminate his

new songs but was yet to meet any of his supporters face-to-face; this study will still define this as performance. This definition may cause conflict when attaining to a producer as they create music, but whether they perform it is questionable. While the participants must make music, tenet 2 is arguably more relevant to this study and understanding identity.

2. It must be self-defined – No objective marker of what constitutes a music artist exists. Kanye West and the acoustic guitarist at a local pub may both consider themselves music artists. While the scope of their influence may differ significantly, both are creating and performing music. So, as my study discusses music artists, it is imperative to remember that these are not necessarily successful performers with large fanbases but individuals who perceive themselves as performers. This perception is affected by tenet 3, an aspiration to be successful in music.

3. Aspirations to be successful in music - The significance of this tenet is highlighted by one of the participants who did not identify as a music artist. They instead stated that they saw music purely as a release of their emotions and did not pursue it as a career. While the data from this participant is included in the analysis, they do not meet the study definition of a music artist. This anomaly helped in defining the boundaries of 'music artist' for the purposes of the study.

In this definition, music artists are essentially focused on the impact and influence they will have on their potential fan base. The conscious construction of this identity as a music artist shifts the emphasis from being an individual to being a commodity. This concept will be explored in depth in the analysis. Having defined the term music artist used in this thesis, it is also necessary to clarify the definition and use of 'music genres.'

### 1.3.2 - Defining music genres

It became evident during the study that the participants had a fluid understanding of genre boundaries, often creating neologisms to establish their ownership of the resulting sound. People in the ingroup have little difficulty understanding the nuances of this, but it can confuse the outgroup members. Many participants had defined their own variations of drill, such as RnDrill, a mixture of drill and singing; Goth drill, which combines goth and drill music; and smooth drill. Smooth drill is an example of the ambiguity of music genres. For example, one of the participants had recorded a track that, in my opinion, would be defined as grime music. The song was performed at *140 BPM* with the lyrics written in *double time*, meaning there are two *bars* in every line, characteristic of grime music. However, the participant defined it as smooth drill. When questioned why, he said that drill was '*what was popping at the moment*' and grime was seen as '*corny*'. The use of smooth drill shows an awareness of the social perception associated with particular definitions. Many participants did not define themselves by a genre; if they did, it would be an amalgamation of genres to give them an individual identity. This study will use terms such as drill and grime to explicate for the readers, yet this simplification does not represent the constant flux that these definitions are in.

## 1.4 - Conclusion

This thesis explores the complex interplay between UK urban music and identity formation within Black youth-oriented culture in North London. By adopting a grounded theory approach, this research prioritises the narratives and lived experiences of the

participants, aiming to generate a deeper understanding of how music functions as a medium for expressing and constructing identity. The study also engages with the wider social and political context, acknowledging the impact of media representation and systemic inequality on the participants' self-perceptions.

In the following chapters, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the empirical data gathered from interviews and observations, positioning these findings within the broader theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory and music psychology. This will offer insight into how young people navigate their identities in a socio-economic environment often defined by marginalisation. Finally, the thesis will reflect on the implications of these findings for understanding the role of music in shaping youth identities and contributing to broader societal debates on race, culture, and inequality.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review explores the intricate relationship between UK urban music and the formation of identity within Black youth-orientated culture in North London. By drawing on key academic contributions from the fields of ethnomusicology, social identity theory, and cultural studies, this chapter examines how genres like grime, rap, and drill shape both personal and collective identities. The review critically engages with literature that highlights the role of music in reflecting and reinforcing group dynamics, fostering community belonging, and providing a sense of social cohesion among Black British youth.

Additionally, the chapter investigates how urban music, particularly grime and drill, serves as a cultural form of resistance against systemic marginalisation. It explores the dual function of music as both a mirror of social realities and a medium for challenging negative portrayals, with particular attention to studies linking drill music to ongoing debates about youth crime and media representation. By reviewing the literature on social identity theory, the chapter also examines how musical preferences and affiliations shape group behaviours and identity negotiation, offering insight into how Black youth in urban areas use music to navigate social hierarchies and foster a collective sense of belonging.

Together, these discussions establish a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of UK urban music in the identity formation of Black youth. This review sets the foundation for the subsequent chapters, connecting the cultural significance of music to broader themes of race, identity, and resistance.

## Section 2.1 - Music as a Tool for Identity Formation

This chapter explores the multifaceted role of music in shaping social and personal identities within Black youth culture. Through the lenses of ethnomusicology and urban music in the UK, the discussion will provide insights into how music serves as both a form of social cohesion and a medium of resistance. By focusing on genres such as rap, grime, and drill, the chapter will investigate how music acts as a cultural force in this community. This section discusses the topic of music, which is central to this thesis. The section is split into two sub-sections. Sub-section 2.1.1 will start by exploring the field of ethnomusicology as it relates to this study. Sub-section 2.1.2 explores urban music in the UK.

### 2.1.1 - Ethnomusicology

Firstly, I wish to define what I mean by music. Everyone will have their own postulations about what music is. Most would agree that music is a formation of sounds arranged to create a melody, rhythm or harmony (Bispham, 2006; Roy & Dowd, 2010). This definition explains that even the rhythmic vibrations of a washing machine or the monotonous beep of a pedestrian traffic light can be interpreted as a musical pattern. Nevertheless, this definition of music does not encapsulate the meaning of music as used in this study. Music is a cultural phenomenon that goes beyond a sonic pattern. There are numerous studies into the physiological effects of music from infancy to adulthood (De Witte et al, 2020; Landreth & Landreth, 1974; Terry et al, 2020) and even psychological studies examining the cognitive impact of music (Magnini & Parker, 2009; Schellenberg, 2005). However, these fields of study fail to capture the cultural influence of music. Observing the physiological responses to music does not provide the context in which those responses are met. Music is not only an artistic form of expression but also a cultural tool deeply

intertwined with identity construction (Hennion, 2012). For Black youth, particularly in urban settings, music serves as a medium through which personal and collective identities are shaped.

Ethnomusicology, as a discipline, provides the framework to understand how cultural practices like music contribute to the construction of social identities. This chapter explores this phenomenon through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), examining how music genres such as drill and grime influence group dynamics, belonging, and identity formation.

Ethnomusicology aims to explore music in its cultural context (Rice, 2010; 2013). Part of the broader field of musicology, ethnomusicology uses anthropological practices to observe music (Nettl, 2010). Throughout history, scholars have written about the cultural implications of music. Confucius discussed ritual music's ability to encourage good qualities with the Chinese aristocracy (Kirkendall, 2017). The Zhou dynasty implemented '*the ritual and music system*', which they saw as an inextricable link between music and ritual that would help create social order and hierarchy (Lo, 2021). Charles Burney (1773; 1775; 1789) was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century English music historian who travelled across Europe and wrote about the state of music in the Netherlands, Italy, France and Germany. However, he is most recognised for his four-volume, *History of Music* (Mahiet, 2013). This long-standing recognition of the role of music within society grew into the academic discipline known originally as comparative musicology (Morgenstern, 2018). It was not until 1950 that Jaap Kunst first used the term ethnomusicology,

*'The study-object of ethnomusicology, or as it was originally called: comparative musicology, is the traditional music and musical instruments of all cultural strata of mankind, from the so-called primitive peoples to the civilized nations. Our science,*

*therefore, investigates all tribal and folk music and every kind non-European art music.... European art- and popular (entertainment-) music do not belong to its field.'*

*(Kunst & Kunst, 1969)*

This focus seems to be unnecessarily restrictive. Kunst saw ethnomusicology as observing the 'other', although that seems to ignore the wealth of insight that could be gained from exploring popular Western music's cultural implications. In an age of globalisation, the lines between traditional and modern and Western and non-Western are becoming ever more blurred. While traditional ethnomusicology focused on folk and tribal music, this study aims to apply its principles to modern urban music, particularly in the UK context, where genres like grime and drill have developed their own unique cultural significance. Considering my own thesis, it could be argued that urban music, with its influences of reggae, bashment, Afrobeats and hip-hop developed in the UK, is both Western and non-Western music. An observer may perceive that as a white researcher, I am exploring the 'other'. However, from my perspective, urban music is part of my identity, it has defined my adult life.

In *The Anthropology of Music* (1964), Alan Merriam provided a comprehensive framework for ethnomusicological research, which significantly shaped the development of Modern Ethnomusicology (ME). Building on the work of other key scholars like Nettl (1975), Rice (1987), and Seeger (1986), Merriam expanded the scope of inquiry within ME to include all forms of music, moving beyond the narrow focus of traditional approaches. His research proposed a model that considered the cultural, social, and symbolic functions of music within various communities. In my research, I focus on several key areas of Merriam's framework that align with my study's objectives, particularly those that explore the cultural and symbolic roles of music, its function within social groups, and its use as a means of



expression and identity. These aspects provide the foundation for understanding how music operates within the lives of the participants and the broader cultural dynamics at play. By focusing on the relationship between music, culture, and social behaviour, this approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how music shapes and reflects identity, social belonging, and community practices, which are central to the themes of this thesis.

While this study falls within the broad remit of ethnomusicology, the major theoretical underpinning is the Social Identity Approach rather than the traditional grounded theory approach of anthropology. As we explore the role of music in youth-oriented Black culture, it becomes essential to understand how the musical landscape contributes to the negotiation of identity. Ethnomusicology offers insights into the cultural significance of music, but for this study, it is Social Identity Theory that provides the framework for analysing how music helps form group memberships and social cohesion. By combining these two perspectives, I argue that we can better understand the multi-dimensional role music plays in shaping individual and collective identities.

### 2.1.2 - The Evolution of Music Consumption: From Piracy to Streaming Services

As music continues to serve as a powerful tool for identity formation within Black youth culture, it is important to consider how changes in technology and music consumption have shaped the industry. The role of technology in shaping music culture is not a recent phenomenon. As Morton (2000) points out, the technology of sound recording has long been linked to the expression of culture. Morton distinguishes between the culture of recording practices and music as culture itself, noting that the limitations and possibilities of recording technology have significantly influenced musical expression. The mass production and broad distribution of recorded music have also served as agents of cultural change,

impacting how music is consumed and how it spreads across social and geographical boundaries.

The rise of digitalisation, particularly through piracy and the advent of streaming platforms, has transformed not only the music industry but also how individuals engage with and access music (Herbert et al, 2013; Lerch, 2018). This shift has had significant implications for how urban music, including genres like grime and drill, is distributed, consumed, and ultimately, how it influences identity. In this context, understanding the transition from piracy to streaming highlights the evolving relationship between music consumption and identity, particularly within youth-oriented Black culture.

While music is more prevalent today than ever, it was not to the benefit of the record labels. From 1999 to 2014, the global recorded music industry revenues have consistently declined. This correlates to the launch of Napster. Pioneers in peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing, Napster allowed music piracy to levels unseen before (Madden, 2009). With Napster, users were able to share files with each other. So, only one person would need to buy an album before uploading it and sharing it with the world. By 2001, Napster had been hit by an injunction that stopped them from trading, yet the music industry had changed forever (Cabaniss, 2018).

Consumers started to stop buying CDs and start downloading music (Reilly, 2019). In the same year, Apple launched iTunes, a media platform that allowed users to be able to manage their digital music library (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018). Then, another two years later, iTunes added a store feature which allowed users to purchase music. The digital age also saw a shift from consumers purchasing albums to now being able to select the specific songs they want from that album. The store was the start of the commercialisation of digital

music, yet it could not combat piracy. It was not until Spotify and other online streaming services that the industry revenues improved (Vonderau, 2019) with the majority of revenue in the music industry being from subscriptions to streaming services (Simon, 2019). This shift to information technology and digital music has been difficult for the '*old industry*' but not for the consumer or new emerging artists. Ali, Karlsson, and Skålen (2021) studied how digitalisation has affected value within the music industry in Sweden. One of their participants discussed the impact piracy of digital music had on societal practice,

*'In 2005 and 2006, there was an enormous debate about pirate activities...*

*Politicians did not put their foot down and say 'this is wrong, you must not download'. Rather, the societal norm was that it was okay to download illegally'.*

*(Ali, Karlsson, & Skålen, 2021)*

Piracy normalised free music. It managed to create a social precedent that it was acceptable to download music illegally. For the music industry to survive, it must adapt to what society demands. While it could not offer free music, it provided the streaming model as a response. In 2018, Spotify was launched. It revolutionised the way users consumed music. Buying singles or albums was no longer necessary, as users could search for any artist on the Spotify cloud-based library (Aguilar & Martens, 2016). Subscribers were now able to create their own playlists and share them with the world. The success of Spotify is based not only on access to the world's most extensive library of music but also on its algorithms, which can recommend songs for the user to listen to. While the logic behind their recommendation service is kept as a trade secret (Bonini and Gandini, 2019) it is known that they

*'use data-driven and automated curation, alongside editorial selection to recommend music, personalise playlists and ultimately decide which artists are made visible to listeners'.*

*(Freeman, Gibbs, & Nansen, 2022)*

In 2017, for the first time, streaming services brought in more revenue than traditional formats (IFPI Global, 2018). As Bonini and Gandini (2019) assessed,

*'a new class of powerful gatekeepers is emerging, which give meaning and value to certain music tracks and artists and mediate tastes, moods, and lifestyles, converting them into valuable objects of consumption in the form of playlists'.*

*(Bonini & Gandini, 2019)*

Previously, the music industry gatekeepers were the record labels (Graham et al, 2004). Now, streaming services and their algorithms control an artist's success. Conversely, unlike the traditional format, anyone is able to upload their music to a streaming service. The digitalisation of music, from the era of piracy to the dominance of streaming platforms, has redefined the way individuals consume and interact with music (Hesmondhalgh, 2009). This transformation has increased revenue earned from music (Hesmondhalgh et al, 2021) and made music more accessible, empowering emerging artists and reshaping the influence of gatekeepers within the industry (Hracs, 2012). For Black youth culture, genres like grime and drill have benefited from this accessibility, allowing for greater representation and the cultivation of identities within these communities. The move to streaming has not only revolutionised the business model but also reinforced music's role as a vehicle for identity formation and expression in today's digital age.

### 2.1.3 - An exploration of UK urban music

This section aims to explore urban music in the UK. It will start with my definition of urban music and the reasons for selecting the term urban, which has become contentious in recent times. This contention has been brought into the public eye due to the rising popularity of urban music in the UK. The section will aim to provide evidence of this popularity and how it has manifested in mainstream society. Urban music genres, particularly grime and drill, serve as cultural markers for many young people in the UK, especially in Black communities. These genres provide not only entertainment but a space where social norms, group dynamics, and personal identities are negotiated and expressed.

#### *2.1.3.1 - Definition of urban music*

The term urban music was likely invented in the 1970s by African-American radio DJ Frankie Crocker to describe the rise in the nuanced genres of black music (Wiggins, 2016). This term has been adopted internationally for the past few decades, with radio stations in the UK, such as KISS FM, describing themselves as urban music stations. This word has been brought into contention with the recent Black Lives Matter protests (Time, last accessed 10/7/23). Twenty of the leading black music industry executives called for the term urban music to be dropped in favour of black music (Guardian, 2020; Leight & Leight, 2020; McEvoy, 2020). While respecting their position, this thesis will continue to use the term urban music as it is a more specific description of the genres discussed in this thesis as explained below.

There has been a rise in Afro-centric music originating in the UK in recent years. This has produced a plethora of genres, from garage, grime and drill to gospel, Afrobeats and reggae. While all urban music is black music, not all black music is urban. The particular

genres encompassed by urban music, such as grime, garage and drill, all relate to the younger generations. They are bass-driven and associated with specific subcultures. Genres such as gospel, reggae and jazz tend to be associated with the parents' generation, Charles (2018) regards these genres as the music of the African diaspora. Charles identifies sonic characteristics, distinct sounds, and patterns as '*signatures*' that allow the grouping of genres. Charles further states that this can be considered '*Black music*'. While this study understands the cultural relevance and accuracy of the term Black music, it will adopt the term urban music instead. In this, I am following White (2017) who states,

*'I am using the term urban here as a shorthand to denote types of popular black musical expression such as hip-hop, grime, garage, dubstep and UK funky. However, I am aware that it is not an unproblematic category and for some, the label is an imposition, forced on them by the commercial interests and the media'.*

*(White, 2017)*

So while the term black music may provide empowerment and recognition for the industry, for purposes of this study, the term urban provides a more definitive description of the genres discussed in this thesis which are related specifically to music of a youth-orientated culture.

As mentioned before, there are several different genres within urban music. The complexity of the differences between them may be considered minute to an outsider. Understanding the difference between rap and hip-hop will not provide a greater understanding of the themes involved. This study will take a reductionist approach to make it easier to understand. The three main genres that will be discussed throughout this paper

are rap/hip-hop, grime and drill. These have been selected due to their importance in shaping the current music scene for black youth-orientated culture.

Rap/hip-hop is widely considered an international genre. Having started in America with groups like the Sugar Hill Gang providing light-hearted raps, rap/hip-hop has become a consistent genre in the US, accounting for 29.9% of all music consumed in 2019 (Götting, 2022). This influenced UK music, with many American artists being household names in the UK as well, Jay Z, Eminem and 50 Cent, for example. Much of the academic literature is based on the Black American experience, which has been shown to differ from that of a young black UK male (Charles, 2016). For example, the UK also received influence from the dance culture of Europe. The combination of these two sounds helped create garage music. This energetic, high-tempo music features an emcee '*spitting*' over the tracks, a term used to describe the performance of rapid, rhythmically delivered vocal lyrics. Wiley, considered the '*Godfather of Grime*', then developed his own sound Eski Beat, which later developed into what we now know as Grime (White, 2021). Grime was the predominant genre of the youth in London during the early 2000s, later reaching all of the major cities in the UK and was fundamental to the shaping of youth culture (Stratton & Zuberi, 2016). In the UK, advancements in technology also helped develop the world of urban pirate radio which allowed the genre to spread. These were independent illegal radio stations often catering to underground urban music (De Lacey, 2020). For the community in question, urban stations like Rinse, Heat and De Ja Vu were more popular than mainstream stations (De Lacey, 2022). BBC eventually responded to this by launching 1Xtra, which was aimed at converting pirate radio listeners (Holmes, 2006). Even with this development, the pirate radio stations meant people within the community could gain fame without needing the traditional gatekeepers. This started to shift the power dynamics of the music industry. No longer were artists reliant

on record labels to market them. The communities were able to define themselves without having traditional frameworks define them.

#### 2.1.3.2 - Drill

The third genre is drill. Drill is an offshoot of Trap. Trap music has a more basic rhyming pattern than its predecessors in the Rap hierarchy also its content was focused on lifestyle. Trap (Whitehouse, 2022) relates to *trapping* which is the selling of drugs and the lifestyle that can bring. Drill, while maintaining a more basic rhyming pattern focuses the content on violence. Drill has become the sound of the *streets*, an urban environment that embodies the culture and experiences of the marginalised communities who inhabit it with drill artists dominating the coverage on UK urban music websites. Alongside the rise in the popularity of drill music, there has also been a rise in youth crime statistics in the UK, particularly knife crime (Fatsis, 2019). The media postulates that music is the cause of increased crime levels. However, there seems to be no empirical data to support a firm conclusion on the direction of causality. This study aims to provide data to help elucidate this debate.

King and Swain (2023) explore the characteristics of street codes on an inner-city housing estate, identifying key elements of '*street masculinity*,' including authenticity, preparedness for violence, and knife-carrying. These traits, which they argue are central to gaining respect and status, are also prevalent in drill music, where similar values are reflected in the lyrics and personas of drill artists. Drill, as a genre, becomes a vehicle through which young men negotiate and perform these street codes, often amplifying the very characteristics that shape their lived realities on the *streets*. The study further illustrates how the digital street, a presence on social media, plays an essential role in maintaining this



masculinity, a trend mirrored in drill's online proliferation. Drill is a violent, unapologetic representation of street life. The word drill is used in the *streets* to represent a gun with a 'drilling' by a 'driller' meaning the murder of an individual by a killer (Scott, 2020). From a sonic foundation, drill is very similar to trap and grime. Based on *140 bpm* with *808s* and *snare*s taken from grime, UK drill now dominates UK street culture (Schwarze & Fatsis, 2022).

Drill's origins are attributed to Chicago. While drill started during the 2000 public housing crisis (Fitzgerald, 2018) it was the release of 'I Don't Like' by 16-year-old Chief Keef in 2012 that popularised it. This song marked a significant change in the music industry. The video starts with a parental advisory warning before we see Chief Keef and associates smoking weed in a *trap* house. Most strikingly, there were no expensive cars, half-naked girls or luxury set. This simple set-up would become the basis for a multitude of drill videos. Chief Keef was just an average Chicago kid putting his life experiences onto tracks. The product was raw and untouched by industry executives, and it blew up on social media being classified in the YouTube comments as a '*hood classic*'. Gone was the need for record label support or a significant investment. Chief Keef had shown people that you could become famous with a low-budget, uncensored representation of gang culture. The popularity of the song even saw Kanye West reach out to Chief Keef to feature on the remix of 'I Don't Like'. In response, even though Chicago has had a longstanding issue with crime (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney; 2017; Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards 2018), mainstream media associated these issues with the relatively recent arrival of drill.

It was around 2013 when the drill scene in the UK started to form (Lynes et al, 2020). Its notoriety was cemented as several notable drill rappers were murdered and countless

more arrested (BBC News, 2016; 2018; Booth, 2017; Morrison & Mitchell, 2017; Offord, 2016). Reminiscent of the Chicago scene, UK groups/gangs such as 67, Harlem Spartans, and Moscow 17 started making low-budget or '*hood*' music videos. These videos would often be filmed in the housing estate associated with the gang. The lyrics of the songs are aimed at their '*opps*' and would describe their violent exploits. The first drill song is attributed to a Brixton gang, 150, who recorded a *diss* track to 67 called 'Its Cracking'. 67 then responded with their own video '*Its Frying*' using the same beat as 150. Historically 150 and 67 were affiliated, but teenager Lil Zac's death in 2010 saw the gangs start to splinter. While the artists from these gangs performed 'real rap', Chief Keef's influence brought about the drill sound with 150 saying 'Sosa', the catchphrase of Chief Keef. There were several tracks back and forth until one day, a 67 member went to Angel Estate, an area associated with 150, and stabbed a rapper, SQ (Gillett, 2016). This death was the first of many associated with '*drill beefs*'. Around the same time, 67 rapper Scribz was gaining a large following on social media but concurrently had several active criminal cases against him, which resulted in the police banning him from making music. Undeterred Scribz started to release music under another pseudonym LD, while wearing a mask. This may be what sparked the trend of drill rappers covering their faces, typically with a balaclava. While there is media speculation about the role of drill music in promoting youth crime, it is important to note that the direction of causality is not yet fully established. This thesis aims to provide data to contribute to this ongoing debate, recognising that drill's portrayal of violence is both a reflection of street life and a commercialised narrative.

As with most music genres, drill has evolved beyond its primitive beginnings. In July 2022 Central Cee released 'Doja Cat' to international acclaim (Moore, 2022). While only managing number 2 in the UK charts, it received top 10 positions in several music charts

across the world. It even managed to get number 12 in the US billboard charts, a feat not achieved by another UK rapper. While not as blatantly violent as early drill songs, Doja Cat still discusses drug dealing but its lyrics are much more similar to trap lyrics about wealth and women than violence and *opps*. This single marks a significant step towards the commercialisation of drill music and the continual development cycle of more representative genres. It also highlights the difficulty in defining drill music.

During my time in music, I noticed the concept of authenticity was integral to an artist's acceptance by the community. Authenticity has been an integral part of American hip-hop music since the 1990s and can be an indicator of ingroup/outgroup membership (Wright, 2010). While hip-hop has had mainstream success the core principles still remain in control of the black community (McLeod, 1999). This allows the community to combat threats of assimilation that are a by-product of the success of the genre. Authenticity in genres like drill is not only a marker of musical success but also a critical component in the social identity of young people who consume and create this music. Hall et al. (2022) carried out an ethnographic study looking at the lyrics of drill and grime songs and found that being seen as '*authentic*' within these communities can validate one's belonging to the group, making it a key factor in social cohesion and exclusion. This need for authenticity is currently being represented in drill music. Drill is one of the most popular genres for the youth in the UK and is at the centre of the media's response to rising crime statistics (Schwarze & Fatsis, 2022). In this section, I aim to provide a description of its origins and current form. This rise in popularity and influence within the younger generation has seen urban music grow from a subculture into a viable market for companies to exploit. This section will finish with a demographical look at the financial influence of music on the UK economy.

In summary, drill music is more than just a soundtrack to these young men's lives. It is a tool of identity negotiation that enables them to navigate their social realities, providing them with a sense of belonging while reinforcing cultural and group-based norms. This aligns with SIT's notion of identity as fluid and contextual, shaped by the individual's position within social groups. This chapter has demonstrated that music, particularly urban genres like grime and drill, serves as both a mirror and a shaper of identity within Black youth culture. By offering a platform for expressing group affiliation, individual struggles, and societal resistance, these genres provide crucial insights into how music functions as a vehicle for identity negotiation in marginalised communities.

## 2.2 - Conceptualising Identity: Theories and Frameworks

Music, as both an expressive art form and a cultural marker, plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities. This thesis explores the dynamic interaction between music and identity, with a particular focus on Black British urban music and its influence on identity formation within marginalised communities.

Drawing upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT), this section examines how individuals navigate personal and social identities. The discussion also considers how identity is shaped by external social forces and how it becomes fluid across different contexts (Hoggs et al, 2004). Special attention is paid to the ways in which music acts as a site of identity formation and negotiation, particularly within marginalised communities, where musical preferences and affiliations often reflect deeper cultural and social alignments.

The structure of this section begins by reviewing classical theories of identity, including those from Carl Rogers and Kuhn, which emphasise more static, foundational concepts of the self. It then transitions to contemporary perspectives that highlight identity's fluid and context-dependent nature. Following this, the Social Identity Approach is explored in detail, focusing on Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory to understand the processes of identity formation within group dynamics. The section concludes by examining how music, particularly within Black British urban culture, serves as a key tool for constructing and negotiating identity, providing insight into the complex interplay between personal and social identities.

### 2.2.1 - Foundations of Identity: From Fixed to Fluid Concepts

Identity is an ambiguous term but, in essence, is concerned with how people are viewed by themselves or by others. When a security guard asks for my identification documents, he wants to assess the demographics that allow me to be distinguished from others. This form of identity comprises characteristics that are relatively predictable over time. He will not expect to be told of my love for Liverpool football club or the fact I class myself as a gamer. These variables collectively would be recognised as my self-identity. In older literature, this self-identity tended to be linked with the existence of '*A Self*'.

The Self is a complicated concept. Carl Rogers (1959, re-released, 2013) believed it had three different components: self-image, the view you have of yourself; self-esteem, what you think of yourself; the ideal self, what you wish you were like. He believed that the ultimate goal for an individual was to achieve self-actualisation. This occurs when the self-image matches the ideal self. Rogers believed that self-actualisation was an inherent drive in all human beings. Kuhn (1960) developed the 20 Statements Test to look at self-image. He

found two categories, social roles and personality traits, which indicated that social roles have an impact on an individual's self-image. While the older literature presents this form of identity as stable, more recent research supports the idea of fluid identities (Morris, 2013). This concept of fluidity can be recognised as *context contingency* (Condor, 1996; Reicher, 2004) and forms a central tenet of the modern understanding of identity. This concept builds the foundations for the epistemological understanding that identity is subjective, stating that an individual's identity depends on the context in which it is being expressed. It is observable, for example, that a child alters their behaviour when with a teacher as opposed to being with their peers. This context-contingent change in their behaviour is associated with the concept of *salience* within identity (Morris, 2013; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Salience expresses the likelihood that a given identity is appropriate for the current social situation and is observable in both self and social identities. Typically, identity characteristics are seen as fluid, but some may be regarded as a '*master status*' (Hogg et al, 1995), capable of being both a demographic and a subjective experience. For example, race can be seen as a master status as it has a visual element that, for most, is unchangeable. Racial identification has been shown to be more salient in the black community than in other racial groups (Aspinall & Song, 2013). However, this research also showed that singular racial affiliation is weakening in young minority people in the UK.

These considerations form the foundations of my approach to the question of the interactions between music and identity. Context contingency and salience indicate that any perceived identity consists of multiple identities that fluidly interact with one another based on the situation's context. The proposed existence of self and social identities or the interpersonal and intergroup continuum adds a further layer of complexity. I will explore some of the differences between self and social identity in the following sections.

## 2.2.2 - The Social Identity Approach: A Framework for Group and Music

### Dynamics

The Social Identity Approach (SIA) (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010) is a term covering Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) (Tajfel, 1978a; 1978b; 1978c; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986; Turner, 1975; 1996; 2010; Turner et al., 1987). This section will explore SIA in detail and its utility in understanding music's effect on identity formation. SIA was selected as the central theory due to its explanatory power in considering the effect of group dynamics on an individual's behaviour. It provides a valuable tool to capture how rules and norms derived from musical choices can impact an individual. Firstly, I will discuss my initial understanding of SIT and how I understood it to apply to the situation. Then, I will explore the difficulties I faced in applying SIT to real-life experiences. I then re-evaluate my understanding of SIT and SCT. Finally, I review current studies concerning the Social Identity Approach and Music and how they may inform my own study. Music's ability to form and represent groups and define periods in history (Roy & Dowd, 2010; Volgsten, 2014), validates its use as a lens to observe group dynamics.

#### *2.2.2.1 - Social Identity Theory (SIT): Origins and Foundations*

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a framework for understanding how individuals' group memberships shape their sense of self, influence behaviour, and contribute to intergroup dynamics. According to Hogg, Abrams, and Brewer (2017), the role of self is central in shaping group processes and intergroup relations. Within the UK Black youth culture, music genres such as grime and drill provide not only a means of self-expression but also a vehicle for negotiating group identities. These genres allow individuals to form in-

group connections while distinguishing themselves from other groups, fostering both personal and collective identities.

Henri Tajfel's experiences during the Second World War, particularly his reflections on prejudice and the Holocaust, provided the foundation for the development of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1974a; 1978). Tajfel's early insights were driven by his recognition that group identity can profoundly influence individual outcomes, prompting him to investigate the psychological processes underpinning intergroup dynamics. Tajfel believed the current group identity models were insufficient to clarify how discrimination could occur in minimal conditions (Brown, 2020a). SIT emerged in response to earlier theories, such as Rokeach's (1960) belief congruence model and Campbell's (1965) intergroup goal conflict model, which posited that intergroup discrimination required substantial differences in beliefs or competition for resources. In contrast, Tajfel sought to determine the minimal conditions necessary to trigger group-based discrimination, resulting in his landmark Minimal Group Paradigm (MGP) experiments (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Billig 1974; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971).

The MGP demonstrated that even arbitrary group assignments, such as preferences for abstract paintings or the random flip of a coin, could elicit strong ingroup favouritism (Tajfel et al., 1971). Participants, despite having no prior contact with their group members and no personal stake in the outcomes, consistently allocated more rewards to their ingroup, even at the cost of maximising overall rewards. This finding challenged prior assumptions, indicating that group discrimination could emerge solely from categorisation, without significant differences between groups.



#### *2.2.2.2 - Theoretical Developments: A Continuum of Identity*

Tajfel proposed that identity exists on a continuum, ranging from interpersonal to intergroup interactions, marking a significant departure from the prevailing, static models of identity in the 1970s (Condor, 1996). He posited that individuals rarely interact purely on an interpersonal basis; instead, group identity frequently informs their behaviour. This flexibility in identity is central to SIT, which suggests that social categorisation alone is sufficient to evoke ingroup-outgroup distinctions, even under minimal conditions. Tajfel's broader objective was to demonstrate that social categorisation plays a pivotal role in shaping not only intergroup relations but also self-perception.

Of the seven core tenets of SIT, as summarised by Trepte and Loy (2017), the ones which seem to have the most explanatory power of my data are self-categorisation, social comparison, the drive for positive distinctiveness, and the feedback loop between social identity and self-esteem. These tenets underscore how individuals derive self-esteem from their group membership, seeking to enhance their group's status in relation to outgroups.

#### *2.2.2.3 - Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) and Prototypes*

Following Tajfel's work, John Turner developed Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) to further explore the cognitive processes involved in identity formation (Turner et al., 1987). Whereas SIT focuses on intergroup dynamics, SCT provides greater emphasis on the intragroup processes, detailing how individuals categorise themselves at various levels of abstraction: human identity (superordinate), social identity (intermediate), and personal identity (subordinate). This multilevel model stands in contrast to Tajfel's single-continuum approach, suggesting that multiple identities can coexist, becoming salient depending on contextual factors such as perceiver readiness and fit (Oakes, 1987; Turner et al., 1994).

The meta-contrast ratio quantifies the categorisation process, wherein individuals assess the comparative and normative fit of their characteristics within different social groups. Those individuals who align most closely with the prototypical traits of a group are afforded greater influence within that group, as the prototype encapsulates the group's central norms and values. This notion of prototypicality differs from stereotypes, which are often oversimplified, homogenised representations of group traits (Beeghly, 2015). Prototypical behaviour is seen as a positive within the social framework of the ingroup (Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995).

In contrast, a stereotype serves as a cognitive shortcut and is an oversimplification of the generalised attributes associated with the group (Beeghly, 2015). In common parlance, stereotyping can often create negative connotations by homogenising and prescribing qualities not representative of the individual group members. However, stereotyping is seen by the social sciences as a necessary function to facilitate a cognitive understanding of the social world (McFarlane, 2014).

Self-stereotyping occurs when individuals internalise group-based stereotypes, often shaped by socio-economic and cultural pressures. While some studies suggest that minority groups are more likely to self-stereotype due to lower social status and strong in-group identification (Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997), others indicate that individuals within these groups may resist negative stereotypes, especially when their personal achievements challenge societal expectations (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006). This dynamic reveals that identity is both a site of stereotype reinforcement and a space for resistance, where strengthening positive group connections can help counteract limiting stereotypes and support self-determined identity expression. Research suggests that social

context significantly influences self-stereotyping, with minority group members more likely to adopt stereotypes associated with their in-group identity (Simon & Hamilton, 1994). For instance, the drill rapper introduced at the beginning of this thesis exemplifies how minority status, combined with high visibility and group status within urban music, can intensify self-stereotyping. His choice of a *chicken shop* over a Michelin-starred restaurant reflects a self-perception shaped by cultural stereotypes, highlighting the interplay between minority group identity and the reinforcement of stereotypes within specific social and cultural settings.

#### *2.2.2.4 - Emotion and Social Identity: A Neglected Dimension*

One significant critique of SIT is its comparative neglect of emotion in explaining intergroup behaviour, particularly given its roots in understanding the atrocities of the Second World War (Brown, 2020b). However, as discussed in the previous section, music is also well-known for its emotive qualities. The link between music and emotion is well-represented, yet the current form of the seven tenets of SIT contains little mention of emotion's importance (Manstead, 2018, cited in Brown, 2020b). While the theory accounts for how individuals strive to maintain positive self-esteem through group affiliation, it does not sufficiently address the emotional responses that accompany intergroup conflicts. Brown (2020b) laments this omission, arguing that group-based emotional reactions often drive the most severe manifestations of prejudice and discrimination.

Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET: Mackie et al., 2008) has emerged as a complementary framework, suggesting that individuals experience emotions based on their group identity rather than their personal identity in situations where social identity is salient. The intensity of the emotional response is proportional to the number of individuals sharing

that group identity. For instance, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests, it could be argued that group-based anger and fear served as powerful motivators for collective action, as individuals emotionally identified with the shared experience of systemic racial oppression.

#### *2.2.2.5 - Age and Identity: The Role of Music in Youth Identity Formation*

The relationship between age and social identity represents another area where SIT's explanatory scope may be limited. A substantial amount of literature explores age through the lens of the SIA approach (Edwards & Harwood, 2003; Harwood, 1999; Barker, 2012). In particular, they concentrate on ageism and age-based decision-making (Trepte, 2013). '*Age identity*' explores the impact of age as an identity characteristic on group formation. Since this thesis focuses on one age group with no comparable groups, there is little ability to apply the age identity literature to this study's data. Research consistently indicates that music plays a crucial role in shaping the social identities of younger individuals (Shepherd & Sigg, 2015), who consume music at significantly higher rates than older generations (Statista, 2022). Music provides both a medium for self-expression and a means of aligning with the norms and values of specific social groups. However, while studies confirm that music is important for youth identity, the lack of comparative research across age groups leaves open the question of whether music holds similar significance for older individuals.

So while age is recognised as an identity variable in SIA literature, there is minimal reflection on whether particular age groups engage differently with group identities (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002). Harwood's (1999) research on media consumption suggests that age identification influences preferences for media content, with individuals favouring representations that reflect their own age group. This idea was also supported by

Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2017), who found that young people prefer media idols that are relatable to them. Nevertheless, the relationship between self-esteem, age identity, and media preferences remains weak. Kroger (2006) highlights that adolescence and young adulthood are critical phases in identity development, during which individuals actively seek out media, including music, as a means of shaping and expressing their evolving identities. Like emotion, further research is required to fully integrate age dynamics into the social identity framework.

#### *2.2.2.6 - SIT as an Ontological Framework*

Although SIT has been highly influential, its application has shifted from being a testable hypothesis to serving as an ontological framework across diverse fields (Brown, 2020b; Burford, 2012; Jacobson, 1979; Palmer et al, 2013). Researchers now utilise its foundational principles to explore phenomena ranging from political behaviour to consumer identity (Burford, 2012; Huddy, 2001; Lam et al, 2010). Brown critiques this transition, suggesting that while SIT offers valuable retrospective explanations, its predictive power is limited. This has led some, including Turner, to refine the theory through the development of SCT, which provides a more detailed understanding of the categorisation processes involved in social identity (See section 2.2.2.3).

Despite these critiques, SIT's flexibility remains one of its strengths, enabling it to be adapted to a wide range of contexts. Its capacity to explain group dynamics in fields as varied as music subcultures, political movements, and organisational behaviour ensures its continued relevance, even as scholars seek to address its theoretical gaps.

### 2.2.3 - Navigating Identity: Strategies within Marginalised Music Communities

Music not only serves as a tool for group identification but also plays a significant role in individual self-esteem. Studies have shown that music can positively influence self-esteem, enhancing personal well-being and self-worth (Lawendowski & Bieleninik, 2017). This is particularly important for young people, who often turn to music to navigate their personal identity and find validation within their peer groups. North and Hargreaves (2008) highlight the deep psychological connection between music and social behaviour, suggesting that music not only reflects group identities but also actively influences them through media and social interactions. This is particularly relevant in understanding how urban music genres like grime and drill foster a sense of belonging and community among Black British youth.

Identity Management Strategies (IMS), rooted in Social Identity Theory (SIT), provide a framework for understanding how members of marginalised groups, use behavioural and cognitive tactics at both individual and group levels to create and maintain a positive social identity (Blanz et al, 1998). Tajfel's SIT emphasises how group membership influences self-esteem, and in the case of Black British urban music, this can manifest in the desire to uplift one's group status through creative expression. The development of IMS expands on SIT by identifying strategies that groups use to assert positive distinctiveness, despite societal marginalisation (Blanz et al, 1998).

As documented by White (2020), for many individuals within Black British urban communities, particularly those engaged with hip-hop, grime, and drill, music becomes a tool for reclaiming power, altering perceptions of identity, and seeking upward mobility (White, 2020). The following IMS approaches highlight how group members actively manage

their identity within a broader socio-political context characterised by systemic inequality, stereotypes, and social exclusion. The six strategies I consider are individual mobility and assimilation; social competition; re-evaluation of comparison dimensions; recategorization strategies; temporal comparison; and comparison with standards. This next section describes the different approaches and how they could be applied to the urban music scene.

### 1. Individual Mobility and Assimilation

Individual mobility, as proposed by Taylor and Mckirnan (1984), suggests that individuals may attempt to distance themselves from stigmatised group identities if they perceive opportunities for movement. However, for members of the Black British community, changing racial identity is not possible. Instead, individuals may express this cognitive distancing by altering their narratives, such as by embracing aspirational lyrics about economic success and social status (Wilbekin, 2020).

Assimilation describes how marginalised individuals might seek to blend with higher-status groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Moghaddam et al, 1987). In UK urban music, this may involve adopting mainstream aesthetics or genres that align with wider cultural norms. However, this can often be seen as a compromise between staying true to road identity and achieving broader acceptance (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). The crossover success of UK grime artists, for instance, demonstrates how some musicians maintain a connection to their cultural roots while also achieving mainstream success, a balance between assimilation and preservation of cultural authenticity.

### 2. Social Competition

A key strategy for groups unable to achieve individual mobility or assimilation is social competition. In the context of Black British urban music, this can be seen in collective resistance movements such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, where music became a tool for amplifying the demands of the Black community (Scott, 2020; Mozie, 2022). Social competition involves using music to change public perceptions, with artists often addressing the struggles of Black communities, challenging stereotypes, and demanding social justice through their work (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Realistic competition also plays a role, particularly in the competition for resources and visibility in the urban music scene. For instance, in areas affected by postcode wars, competition over territories and markets (e.g., drug trade) mirrors realistic competition for scarce resources (Mummendey et al., 1999). The conflict between UK drill music factions is often a reflection of these deeper socio-economic battles, with music serving as both a battleground and a means of asserting dominance (Hall et al., 2022).

### 3. Re-evaluation of comparison dimensions

Within the UK Black urban music scene, new comparison dimension strategies are often employed to reshape the parameters by which groups are judged. For example, Black musicians might reframe the narrative around financial success by emphasising solidarity, community strength, or authenticity over wealth (Bridson et al, 2017). In doing so, they create alternative standards of success that are more accessible to those within their community, thereby enhancing group self-esteem (Hogg, 2000).

Re-evaluation of comparison dimensions similarly allows groups to reinterpret societal judgments. For instance, as Kehinde Andrews (2018) argues the negative stereotypes around urban music's association with violence may be reframed as a reflection



of the community's broader struggles with systemic racism, allowing artists to assert a moral high ground and redefine their role within society.

#### 4. Recategorisation Strategies

Black British urban music potentially engages in recategorisation by redefining group boundaries. Subordinate recategorisation is evident in the way different sub-genres (e.g., grime, drill, hip-hop) compete for recognition and legitimacy, sometimes fragmenting into smaller communities that vie for cultural relevance and power (Crisp et al., 2006). These subcultures within urban music create micro-identities that afford participants a sense of belonging and status within a smaller context, even if the larger societal structures remain unchanged.

Conversely, superordinate recategorisation may also be observed when musicians from diverse backgrounds come together to challenge common societal outgroups. For example, collaborations between artists of different Black genres form alliances that collectively compete against the marginalisation of Black voices in mainstream media. This is in keeping with the findings of Jung et al's (2019) study on the impact of recategorisation on the entitativity of the group.

#### 5. Temporal Comparisons and Future Aspirations

Temporal comparison offers another strategy for identity management within the Black British music scene. Artists may look to a past period of higher status, such as the civil rights era, for inspiration, aligning their music with historical struggles for justice and empowerment. Conversely, temporal comparisons into the future are also evident, where musicians envision their success and influence expanding beyond the confines of their

current environment. This aspirational narrative is a hallmark of genres like drill and grime, where young artists often depict themselves as rising from hardship to prominence (Fatsis, 2021).

## 6. Standards for Self-Evaluation

Finally, comparison with standards sees Black British urban music artists shifting away from competing with societal norms and instead focusing on measuring their worth against internal standards. By embracing their own cultural norms and values—such as authenticity, lyrical integrity, and community loyalty—musicians may avoid mainstream comparison and instead judge themselves by the ethos of their genre.

These Identity Management Strategies are centred on positive distinctiveness, the idea that individuals/groups will seek to maintain a positive esteem. It is this drive that Blanz et al describe as the primary motivator for IMS. The MGPs presented group dynamics in a restrictive laboratory-based setting, where individual/group mobility was impossible. IMS provides a more realistic description of potential social responses in complex real-life settings. Due to the low status of the cohort being studied in this thesis, there is potential for several of the processes to be observed. Due to music's ability to transmit norms and values, it may potentially play an important role in facilitating these strategies.

### 2.2.4 - Music and Identity: Insights from the Social Identity Approach

The Social Identity Approach forms the theoretical basis for this thesis. There are several studies on the relationship between SIA and music. This section examines three quantitative studies that explore the relationship between Social Identity Theory and music. The studies in question are Tekman and Hortaçsu's study (2002); Lonsdale's (2021); Clark &

Lonsdale's (2023). These studies have found a relationship between music, social identity and self-esteem and justify pursuing this topic in more depth through a qualitative study. For clarity, I describe each study before reflecting on their application to this thesis. Tekman and Hortaçsu's study (2002) explored the relationship between musical preferences and social identity, examining six music genres: Arabesk, classical, pop, rap, rock, and Turkish folk music. The study found that musical preferences are linked to specific social traits, with genres like Arabesk associated with negative social connotations, while classical music was seen as sophisticated due to its Western and polyphonic origins.

Tekman and Hortaçsu's work builds on the findings of North and Hargreaves (North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000; Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves, 2000; Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves, 2001), showing that genre preferences are influenced by social and cultural perceptions. Fans of particular genres rate those genres as closer to their ideal social identity, suggesting that the choice of music reflects more than mere aesthetic preference but is also tied to social categorisation. However, the study did not explore whether individuals were active followers of a genre, which might have yielded more insight into group identification processes. This study laid the groundwork for further exploration of how SIT's processes apply to music preferences, confirming that social and historical contexts shape group identity in music. Lonsdale's (2021) study investigated SIT's hypothesis that ingroup favouritism arises from the need for a positive social identity, exploring the relationship between music preferences and self-esteem. Participants rated eight different genres and completed self-esteem measures. Consistent with SIT, participants rated fans of their favourite genre more positively than fans of their least preferred genre. Unlike previous studies, Lonsdale's research demonstrated a link between individual self-esteem and group identification with music genres.

The study introduced new measures for collective self-esteem, distinguishing between *membership esteem* (how well individuals perceive themselves as group members), *private collective self-esteem* (how happy they are to be represented by their genre), and *public collective self-esteem* (how they think others perceive their genre). The findings reinforced that ingroup bias is tied to how positively individuals perceive their identity as part of a group, rather than general self-worth. However, the study highlighted limitations in focusing solely on intergroup comparison, noting that intragroup dynamics also play a role in self-esteem, which SIT traditionally underplays. This distinction calls for future research to examine both intergroup and intragroup processes in the context of music.

Clark and Lonsdale's (2023) study built on previous research by focusing on collective self-esteem and its relationship to music preferences. They discuss Roe's (1995) Theory of media delinquency as an explanation. Roe found that adolescents who performed badly at school were more likely to listen to heavy metal. He concludes this may cause low self-esteem which will see them seek an alternative identity to the mainstream/academic one.

While Lonsdale's earlier work established a link between self-esteem and music preferences, this study acknowledged the inconsistency in the literature, where previous research found no relationship between self-esteem and music preferences (Bodner & Bensimon, 2015; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003; Zillmann et al., 1995). Clark and Lonsdale found that collective self-esteem was a significant predictor of music preferences, particularly among younger listeners.

Genres like hip-hop, rap, and R&B were found to be positively related to membership self-esteem, suggesting that these genres are integrated into youth culture, providing social benefits to those who identify with them. This insight is particularly relevant to Black British

urban music, where genres like grime and drill offer avenues for social expression and group solidarity. Interestingly, while these genres are culturally relevant and often alternative, their association with collective self-esteem suggests that identification with them reflects broader cultural trends among younger audiences.

Branscombe et al (2002) constructed a study to examine the joint effects of intergroup and intragroup processes on reward allocation. Their study showed that both types of evaluative comparison affected reward allocations. This suggests that the study of self-esteem needs to look at personal and collective self-esteem with reflection on the intergroup and intragroup perspectives.

Clark and Lonsdale's findings indicate that music genres provide more than entertainment; they offer frameworks for social identity formation, particularly for groups marginalised in mainstream society. However, the study acknowledges the need for further investigation into how self-esteem and group identity function across different social contexts and age groups. The role of collective self-esteem in shaping musical preferences opens the door for deeper inquiry into the cultural and social significance of music in identity formation.

#### *2.2.4.1 - Self-Esteem and Social Identity: Ongoing Debates*

SIA's Self-Esteem Hypothesis (Martiny & Rubin, 2016; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998) posits that individuals seek to enhance self-esteem through positive group identification, but the evidence remains mixed. Studies like those of Clark and Lonsdale (2023) and Tekman and Hortaçsu (2002) show some relationship between music preferences and self-esteem, but the correlation is not consistently strong across all demographics or music genres. Much of the variation may be attributed to the different ways in which self-esteem is measured. For

instance, Shepherd and Sigg's (2015) study found no significant association between self-esteem and music preferences, highlighting the challenges of applying SIT's traditional frameworks to specific cultural phenomena.

Tajfel's original formulation of SIT emphasised intergroup discrimination as a primary driver for enhancing group identity and self-esteem. However, these studies demonstrate that music genres often function less as antagonistic group markers and more as social identity markers within ingroup dynamics. Membership in a music group does not always result in intergroup conflict but can instead reinforce a sense of belonging through shared values and cultural norms.

#### *2.2.4.2 - Implications for Black British Urban Music*

In the context of Black British urban music, genres like grime and drill embody more than just musical tastes; they represent social identity markers that challenge mainstream perceptions. The negative portrayal of these genres by the media as representative of marginalised communities only serves to heighten their cultural relevance and reinforce group solidarity among their listeners. This dynamic illustrates SIT's processes of social comparison and ingroup favouritism, where Black British youth find positive self-esteem through their identification with these culturally significant music genres.

The studies reviewed support the argument that Black British urban music provides a vital lens through which young people navigate their social identities. However, these genres' relevance to self-esteem and group identity cannot be fully understood without considering the broader social and historical context in which they arise. As Tekman and Hortaçsu (2002) demonstrated, the social and cultural roots of a genre influence how it is perceived, both by its fans and society at large. In this sense, genres like grime and drill

function as both expressions of identity and sites of resistance against mainstream narratives.

### 2.2.5 - Leadership through Music: Exploring Artists as Community Leaders

In this section, I explore the concept of music artists as leaders within their community. For the cohort of this thesis, the rapper plays a predominant role as the articulator of the community's norms and values. This section reviews the theoretical underpinnings that explain the role a music artist has within the community. Firstly, I review The Social Identity Theory of Leadership (Hogg, 2001) which applies the key concepts of SIT to the study of leadership. This paper helped provide the foundations for the later development of Entrepreneurship of Identity (Reicher et al., 2005). Finally, I consider the applicability of the concept of Entrepreneurship of Identity to the role of music artists as leaders in the community. This aims to provide insight into the social function of a rapper and the nature of their influence.

In his 2001 paper, Hogg explores how Social Identity Theory (SIT) relates to leadership, viewing it as a group process shaped by social categorisation and prototype-based depersonalisation. Key concepts from SIT and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) as previously described in Section 2.2.2 are applied to leadership:

1. Social Identity and Intergroup Relations: Individuals derive identity from group membership, influencing behaviour. Tajfel's ideas highlight cognitive accentuation (emphasising ingroup similarities and outgroup differences) and comparative identity (ingroup identity gains meaning through comparison with outgroups).
2. Self-esteem Hypothesis: Individuals seek positive distinctiveness through group identity to boost self-esteem. Studies show music can enhance self-esteem by

influencing emotions and transmitting norms and values, positioning music artists as leaders within their fan communities (Sharma & Jagdev, 2012; Shepherd & Sigg, 2015)

3.       Self-Categorisation, Prototypicality, and Depersonalisation: SCT explores how individuals categorise themselves and others into groups. Prototypical behaviour shapes group identity, leading to depersonalisation where self-perception aligns with group norms (Hogg et al, 1995). Leaders who embody group prototypes wield significant influence. Van Knippenberg (2011) notes that leaders gain influence by embodying group identity.
4.       Social Attraction Hypothesis: Depersonalisation shifts attraction from personal to social, where prototypical similarity drives acceptance. This may explain the rapid rise of music artists who become socially attractive.
5.       Uncertainty Reduction Hypothesis: Hogg (2007b) suggests reducing subjective uncertainty as a key motivator. Self-categorisation reduces uncertainty by providing clear behavioural guidelines, making groups with explicit prototypes more appealing.
6.       Salience: Multiple group identities operate simultaneously, with the context determining which identity is dominant. SCT's concept of salience explains how identity changes based on context, crucial for understanding the multiple artist connections a fan has.

Hogg's theory demonstrates that leadership can be understood through social identity processes, with prototypicality explaining how music artists influence their fans. These insights suggest that music artists operate in a transformational rather than transactional manner, similar to other forms of leadership.



## 2.2.6 - Cultural Impact: Music as a Driver of Identity and Leadership

With regards to the music industry, this confirms many marketing approaches that have focused on understanding and promoting stereotypical ideals. Many of the great artists appear to embody the culture of the time. From the Beatles to Madonna to Drake, all seem to have a symbiotic relationship with the culture in which they represent and dictate the trends. Changes in music production and marketing brought about by the digital era have made this role accessible to anyone.

A leader within an organisational setting has differences from the role of a music artist, but there are also important similarities. By definition, a successful music artist must have followers who regard them as the ideal group prototype. Baym's (2012) research on Swedish indie artists highlights a symbiotic relationship between musicians and their audiences, shaped by social media interactions. These interactions blur the boundaries between fans and friends, offering interpersonal rewards for musicians while posing challenges in maintaining personal and professional boundaries. Similarly, Giles (2017) examines how social media has transformed the dynamics between celebrities and fans, using the case of emerging crime authors and their Twitter followers. Giles's findings reveal that traditional fan-celebrity relationships have evolved into more fluid, multidirectional interactions where followers, such as book bloggers, often act as legitimising agents within specific cultural spheres. Together, these studies demonstrate how the modern artist-audience relationship involves mutual influence, with followers playing a key role in shaping the artist's success and public persona.

This reciprocal relationship creates a dynamic where the ideal presented by the artist influences their followers, but the artist remains dependent on the approval of those

followers. This process may help to explain the heightened pressure faced by leaders and artists, as their position as the prototypical leader makes them the ideal ingroup member, subject to greater scrutiny and higher expectations. This dynamic is explored in the Black Sheep Effect (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002), which highlights how ingroup members who deviate from the group's ideals are judged more harshly than outgroup members. Leaders, including artists regarded as ideal prototypes, experience amplified pressure as they must constantly meet or exceed the standards set by their followers. Giles (2017) further supports this by demonstrating that on social media, followers are not a monolithic group but instead perform multiple roles and identities, blurring the lines between followers and fans. While academic literature uses the term "followers" to describe these audiences, common language differentiates between music followers, typically referred to as fans, and organisational followers, typically referred to as employees. For ease of understanding, I will adopt these common language terms when differentiating between the two contexts.

The relationship dynamics are different between artist/fan and organisational leader/employee. There is a direct line of responsibility for an employee created by the organisational hierarchy. A fan is seemingly not obligated to follow any particular genre or artist making the role of a leader more precarious due to no formal requirement to follow. Also, the constant need to grow a fanbase differs from the relatively stable nature of an employment roster. This need to grow a fanbase, whether from individual motivation or contractual obligations, means they must appeal to individuals not part of the ingroup. I, myself, am a mid-30s, white, middle-class fan of UK urban music. I certainly do not fit the

demographics of the group prototype. Van Knippenberg (2011) offers an explanation that may provide some insight,

*'In this respect, it may also be important to note that prototypes are not restricted to – indeed do not even need to include – demographic attributes. Group prototypes capture the socially shared reality of the group, and thus include what the group values, believes, and considers important, and what are seen as appropriate and desirable behaviors and courses of action.'*

*Van Knippenberg (2011)*

So while I may not have the demographic attributes of the music artist, I can connect with their values and beliefs. This connection is enough for me to appreciate the music (Tanz, 2007) and potentially become a fan of an artist/genre. This process allows artists to grow beyond their core fanbase with which they share the most prototypicality.

### 2.2.7 - Reflecting on the Interplay Between Music and Identity

This thesis will seek to demonstrate that an individual's chosen music genre may act as an agent of depersonalisation resulting in intragroup processes and the ingroup's societal context in keeping with SIA. Tajfel said

*'if twenty years from now someone is interested enough to write that Tajfel was writing nonsense, that's fine. I think it's necessary to stir these issues up because I think they are important'*

*(Tajfel, cited in Cohen 1977)*

It is apparent from this quote that Tajfel thought that exploring issues was more important than any formulation he devised. While the challenges of understanding the relative importance of intergroup/intragroup processes remain significant, the Social Identity

Approach has evolved. This evolution has resulted in semantic confusion in the literature as different authors use different components of the theory as frameworks for their studies. Unfortunately for the naïve PhD student, this presents an issue when trying to comprehend the Social Identity Approach. Its original conception based on the minimal group paradigm would suggest it explains how group identity during conflict with another group impacts an individual's decisions. It was actually Turner who coined the term Social Identity Theory after the death of Tajfel. Turner suggested that Tajfel thought social identity would not do justice to the positive distinctiveness element of Social Identity Theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2010). The early death of Tajfel may have cut short his opportunity to develop ideas in his own image. However, based on his quotes, I can imagine he is happy people are discussing it at all.

Sik-Hung Ng (cited in Brown, 2020b) states, '*Social Identity Theory is first and last about social change*'. This definition is in keeping with Tajfel's lecture title that he delivered prior to Social Identity Theory's conception, '*Intergroup behaviour, social comparison and social change*'. This title also highlights another view that it is simply a theory to explain intergroup relations. Others may say it is a way of exploring prejudice and discrimination as it focuses on the processes of the inferior group. SIT is understandably dominant over the Self Categorisation Theory, with some seeing SCT as a subsidiary theory that supports SIT. With SIT focusing on intergroup processes and SCT on intragroup processes, the theories seem to be two sides of the same coin. It may be expected that SIA would become the predominant terminology for discussing group processes. However, it seems SIT is still the more common approach found in the literature. As discussed previously, SIT is often used as a framework based on tenets rather than a falsifiable hypothesis. Brown argues that there is a distinction between the Social Identity Theorists whose interest is developing SIT and

those researchers who use it as a pragmatic framework to explain real-life group interactions.

For my thesis, I adopted the SIA framework. Initially, SIT's description of group dynamics, us vs them, seemed best suited to elucidate the significance of music as a cultural expression. However, this thesis was designed to be exploratory rather than comparative. Without capturing the outgroup's perspective, any conclusion on the subject would be biased. Instead, I aimed to provide an exploratory study of the intragroup processes of an under-researched group. SCT seemed to be well-suited to developing an understanding of these processes because of its explanatory power concerning the categorisation process. Other aspects of the group dynamics have required applying alternative theoretical approaches derived from SIT, such as Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET) and Identity Management Strategies (IMS). Some aspects required insights from theoretical approaches not related to SIA. Notable among these was Evans and McPherson's (2017) exploration of developing a musical identity during adolescence, which drew on the Erikson-Marcia model of identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; 1980). This approach compensated for SIT's failure to recognise that the individual's development stage might affect the achievement of group identity.

The study applies various theories to help explicate the relationship between music and identity rather than attempting to verify the validity of any particular theory. Music artists can serve as leaders within the Social Identity Approach (SIA) by shaping and reinforcing group identities. Through their music, they articulate shared experiences and values, becoming cultural symbols and in-group prototypes. This leadership role involves guiding collective identity, particularly in marginalised groups, and helping to challenge

societal stereotypes. By embodying these norms, artists contribute to both Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT), uniting in-group members and influencing group dynamics.

## 2.3 - The Intersection of Race and Identity in Black British

### Youth

Understanding race and identity is central to exploring the experiences of young Black males in Tottenham, especially in the context of urban music. The complexity of race as a social construct and the historical experiences of Black communities in the UK and the US deeply influence how identity is formed, navigated, and expressed. In this study, my aim is to critically engage with these concepts, acknowledging my positionality as a white researcher while amplifying the voices of the participants, whose lived experiences form the core of this research.

This section explores definitions of race and ethnicity, the distinct historical trajectories of Black British and African American identities, and key theoretical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and BritCrit. These theories are crucial for understanding how systemic racism operates, both in global contexts and specifically within the UK.

#### 2.3.1 - Definitions of Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are foundational concepts in this study, yet they are often misunderstood or used interchangeably. It is important to distinguish between the two and consider their social and political implications, especially in the context of identity formation among young Black males.

##### *2.3.1.1 - Race as a Social Construct*

Race is not a biological reality but a social construct, a tool historically used to categorise and divide people based on physical traits such as skin colour, hair texture, and

facial features (Richeson & Sommers, 2016). This categorisation has long been used to justify systems of oppression, including slavery, colonialism, and segregation. Despite the discrediting of race as a biological fact (Long, Li & Healy, 2009), it continues to have profound implications in shaping social hierarchies and power relations. In the UK, as in other parts of the world, race remains a critical factor in determining access to resources, opportunities, and justice. Even in 1935, Huxley, Haddon, and Carr-Saunders advocated replacing '*race*' with '*ethnic*,' arguing that mixed ancestry makes ethnicity more accurate. Despite this, modern society still uses '*race*' for categorisation, often grouping culture, nationality, and religion under racism. Recognising the distinctions between these terms could foster more nuanced discussions, though these remain largely academic. For this thesis, I aim to provide the contextual background of Black Britain to better understand the factors shaping Black British youth culture.

In this study, Blackness is examined not just as a racial identity but as a socio-political category, reflecting the shared experiences of marginalisation and resistance that unite people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain. However, it is crucial to recognise that Blackness is not monolithic; it encompasses a wide range of cultural and historical experiences that differ based on migration history, local contexts, and global influences.

#### *2.3.1.2 - Ethnicity and Cultural Identity*

The concept of Black identity in Britain, especially within the context of music, has evolved significantly over the decades. Hall's (1978) critique of the term "Black" highlights how it once served to unify individuals under a shared experience of racism and marginalisation, while simultaneously erasing the rich diversity within Black communities. This section explores how scholars such as Hall and Back address these complexities through



the notion of "new ethnicities," which better captures the layered, multifaceted nature of Black identity.

Ethnicity, by contrast to race, refers to shared cultural practices, languages, traditions, and histories (Ansell, 2013; Franzinetti, 2016). It is credited to US sociologist David Riesman in 1953 (Eriksen, 2002). It was not until 1972 that it was added to the Oxford English Dictionary. It offers a more nuanced and flexible understanding of identity, as it is shaped by cultural, rather than physical, markers. In the UK, Black British identity is an amalgamation of multiple ethnicities, particularly those stemming from African and Caribbean backgrounds, which coexist and intersect with a British identity that is multifaceted.

Hall (1978) argued that the term '*black*' coined during the 1970s was a means to reference a shared experience of racism and marginalisation. Doing so took out all of the varieties of experience for a black person in Britain.

*'It created a homogenous movement removing culture, class and sexual differences within blackness'.*

*(Hall, 1978)*

To answer this problem, Back and Hall champion the idea of '*new ethnicities*'. New Ethnicities are produced in part through a productive tension between global and local influences. This concept takes into account the experience that West Africans may be different from East Africans, first generation compared to third generation etc. As Back (2013) says,

*'It avoids the tendency to define ethnicity in primordial ways and acknowledges the simultaneously local and trans local nature.'*

*(Back, 2013)*

However, while the term black may fail to capture these nuances it can also operate as a collective self-esteem enhancer. For the young Black males in this study, ethnicity plays a crucial role in their identity formation, as they navigate their connections to African or Caribbean heritage while also grappling with what it means to be Black and British. This negotiation between ethnicity and race forms the backdrop of their experiences in Tottenham, a community that reflects both the local and global dynamics of Black identity.

### 2.3.2 - Black British History and Its Relationship to African American History

Understanding the historical trajectories of Black British and African American identities is crucial to this study. While African American identity has had a significant global impact, Black British identity has developed along a different path, shaped by the legacies of British colonialism, migration, and socio-economic factors. These distinct historical contexts have resulted in unique identity formations, but both share common themes of resistance, cultural expression, and survival under oppressive systems.

#### 2.3.2.1 - Black British History: The Windrush Generation and Beyond

Black British history, as it is often understood today, begins with the post-war migration of Caribbean people, though Black presence in Britain dates back centuries to the Roman era and through the transatlantic slave trade (Olusoga, 2021). Despite this long history, the most defining moment for contemporary Black British identity is the arrival of the Windrush Generation in 1948, when Britain invited thousands of Caribbean migrants to

help rebuild the country after World War II. The ship HMT Empire Windrush, which carried 492 passengers from Jamaica to the UK, has since become a symbol of this pivotal migration moment.

The Windrush migrants, although invited to Britain, faced severe racism and exclusion upon arrival (Mead, 2009; Wardle & Obermuller, 2019). Despite the promise of jobs and opportunities, many struggled to find housing and employment. They were often subjected to racial slurs and treated as second-class citizens, forced to navigate a society that was not prepared to integrate them fully. The struggles of the Windrush Generation are emblematic of the broader challenges faced by Black British communities. Their experiences highlight the tension between being invited as workers yet being unwelcome as full citizens, a tension that has persisted across generations.

This post-war migration did more than merely bring new labour to Britain; it laid the foundation for modern Black British identity. The Caribbean migrants and their descendants became central to Britain's cultural fabric, contributing to music, literature, sports, and more. Despite facing systemic racism in housing, employment, and education, Black British communities began to build strong cultural identities, drawing from their Caribbean heritage while adapting to life in Britain. These communities have created cultural forms that reflect their resilience and historical experiences, with music genres like reggae, ska, and grime becoming powerful symbols of their struggles and creativity. Reggae and ska emerged as expressions of resistance and cultural pride in the postcolonial Caribbean, embodying themes of social justice and identity (Hebdige, 1981). Similarly, grime, which developed in the early 2000s London, fused the traditions of Jamaican dancehall and hip-hop-inspired beats to portray the harsh realities of urban poverty and council estate life, acting as a form

of "rebel music" (Fatsis, 2019; Johnson, 1976). Together, these genres illustrate the enduring role of music in documenting and resisting systemic inequality while fostering a sense of community and cultural identity.

The story of Black British identity, however, does not end with the Windrush Generation. The last few decades have seen a significant increase in migration from African countries, particularly Nigeria, Ghana, and Somalia. Between 1991 and 2021, the African population in the UK grew by over 700%, dramatically changing the demographic landscape of Black British communities (ONS, 2021). These migrants brought with them diverse cultural practices, languages, and traditions, which have enriched the already complex identity of Black Britain. Today, Black British identity is a tapestry woven from African and Caribbean influences, creating a dynamic and multifaceted cultural identity.

According to the Black British Voices Project Report (2023), Black British identity is shaped by the intersection of race, class, and systemic discrimination within the UK. The report highlights how Black Britons navigate unique challenges tied to their racial identity, including inequities in employment, education, and social mobility. This nuanced understanding of identity reflects the ongoing impact of structural barriers and societal attitudes that influence the lived experiences of Black British communities. This intersection of race and immigration is a key feature of Black British life, one that distinguishes it from the African American experience, which is primarily shaped by the legacy of slavery and segregation (Gunning and Ward, 2003).

#### *2.3.2.2 - African American History: Slavery, Segregation, and Cultural Influence*

To fully appreciate the development of UK urban music genres like grime and drill, it is essential to situate them within a broader historical and transnational framework. (Be

more explicit) Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic offers a powerful lens through which to view these genres, suggesting that the cultural exchanges between Africa, America, and Europe are part of a longstanding tradition. Gilroy traces the roots of African American cultural hegemony in music back to the nineteenth century, with the tours of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers serving as an early example of *'African-American folk forms passing into the emergent popular-cultural industries of the overdeveloped countries'* (Gilroy, 1993). This model of cross-cultural circulation enables a deeper understanding of how Black British music, including the evolution of grime and drill, continues to reflect the historical interdependence of African American and Black European cultures. The circulation of cultural artefacts and ideas between these regions has not only shaped the sound but also the socio-political significance of these musical forms.

In 1997, Henry Louis Grant, Jr, wrote a two-part article in the New Yorker examining *'Black London'*. This quote captures his initial thoughts,

*"What bliss to be black and living in London! How free you felt from the mundane prejudices of race-obsessed America! Here was a country where the boundaries between the races had been erased."*

(Owusu, 2003)

His initial experience was a sharp contrast from the volatile race debates in the US. However, this optimism was quickly replaced with despair when he realised the powerlessness and marginality experienced by the Black British community. The difference he experienced may be due to Black British identity being shaped by migration and the legacies of colonialism, while African American identity has been profoundly influenced by the history of slavery and segregation (Eltis, 2007). The forced removal of millions of Africans

to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade severed many African Americans from their ancestral roots (Winston & Kittles, 2005), creating a unique identity formation that is both deeply tied to survival and resistance against racial oppression. Britain undeniably played a pivotal role in the transatlantic slave trade (Klein & Engerman, 1997) and should be acknowledged accordingly. However, it is important to recognise that the formation of the Black British community is largely rooted in economic migration, rather than the legacy of slavery.

In the United States, the legacy of slavery is inescapable, as it not only shaped the economic foundations of the country but also left an enduring scar on the social fabric. After the abolition of slavery, African Americans faced further marginalisation through the institution of Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation in the southern states. These laws systematically disenfranchised African Americans, restricting their access to education, employment, and public services, while also subjecting them to brutal violence and intimidation.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s marked a turning point in African American history, as figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks led efforts to dismantle segregation and secure equal rights for Black Americans. However, despite the successes of the movement, the structural inequalities that were born out of slavery and segregation continue to affect African American communities today. Issues such as mass incarceration, police brutality, and economic disenfranchisement are all legacies of this historical trajectory, which remains a central concern for scholars of race and identity in the US.

What distinguishes African American identity from Black British identity is the way that slavery has fractured the ancestral connections of African Americans. Many African Americans cannot trace their roots back to specific countries or cultural groups, leading to a complex and often painful relationship with their African heritage. This lack of connection has contributed to what W.E.B. Du Bois described as double consciousness—the feeling of having two warring identities, one African and one American, that can never be fully reconciled. This concept has been pivotal in understanding how African Americans navigate their identity within a society that has historically denied them full citizenship.

### *2.3.2.3 - Comparative Exploration of Black British and African American Identity*

The comparison between Black British and African American identities offers a rich field for exploration, particularly in how these two groups have responded to different forms of systemic racism. In the UK, racism is often more subtle but no less pervasive. Black British individuals face barriers in education, housing, and employment, but these forms of discrimination are typically more institutionalised and less overt than in the US, where police brutality and segregation have been prominent features of the African American experience.

Black British identity, particularly for young people in urban areas like Tottenham, is shaped by a constant negotiation between their African or Caribbean heritage and their British nationality (Visser, 2020). This duality allows for a stronger connection to ancestral roots compared to African Americans, who may lack knowledge of their precise origins due to the disruptions of slavery. This connection to heritage is reflected in the cultural practices of Black British communities, from Caribbean-influenced music and food to the traditions and languages brought by African migrants.

However, the global dominance of African American culture, particularly through music, television, and cinema, has had a profound impact on how Black British individuals perceive their identity. African American artists like Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé have become global icons, shaping how Black identity is expressed and understood around the world. This influence is particularly strong in the realm of urban music, where genres like hip-hop and rap have inspired the development of British genres such as grime and drill. For young Black males in Tottenham, African American culture provides a framework through which they can explore their own identities, even as they maintain their connections to African and Caribbean traditions.

In both the UK and the US, urban music has become a powerful tool for expressing Black identity. Grime and drill in the UK, much like hip-hop and rap in the US, are genres born out of marginalised communities, offering a space for Black youth to voice their frustrations, aspirations, and resistance to systemic oppression. These music genres not only reflect the realities of life in urban environments but also provide a sense of solidarity and collective identity among Black youth across the Atlantic.

Despite the differences in their historical trajectories, Black British and African American identities are deeply connected by their shared experiences of racial marginalisation and their use of cultural expression as a form of resistance. In this study, understanding how these histories intersect is crucial for analysing how young Black males in Tottenham navigate their identity through music, drawing on both their local experiences and the global influences of African American culture.



#### *2.3.2.4 - Implications for Research*

The historical comparison between Black British and African American identities has significant implications for research on race and identity. For one, it highlights the importance of considering transnational influences on Black identity formation, particularly through cultural mediums like music. While Black British individuals have their own unique history, they are also influenced by the global representations of Blackness that have been shaped largely by African American culture. This interplay between the local and the global is crucial for understanding how young Black males in Tottenham engage with urban music as a way of expressing their identities.

Furthermore, this comparative approach underscores the importance of examining how different forms of systemic racism manifest in different contexts. In the UK, systemic racism is often more subtle, manifesting through policies and institutions that disproportionately affect Black communities, such as the criminalisation of urban music or the disproportionate exclusion of Black students from schools. In contrast, the US experience of race is often more overt, with police brutality and mass incarceration being central issues.

By understanding these historical and contextual differences, this research aims to provide a nuanced exploration of Black identity, recognising both the unique features of the Black British experience and its connections to the broader global Black identity shaped by African American culture.

#### *2.3.3 - Critical Race Theory (CRT) and BritCrit*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the United States, emerging from the work of legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (Ladson-Billings,

2021). CRT challenges the idea that racism is merely an aberration, asserting that it is a deeply ingrained feature of societal structures, including the legal system, education, such as arrest rates, health indexes, and educational attainment (Sablan, 2019; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018) CRT posits that racism is ordinary and not only exists at the individual level but is embedded within institutional policies and practices that reinforce racial hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The framework critiques the limitations of legal reforms in addressing structural racism and argues that racial progress often occurs only when it aligns with the interests of white elites, a concept known as interest convergence (Bell, 1980).

In the UK, BritCrit has developed as a British adaptation of CRT to address the unique context of race relations in the UK (Warmington, 2020). While it draws on the key tenets of CRT, BritCrit considers the specific racial, colonial, and class dynamics that operate within British society, providing a framework for understanding how systemic racism manifests in UK institutions.

#### *2.3.3.1 - Key Tenets of CRT and BritCrit*

Both CRT and BritCrit share core principles, but BritCrit incorporates a more nuanced understanding of how race intersects with the UK's history of colonialism and its current immigration policies. The following are key tenets that underpin both CRT and BritCrit:

1. Racism as a permanent feature of society: Both CRT and BritCrit assert that racism is a deeply embedded, structural phenomenon rather than an occasional aberration. In the UK, this is evident in the ways that institutions like education, law enforcement, and housing continue to disproportionately affect Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities (Gillborn, 2005).

2. Race as a social construct: Like CRT, BritCrit holds that race is not a biological reality but a social construct. This construct has been used historically to justify the subjugation of colonised peoples and continues to influence how racialised groups are treated within British society.
3. Interest convergence: While this concept originates from CRT, BritCrit acknowledges that in the UK, racial progress for Black communities often coincides with the needs of the dominant white majority. For instance, policies aimed at improving race relations often benefit the economy or political stability, rather than being driven by genuine concern for racial justice.
4. Counter-narratives: Both CRT and BritCrit emphasise the importance of giving voice to marginalised groups. In the UK, Black British individuals have used cultural forms such as music and literature to tell their own stories, challenging the dominant narratives imposed by white society. This is particularly relevant in the study of young Black males in Tottenham, where music serves as a form of resistance to systemic oppression and a platform for self-expression.
5. The role of colonialism and immigration: BritCrit adds an important focus on the UK's colonial history and its ongoing impact on race relations. The legacy of British colonialism continues to shape the experiences of Black British communities, particularly those of African and Caribbean descent. This context differs from the United States, where slavery and segregation play a more central role in discussions of race.

### *2.3.3.2 - CRT, BritCrit, and This Research*

While my thesis is not solely based on CRT, its adaptation in the form of BritCrit is highly relevant to understanding the specific ways systemic racism operates in the UK, particularly in the lives of young Black males in Tottenham. BritCrit provides a framework for analysing how racial inequalities manifest in British institutions, from education to media representation, and how these inequalities impact identity formation.

#### *2.3.3.2.1 - Systemic Racism in Education and Policing*

In both the US and the UK, systemic racism in education disproportionately affects young Black males. However, BritCrit helps to contextualise this within the UK's distinct history of colonialism and immigration. The UK school system, as explored by BritCrit scholars such as David Gillborn, has been shown to systematically disadvantage Black students, particularly through practices like exclusion and disproportionate discipline (Gillborn, 2005). Black students are far more likely to be excluded from school and placed in lower academic tracks, which limits their future opportunities and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon where young Black males are funnelled into the criminal justice system through exclusion from mainstream education.

In Tottenham, these institutional barriers are a key part of the experiences of young Black males, many of whom find themselves marginalised within the education system. BritCrit's critique of how racism is embedded in seemingly neutral policies sheds light on how school exclusions and harsher policing in Black communities reinforce the marginalisation of these young men.

#### *2.3.3.2.2 - Criminalisation Through Music*

BritCrit also provides a useful lens for understanding the criminalisation of urban music genres like grime and drill. In the UK, there has been significant media attention on drill music, often portraying it as inherently violent and linked to gang culture. This media portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes about young Black males, positioning them as threats to societal order. As a result, these genres—and by extension, the young men who create and consume them—are often targeted by both law enforcement and public policy. BritCrit's focus on counter-narratives offers a valuable perspective for understanding the role of music in the lives of young Black males in Tottenham. For young Black males in Tottenham, music is not simply an artistic expression but a way of pushing back against the dominant narratives that criminalise their existence. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993) and Stuart Hall (1997) argue that cultural production, particularly among marginalised communities, serves as a means of resisting dominant ideologies that reinforce racialised stereotypes. In this context, grime and drill music can be seen not merely as artistic expressions but as vehicles for pushing back against the narratives that criminalise young Black men. Through their music, these young men create alternative stories that challenge the reductive portrayals in mainstream media and public discourse.

#### *2.3.3.2.3 - Intersectionality and Class in BritCrit*

BritCrit also emphasises the intersection of race with other social factors, particularly class. While CRT in the US focuses heavily on the racialisation of Black individuals, BritCrit places a stronger emphasis on how class and immigration status intersect with race in shaping the experiences of Black British individuals. David Gillborn's work (2005) underscores the importance of intersectionality, arguing that race retains primacy while

interacting with other dimensions like class to perpetuate systemic inequities. Similarly, Nicola Rollock's (2014) examination of race and class in British education reveals how these factors intersect to marginalise Black individuals, highlighting how systemic barriers in education reinforce socio-economic inequality.

In Tottenham, where socio-economic deprivation is common, young Black males face the compounded challenges of racial discrimination and class-based marginalisation. This intersection of race and class shapes their access to resources, their treatment by institutions, and their portrayal in the media. Music, especially in urban genres like grime and drill, becomes an avenue for expressing not only racial identity but also frustrations with economic inequality and marginalisation. Lambros Fatsis (2019) demonstrates how grime and drill are subject to criminalisation and policing, revealing how systemic racism and class prejudice combine to target these cultural expressions. Likewise, Alex de Lacey's (2020) study on censorship highlights how institutional forces restrict the creative outputs of these artists, further marginalising them within cultural spaces.

However, while BritCrit helps to frame these genres as platforms for resistance and self-expression, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of this narrative. By solely viewing grime and drill as expressions of frustration and marginalisation, we risk dissolving the personal responsibility of the young men involved in crime. As Hall et al. (2022) point out, the criminalisation of these genres often fails to address the broader socio-political context, but the content of the music also cannot be divorced from the actions it sometimes glorifies. Striking this balance is essential, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of the music's role as both a reflection of systemic oppression and an individual choice within that system.

BritCrit helps to frame this experience by showing how young Black males are doubly marginalised—by both their race and their socio-economic status. Hall et al. (2022) explore this dynamic in their analysis of grime and drill lyrics as ethnographic data, arguing that criminalising these musical expressions overlooks their role in articulating the lived realities of urban youth. At the same time, recognising that music is part of a larger social ecosystem ensures that we do not romanticise its role in shaping identity while ignoring its potential to perpetuate harmful norms. This lens allows for a deeper understanding of how systemic oppression is navigated and resisted through cultural production while also holding space for critical reflections on personal responsibility.

#### *2.3.3.2.4 - BritCrit's Relevance to This Study*

BritCrit's adaptation of CRT for the British context is essential for understanding the specific experiences of young Black males in Tottenham. While CRT provides a broad framework for examining systemic racism, BritCrit allows for a more tailored analysis of how race intersects with class, immigration status, and colonial history in the UK. Nicola Rollock's work (2014) highlights how systemic structures disproportionately disadvantage Black Britons, with socio-economic barriers reinforcing racial inequities.

#### *2.3.4 - Summary*

By incorporating BritCrit into this study, I can more effectively analyse how young Black males use urban music not only to express their identities but also to resist the systems that oppress them. Their music becomes a powerful form of counter-narrative, challenging the dominant discourses that criminalise their existence. At the same time, this study acknowledges the tension between music as a means of resistance and its potential to perpetuate problematic behaviours. For instance, Fatsis (2019) and de Lacey (2020) highlight

how grime and drill serve as platforms for resisting systemic marginalisation, despite facing censorship and criminalisation. However, they also reveal the importance of addressing the actions that accompany these narratives, ensuring a balanced view that neither absolves nor unduly vilifies the artists or their music.

In this way, BritCrit not only informs the theoretical framework of this research but also highlights the agency of these young men in shaping their own narratives in the face of systemic oppression. By maintaining a critical balance, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dualities within urban music and its role in identity construction and social resistance.



## 2.4 - Music and Identity in Black British Youth Culture

In this section, I will explore how music artists can serve as leaders within the Social Identity Approach (SIA), focusing on how they influence group dynamics through cultural expression. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT), I will explain how musicians act as in-group prototypes, shaping collective identity through authenticity, lyrical integrity, and community loyalty. Additionally, I will discuss how music allows these artists to transcend mainstream norms, positioning them as cultural leaders who redefine success by the ethos of their genre. By integrating these theoretical frameworks with insights from alternative models like the Erikson-Marcia identity formation theory, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of music in identity development.

### 2.4.1 - Music, Belonging, and Self-Esteem

The previous three sections aimed to lay the foundations of understanding for this discussion section. This was necessary to answer the question, "How important is music to young Black men and why?" Visser (2020) conducted a study exploring the experiences of young people from immigrant backgrounds in Tottenham. With many being second or third-generation immigrants, one might assume they would experience a cultural dilemma between their parents' country and the UK. However, several studies show that they are not conflicted by this dichotomy but navigate fluidly across different cultural fields (Hall, 2002; Malson et al., 2002). This capacity to move between identities is supported by self-categorisation theory, which explains how one's sense of self varies depending on group attachment and context (Reicher et al., 2016). A strong attachment to group identity not only enhances collective self-esteem but also deepens a sense of belonging (Phinney, 1992;

Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). Visser's interviews focused on participants' 'belongingness' to British culture, with one response underscoring how music plays a vital role in defining one's character within the collective identity of Black British youth.

*I've always said Jamaican, but obviously when I speak, I'm British, but I would say Jamaican 'cos that's like how I've grown up ... the food I eat, the music I listen to and sometimes the way I talk and just the way I do everything (...)*

*(Visser, 2020)*

For this participant, music was one of the cultural parameters that made her self-identify as Jamaican rather than British. There is not enough data to determine the prominence of music in this process. However, it does highlight that music can be involved in a feeling of belongingness. It could be presumed that the diversity of the area would cause a strain on the young people's feelings of belonging. However, Visser found that the young people were very comfortable with navigating the multitudes of cultural identities. A sense of 'being in the same boat' allows the young people to form relationships across social boundaries such as race, language and culture. These relationships are reinforced by a lack of judgement based on these social boundaries, which may not be the case outside the neighbourhood. It is unsurprising that grime, which for a decade represented the London youth, is seen as a

*'predominantly black musical form, grime does not preclude an "authentic" white (or other ethnic) identification; both musically and lyrically it illustrates a process of cultural blending, which creates new modes of identity and expression'.*

*(Adams, 2019)*

Grime developed as a music genre that is representative of the social dynamics that young people must adapt to feel belonging. In a previous study, Visser et al (2015) found that young people gain self-esteem and self-efficacy from their neighbourhood. So, while outsiders may only have negative connotations of an area like Tottenham, the young people living there can recognise the violence and crime but are able to perceive the area's strengths. This is in keeping with the tenets of Social Identity Theory that would suggest an individual gains self-esteem from their collective identity (Hornsey, 2008; Trepte & Loy, 2017) and that ingroup members will recognise the positive qualities of their group's properties. Also, the intragroup identity is reinforced through comparison with wider society.

As the Identity section revealed, achieving positive self-esteem is the preliminary motivator in SIT. However, the use of 'positive' can be misleading due to its use in ordinary language. Positive can be used as a synonym for good, creating a misconception on potential desired behaviour. Positive self-esteem is not achieved by comparison to an objective moral standard. Instead, individuals have unique social frameworks comprising an amalgamation of group prototypes. It is the relationship between these prototypes that creates unique frameworks. For example, the gatekeeper and I are both part of the urban music community. However, the differences in our races provide a different context by which we experience the community. These unique frameworks dictate the rules and norms, and prototypes by which to assess our individual self-esteem. However, the mainstream media seem to be making judgements based on comparison to the prototypes of the dominant society. This comparison can reinforce the differences between the cultural frameworks, further isolating the subculture. This isolation may lead to higher ingroup identification and participation, creating more of the behaviour the dominant society deems negative thus creating a vicious cycle.

So far, I have demonstrated why young people in deprived areas may have a higher sense of belonging to their area, and music may be representative of this belonging. However, in this next part, I aim to establish an understanding of the potential importance of music to a young black person's identity. A YouGov survey in 2018 found that 69% of black people living in the USA feel music helps them to connect with others. A similar percentage agreed with the statement that it is important to support African American music artists. There is substantial literature surrounding the significance of music in the black community based on slavery and the civil rights movement (Peretti, 2008; Turck, 2008). However, this literature may not be relevant to the experience of the black community in the UK. As many of the young people in Tottenham are second- or third-generation immigrants, they still have a close connection with their parents/traditional music.

Myrie et al. (2022) carried out a study examining *'how music functions in relation to identity development for African-, Caribbean- and Black-identified emerging adults who have immigrated to Canada'*. They proposed three impacts that music can have on black identity. Firstly, there is its role in identity formation which has been discussed in length. They found that music helps people to accept their racialised body which the mainstream society may have rejected. Secondly, they propose that music is a crucial tool in the role of resistance (ibid). Music has been used to combat harmful social labels and reform group identities (Rabinowitch, 2020; Danaher, 2010). When the social majority has maligned a community such as the one in question, music can help to reinforce a positive collective identity. Finally, they suggest that music is crucial to the diaspora and migrants. Music helps to transmit stories and narratives, keeping culture alive, but it also gives other people a chance to see and understand the culture in a more digestible format than lengthy text.

The research by Dixon, Zhang, and Conrad, (2009) based on African American's viewing habits of rap music videos, found that,

*'Black audience members who watch rap music videos tend to have higher collective self-esteem, and they tend to identify with rap videos that feature characters who share their darker skin tones'.*

*Dixon, Zhang, and Conrad (2009)*

This quote indicates that race is a critical factor in the prototype of a black rap fan. The results also revealed that individuals who consumed more rap videos had a higher sense of collective self-esteem with their racial identity.

It appears that within a multicultural environment, music can provide a vehicle for the development of a new, unifying identity. By its nature, this new identity has the ability to cross cultural boundaries. Thus, music has the potential to draw diverse communities together. For the participants in this thesis, music becomes a vital social tool in their adjustment to their environment. It provides both a branding for the group and a framework for group-appropriate behaviour.

#### 2.4.2 - Fashion and Drill Culture

People have different definitions of fashion. For some, the term is used as a synonym for haute couture associated with the catwalks of Paris Fashion Week and incredible designs. For others, it is a term to describe all clothing choices even uniforms. For this thesis, I define fashion as identifiable clothing that reflects some element of one's persona. With this definition, I aim to explore the specificity of the application of fashion choices within drill

music. Gunter (2008) described the clothing choices of young males involved in Road culture,

*'the majority of young males involved in Road life will tend to walk around in small groups, wearing designer sportswear (Nike sportswear is the brand of choice, followed by Adidas and then Reebok): hooded sports tops and jackets (normally with hood up, even in blazing sunshine), baseball caps, tracksuit bottoms or straight-legged designer trousers or denim jeans. To get the straight-legged effect, the trousers or jeans are taken in from just below the knee right down to the ankles to give a drainpipe effect. Designer labels of choice for trousers, jeans and shirts are Versace, Valentino, Stone Island, Iceberg, Armani and Moschino.'*

*(Gunter, 2008)*

Even though this description is almost sixteen years old it still holds relevance in 2024. There are two standards of fashion within road culture, sports and designer. Day-to-day outfits tend to be sports based which will include tracksuits, hoodies and caps. Whereas for smarter social events individuals will wear expensive designer brands. The one notable change from this description is the choice of designer brands with Balenciaga, Moncler, LV, Fendi, Dior or Gucci being more fashionable in 2024 (Åberg and Tyvelä, 2024).

The particular fashion of urban youth, such as tracksuits, hoodies and trainers, is defined by some as streetwear (Roman & Harkes, 2023), once again relating to the concept of the *streets*. Streetwear is an international fashion style adopted by many young people across the world with each country having their own variations. Borne out of the hip-hop and skate/surfing culture in America streetwear was an opportunity for young people to differentiate themselves from their parent's culture. Based on rebelling from the

mainstream culture streetwear is also defined by its practicality. For example, skate shoes designed for skateboarding are flat-soled to allow for more grip and control. Drill music, in particular, has several fashion items that also have practical value. The balaclava has become synonymous with drill music as many artists wear them in their videos. This is often associated with the phrase *'No face, No case'* which alludes to the reason behind the popularity. The balaclava or *'bally'* as it is more commonly known can hide the individual's identity, mainly from the police but also from their rivals. The use of gloves within drill is also for the same motivation of avoiding police repercussions. However, the choice of glove can have further ingroup implications. Many young people will wear branded gloves such as Nike or Adidas while these help hide fingerprints that is where their practicality ends. For many active criminals, the use of surgical gloves is far more practical as they are disposable and the material is impermeable making them better for handling drugs such as cocaine. This can be seen in numerous videos such as TPL – Philly Don't Dance or Meekz – Like Me and is a subtle indication to other ingroup members of their active status in the *streets*. While certain items may be used for their functionality that is certainly not the main consideration within fashion choices in the drill scene. There is a heavy association with very expensive designer brands even in the Finnish rap scene as Åberg and Tyvelä (2024) found in their study. The fixation with these designer brands can add pressure on young people from deprived social areas, potentially increasing their dissonance between their ideal and actual selves. This pressure to obtain designer brands has increased with the emergence of social media. Yet as one of the participants in Åberg and Tyvelä study noted,

*'Among guns and keys [kilograms] and drugs, baby I am stuck here, among tower houses and demons. Habibti, it's fucked up here. They shoot first and then ask the questions. It's not fashion designers or expensive watches]'*

In marginalised communities, the pressure of luxury purchases can increase the real-world implications of violence and crime. Fatsis (2021) states that the main motivation for drill rappers is to become financially well-off enough to leave their current socio-economic conditions. However, this does seem to contradict the importance of our contextual experience in providing self-concept. The Drill Rapper in my introduction, did not want wealth to escape his surroundings but to be able to thrive in them. The pursuit of designer fashion may not be an attempt to switch group identities but rather to increase social position within current ingroup members.

There seems to be limited theoretical analysis of fashion within the roadman culture. While many papers discuss the use of fashion by a subculture (Cova et al, 2012; Turner-Graham, 2015) few are done through a specific theoretical lens. Roman (2020), as part of a master's thesis, applied Social Identity Theory to the concept of streetwear. Their results revealed five implications in relation to Social Identity Theory: 1. The importance of identity constructs of the self-concept. 2. SIT helps describe the functions of the streetwear community. 3. The significance of influential figures in defining the rules and norms of the community. 4, The value of aligning brand image and personality with the product user. 5. How the narrative of a brand can impact fashion choices. Their application of SIT as a framework resonates with the epistemological stance of this thesis. They found that the top three credible sources of inspiration for fashion choices are musicians (64.8%), industry insiders (51.8%) and contemporary artists (44.5%). This gives credence to the study's focus on music artists as a major influence on the self and social identity of an individual. To



demonstrate this influence they refer to drill rapper, Central Cee's appearance at the British Fashion Awards,

*'Central Cee attended the ceremony in an outfit that became instantly viral. Most attendees to such events take this opportunity to dress up in their elegant formal wear, however, Central Cee had other plans in mind. He came in wearing black Chanel trainers, Nike Tech Fleece Joggers, his famous Kalenji hat and the star of the show, a 60-euro Forclaz hiking jacket from the sporting goods store, Decathlon. His unconventional appearance for an event like this led the event security to mistake him for a fan, resulting in an initial entry refusal (Lockcharms, 2022). One day after Central Cee's red carpet appearance, the Forclaz jacket sold out in all sizes within a day. Rappers selling out clothing pieces they wear is no new concept but what's unique about this example is the garment itself. Decathlon isn't exactly known as a fashion house when it comes to clothing, they offer functional active wear suitable for sports and outdoor activities, yet despite this, fans of Central Cee bought everything they could, boosting the sales of Decathlon.'*

*(Roman and Harkes, 2023)*

This demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between artists and their fans. What Central Cee wore to the award show is traditional of a drill fan, yet his exposure further increased the sales creating more representation of the drill image. As Roman and Harkes note Decathlon as a brand is not known for its coolness yet the association with a major influence such as Central Cee saw a positive financial impact. Yet even in this scenario, the drill style saw him initially denied entry to the award show.

Some of the most significant research into subcultures was from the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Culture Studies in the 1970s. Initially, the research tied the formation of subcultures and their fashion choices to class structures. However, more contemporary research has argued that it is a complex set of individual choices (Muggleton, 2003; Bennett, 1999). Hodkinson notes that a criticism of the CCCS was their oversimplification of groups and in turn focusing on the *ideal group*. This could be a general criticism of research into marginalised communities as many concentrate on the more extreme subgroups and was a consideration in the approach of this thesis. In my own experience, the community can be diverse with varying levels of commitment to the group's norms and values. Research in this area must aim to capture this variety to give a fair reflection rather than the enticing extremities. Hodkinson concludes by stating that future research should consider the extension of youthful styles traditionally reserved for 16 to 25-year-olds. It was this consideration that changed the title of this thesis from examining youth culture to youth-orientated culture to capture the expansion of youth identity.

Some may not describe the tracksuit as a fashion item. As the Central Cee example shows it is not normally associated with high-end fashion houses yet it is undeniably the uniform for drill culture and an indication of ingroup membership. It is affordable, practical and long-lasting while also providing them with 'street rep', a reputation within the street community, making it an ideal choice for teenage boys. However, it is the oversimplification of the tracksuit that fails to capture the nuances that allow ingroup members to identify for example, which area you are from, what type of urban music you like the most and if you are active in the *streets*. As with most subcultures, it is the group members that provide the meaning and context. In particular with young people, it is the music artists that often

provide that meaning and context, a feature which is capitalised on by brands and marketers.

### 2.4.3 - Social Media and Urban Music

Social media has had a substantial impact on identity formation since its emergence in 1997, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X becoming integral to both personal and professional lives. For young people especially, social media has become a fundamental part of social interaction. Perez-Torres (2024) identified four identity-related themes in social media use—self-presentation, social comparison, role models, and online audience—that align closely with Social Identity Theory. This aligns with Salo, Lankinen, and Mäntymäki's (2013) findings on motivations for social media engagement in the music industry, which include reinforcing individual and group identity, fostering affinity, enabling user-generated content, facilitating two-way interaction, and providing content access. Together, these studies reveal that social media fosters a sense of belonging and group identity, allowing users to present an idealised version of themselves to a broader audience, significantly shaping modern group processes and self-concept.

Before social media individuals could project an ideal version of themselves, however, this was often constrained by their socioeconomic conditions, geographical location or social hierarchy. The ability to manipulate social media images, posts and videos allows the individual to more easily project that idealised version. The social comparison of an ideal rather than an actual self with an online audience may be perceived to increase the individual's self-esteem. In reality, as Midgley et al (2021) have shown users tend to make upward comparisons rather than lateral or downward comparisons with the result that social media interactions lead to a negative self-evaluation and a lowering of self-esteem.

These comparisons are often based on physical appearance and peer relationships, two areas that are prominent in the lives of the participants of this study. What you are wearing and who you are friends with are major influences on the development of a young person's social landscape. Young people are increasingly being exposed to expensive luxury brands (Ki & Kim, 2019) creating more pressure on them to purchase brands they think will enhance their social image. Studies show that high social media usage correlates with materialistic values and encourages brand purchases (Kamal et al., 2013; Thourungroje, 2018). This means there is not only more pressure to purchase desirable brands but that these brands are becoming more expensive. For young people from low economic backgrounds, this can widen the gap between their ideal and actual self leading to low self-esteem and an increased potential for mental health issues.

While the previous paragraphs explored a more generalised approach to social media in this next part I examine the specific impact of social media on young people from marginalised communities. Much of the research on social media explores the negative impacts, however, Stevens et al (2017) discuss the potential role of social media in developing urban imaginaries that act as third spaces (Oldenburg, 1989), a place where young people can find refuge and connections with similar others. With the threat of violence in the physical world these digital third spaces (Soukup, 2006) can provide an opportunity to build and maintain positive social relationships and a sense of belonging that seems necessary for positive identity development. Stevens et al (2017) exploration of the positive impact of social media found that the negative outcomes outweighed the positive. They propose that social media increases disconnection between marginalised racial groups and mainstream society through the increased promotion of negative stereotypes.

However, the use of social media within gang culture can have much more severe implications in the physical world. Forrest Stuart (2020) who is renowned for his work on gangs and drill music in Chicago identified three strategies used by gang-associated youth; *cross-referencing*, *calling bluffs*, and *caught lacking*. Based on data acquired during a two-year ethnography into gangs in the Chicago southside, these strategies detail how gangs use social media to challenge rivals. It is through this challenge they create ingroup favouritism and outgroup homogeneity. *Cross-referencing* refers to the process by which previously unnoticed content is used to weaken the social reputation of their opponent by revealing comprising details. The content which will be accompanied by a humiliating comment is then reacted to by the wider online audience. This was the most common process used by the Chicago youth. The second process of *calling bluffs* is when gang members challenge rivals to live up to their violent claims and persona. This is often done by going to the area of the rival gang and posting antagonising videos claiming their opponents are soft. This process was seen during a clash between Chipmunk and Bussy Malone in the UK where Bussy filmed his response video on Tottenham High Road (YouTube, 2015), the area that Chipmunk claims to represent. This can lead to a back-and-forth with rivals seeking to have the last word. This back-and-forth increases the risk of physical violence as the gang members tempt the fate of a conflict. Finally, the most dangerous process is *caught lacking*. To catch someone lacking is when a rival is confronted in a non-gang-related situation such as shopping with their family or attending church. Lacking refers to the fact the individual is confronted when they have no support from their fellow gang members. The face-to-face nature of the interaction increases the risk of violence. Often these interactions are recorded and shared across social media in which aggressors will confirm the identity of the victim and then ask them to renounce their gang, area or friends. This is one of the better

outcomes as there are occasions when the victim will be forced to strip and perform embarrassing acts that end in a vicious beating. The humiliation can be more painful than the physical beating as the victim is now excluded from his gang due to his perceived weakness (Gunter, 2008).

Social media has provided a quantifiable form of human interaction through likes, views and followers. For many music artists, these metrics are correlated to their success so they focus on increasing them. For young people, adolescence is a time of identity exploration during which self and social comparison gives them an understanding of who they are. SIA proposes that this comparison is motivated by the pursuit of positive self-esteem. Social media networks help to facilitate this comparison (Chen & Lee, 2013). This means that social interactions that increase our self-esteem can be conditioned as desirable behaviour. However, due to the tendency of upward comparison, this process can lower one's self-esteem. Vogel et al (2014) supported this when they found that comparison with others on social media lowered the participant's self-esteem. However, an individual would gain self-esteem when receiving likes and follows based on their own content. While not a new phenomenon when combined with the quantitative nature of social media it can provide definitive answers on how popular you are in comparison to someone else. The correlation between interactions and popularity means

## 2.5 - Street Life and Music in Urban Communities

This section will examine the challenges in defining street life and the ways it has been sensationalised by both media and academia. As noted, the portrayal of genres like

drill often focuses on criminality and violence, reinforcing negative stereotypes about marginalised communities. However, I will argue that street life, as expressed through music, is not only about these extreme elements but also reflects the lived realities, cultural values, and identity struggles of urban youth. By drawing on social theories and examining how music influences street identity, this chapter will further explore the commodification of street culture and the role of music artists as cultural leaders within these environments. This shift allows us to understand how street life and music are intertwined, shaping both individual identity and broader community dynamics.

In doing so, the section will address topics such as the criminalisation of urban music, the commodification of street culture, and how artists navigate the tension between staying authentic to their communities while achieving commercial success. This provides a comprehensive view of how music not only reflects but also influences the social landscape of street life.

### 2.5.1 - What is Street life?

Reid's (2023) research, *'Trap Life'*, examines the psychosocial dimensions underlying street crime and cultural involvement among inner-city youth in London. She argues that engagement with 'street life' often emerges as a response to psychosocial stressors, such as socio-economic deprivation, lack of institutional support, and the need for resilience within marginalised communities. For Black youth in North London, cultural forms like drill and grime may function similarly, offering not only a means of self-expression but also a way to navigate and respond to the pressures and expectations imposed by their social environment. Reid's work thus provides valuable insight into the psychological motivations and survival mechanisms that underlie cultural engagement within urban youth identity

formation. As this section will show the concept of street life is not one I have found easy to define yet is crucial to further my arguments. As Reid states,

*‘the lack of theoretical rigour and poor ability to account for the role of personal history, family of origin, and culture, often trivializing the diverse and complex social worlds the research desperately seeks to describe’*

*(Reid, 2023)*

This thesis aims to provide rich accounts of personal history, family of origin and most importantly culture to combat these considerations. Further to Reid’s claim that trivialising the subject is a concern, my own concern is around the sensationalisation of the topic. Headlines such as,

*‘Drill, the demonic music linked to rise in youth murders’*

*(The Times, 2018)*

, can fuel public perception by reinforcing stereotypes. Drill is not the first and will not be the last music genre to be blamed for the rise in troubled behaviour (Billingham, L. and Irwin-Rogers, K., 2021). From a marketing point of view, this sensationalism works wonders for music sales (Ilan, 2012). However, on a societal level, it can create a moral panic that in turn produces more divisions in an already fractured society.

It is not only the media that tends to sensationalise the experience of street life but also academia. There is a risk of studies concentrating on overt criminal behaviour thus subtly glamorising the more extreme elements of street life (Wacquant, 1993). It may seem far more exciting to study stabbings and drug dealings than the monotonous boredom that those involved in street life experience. As Gunter (2008) notes most people are not involved



in the spectacular or violent aspects of street life. I would further this point by saying that even for those who are the violence is episodic and interspersed with long mundane periods. A young dealer may be required to stay on a particular street corner for twelve to fourteen hours a day waiting to make deals. The boredom may be tempered by a constant threat from the police or ‘*opps*’ but this can quickly become the norm and the boredom returns. As Bakkali (2022) states focusing on the most criminal aspects of a culture can ‘*lead to potentially misleading outcomes*’. There is a risk they are looking at the symptoms of crime rather than the underlying aetiology. This risk is intensified when these symptoms are seen through the lens of race. Race can be seen as a master status, that is an identity that is readily identifiable and unchangeable. Due to the innate nature of race, it seems inappropriate that judgements are being based on this characteristic.

Having grown up in Brixton, Dr Yusef Bakkali highlights the negative impact that such judgements can have on the Black British community. One example that he gives is how the term street has been misapplied as a synonym for ‘black’,

*“street ‘ can be (mis)understood as a deracialising proxy for marginalised groups, particularly those from the Black community’.*

*(Bakkali, 2022)*

The term street can be associated with the Black community, but it is certainly not exclusive to that community (Bakkali, 2019; Gunter 2008). The Albanian and Turkish communities are as influential in street life within the UK as the black community (Arsovska, 2015; Albanian Daily News, 2024). The difference is in the cultural output in regards to street life identity. Many claim that it is the Albanians who control most of the drug operations in the UK (Townsend, 2019). However, when observing Albanian youth culture it is clear to see

the influence of the Black youth culture. Even as I was carrying out this thesis I was invited to Albania with the gatekeeper, Tug. As soon as we arrived there seemed to be a clear divide in the acceptance of Tug's skin colour between the older and younger generations. It would be hard to distinguish the young people of Albania from those in the UK. Many of them wore similar brands of Nike, Adidas, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton and were almost excited by the presence of Tug. The older generation, however, did not welcome him with open arms with some being explicit in their disdain. Perhaps it is this disparity in the cultural output of street life that can see unfair associations between 'black' and 'street' identity. This a point that is recognised by Fatsis who claims that,

*'in the context of contemporary urban multicultural- the (kin)aesthetic, linguistic and musical codes that define it, are nevertheless informed by and borrow from Black or Afro-diasporic culture'*

*Fatsis (2023)*

What Fatsis calls 'contemporary urban multicultural' is synonymous with what I am defining as 'street'. He identifies the connection between this style and the black diaspora in the UK. At the centre of this debate is the constant issue of different usages of terminology in different sources. In some media reports street is used as a clear synonym for black. For myself, street is a system of thinking and behaviour. Irrespective of any demographics 'the streets' create a unique behavioural framework that appears identifiable in most cultures. Whether in Australia (Malone, 2002), Norway (Tutenges ' & Sandberg, 2022) or America (Lauger & Horning, 2020) there is a recognisable identity of 'street'. This is not to undermine the negative experiences the black community receives but to demonstrate how misguided

these negative assumptions by many writers are. Unfortunately, almost every term in this debate has multiple understandings which confuse the potential social responses.

### 2.5.2 - Criminalisation and Commodification

There is a certain amount of difficulty in discussing the relationship between music and street life due to the topic becoming highly politicised, making it difficult to be academically objective. As with any discussion involving race in today's cultural climate, opposing views are weaponised, limiting the freedom of discussion. As a result, mainstream society is often seen as criminalising the urban music community (Fatsis, 2019; Debo-Aina, 2021). The issue is that the mainstream can produce data to condone this view (Moore, Jewell & Cushion, 2011). While it is undoubtedly true that many of the actions described in urban music are overtly criminal, defining the music as the cause of the criminal activity is over-simplistic. It would be easy to follow the mainstream narrative that urban music causes crime without first exploring the statement's validity. Just because crimes are committed by individuals who share traits with urban music fans is not evidence of a relationship between crime and music. Nevertheless, the British courts demonstrated that they believed there was a link when in October 2019, rapper Rico Racks was convicted of drug offences and sentenced to five years in prison (Ilan, 2020). As a condition of his sentencing, he was also banned from using the slang words from the drug-dealing lexicon, '*bando*', '*trapping*', '*connect*' and '*whipping*' in his music. This approach seems to be naïve on the part of the judicial system for several reasons. Firstly, MLE is a constantly evolving lingua franca of street culture (Cheshire, 2020). As a result, the banned terms would likely change within a relatively short time frame. Secondly, rather than restricting the use of these words, the ban gives them increased credibility. Finally, it also appears unlikely that banning the use of the

words will fundamentally alter the underlying actions that these words portray. The words only act as a metaphor for the action. The action will continue even if the word is banned.

Jonathan Ilan defines a drill rapper as '*a young, male, black and underprivileged, a demographic group with a long history of tense relationships with the agencies of criminal justice*' (2020). Within his definition, he is explicit about drill rapper's relationship with the police, courts and prison. After the Tottenham riots of 2011, David Cameron proclaimed the riots were caused by '*gangs*' and '*gangster rap*' (Gunter, 2017). The government then developed the '*Ending Gang and Youth Violence*' initiative, which failed to explore the role of music even after Cameron's declaration of its catalytic nature. Across several papers, Ilan demonstrates urban music's tumultuous relationship with mainstream society (Ilan, 2012; 2014; 2017; 2020). One example of the targeted approach from mainstream society to criminalise the urban music community was Form 696.

Form 696 was a risk assessment form used by the Metropolitan Police in 2005 for music venues to determine the potential for anti-social behaviour at a particular live music event. The form created controversy as it was seen as racist for profiling black music genres (Fatsis, 2019; Ilan, 2012). The form asked what type of music would be played at the event and listed Bashment, RnB and Garage as examples, all music of black origin. The form also asked for the ethnicity of the target audience, which seems unnecessary unless judgements are made based on the audience's race. The recipient of the form was also threatened with a £20,000 fine or six months in prison. These questions were eventually removed from the form in 2009, although the form continued to be used until 2017. After a review led by Sadiq Khan, the form was removed in 2017. The Voluntary Partnership Approach was implemented to replace Form 696. The Guardian's report (Pritchard, 2023) on this approach

has several quotations from club owners who see it as simply a rebranding of Form 696 without the name. There is no predesigned form anymore, but applicants must provide their own risk assessment with particular details included. One manager commented,

*'But they're (the police) doing it by stealth now: they know that these are Black shows'.*

*(Pritchard, 2023)*

The police cannot stop the show but recommend that if the event is deemed high risk and there is trouble, there will be a review of the licensed venue, a veiled threat of closure. It is incidents such as Form 696 that give credence to CRT. While explicit in its original construct, the adaption to the Voluntary Partnership Approach is the same way CRT discusses systemic prejudices which may no longer be explicit in the American constitution.

The *'gangster'* is a popular trope within American culture dating back to cowboy outlaws such as Billy the Kid or Jesse James (Meyer, 1980; White, 1981; Ruth, 1996). Nowadays, hundreds of films follow a criminal protagonist that the audience supports. There is an allure to the criminal story as the lawless, free, successful image is something most people can only fantasise about compared to their self-perceived mundane lives. Fortunately, these films are age-restricted, reducing the number of children that the criminal elements may influence. Music does not have the same restrictive guidelines. Institutions such as the British Board of Film Classification are able to regulate content determining the suitability for the audience. In contrast, most musicians will upload their music videos to YouTube directly. There are community guidelines for YouTube which do limit some videos, but the combination of multiple social media platforms allows an avid follower to find any

content. This ease of accessibility can lead to a blurring of the lines between entertainment and reality.

One of the phrases I used while directing urban music videos for the mainstream market is '*that they want to see the hood through a glass window*'. The market wants a sanitised replication of actual criminal behaviour. There was an appeal to the concept of a gangster without an appreciation of the realistic behaviour needed to be a '*gangster*'. A feature of the gangster is that it appears the rules and norms of society do not dictate to them (Larke-Walsh, 2018). There is confidence and arrogance about a gangster who seems to exude self-esteem. This confidence can appear in contrast to their humble beginnings in life, a factor that can make the image more enticing.

Ilan describes how rappers can hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which is evidenced throughout the genre (2012). He uses the example of an artist condemning violence while also threatening their '*opps*'. The evident hypocrisy allows them to manage conflicting elements of their various prototypes, such as the prototype of the dominant society and that of their own subculture. The existence of this hypocrisy is perhaps necessary if effective identity management strategies are to be employed.

There appears to be a definite association between urban music and street life, which can be seen most clearly in the relationship between drill and crime. It is unclear whether urban music is the primary catalyst of crime or merely a by-product of the social environment. While this thesis will not be able to provide a conclusive answer, it does aim to provide further light on this topic.

At the centre of most discussions on street life is the role of the gang. The term gang has broad meanings. Ashton and Bussu (2020) found participants operated in three different

types of gangs; organised crime groups, street gangs, and peer groups. Organised crime groups are gangs that have a semblance of structure and hierarchy. These gangs will be involved in the higher echelons of criminal activity and operate through membership. Street gangs are typically associated with a group of friends who drug deal, rob and commit acts of violence. They are separated from OCGs by their lack of organisation and size of operation. Finally, peer groups were defined in the study as being different from street gangs based on levels of trust. A street gang is often formed based on locality meaning 'friendship' can be forced rather than built on a genuine connection.

*'One key difference between gangs and groups of friends was that friends were loyal to each other and could be trusted'*

*Ashton and Bussu (2020)*

While Ashton and Bussu offer clear definitions they admit that gang membership was not as simple as their analysis suggests. Members can be involved in several different models at any one time. They also mention that peer groups can be the first stages of OCGs. The media can create unnecessary controversy by not distinguishing between these different forms when discussing gangs. Most drill gangs are either street gangs or peer groups with the more successful developing into OCGs. Even the operations of an OCG can vary wildly. This may be another area in which American academia can infiltrate and misdirect European research. Traditionally many people would think of organisations such as Hells Angels, the Yakuza, and the Mafia when describing OCGs. However, some of the largest crime organisations operating in the UK are based around families such as the Adams family or Kinanhan's Cartel (Gottschalk, 2009) This may be based on trust with gangs like the Mafia and Yakuza setting up punishment and reward systems to maintain control of the

membership while family-based gangs already offer an innate level of trust. In regards to the participants of this study, none of them consciously operated as part of an international crime syndicate. There is a high possibility that many of those involved in the sale of drugs will use products procured by one of the top crime families but they are not a direct subsidiary of the gang. It is important to clarify the understanding and usage of '*gangs*' as it is regularly attributed to drill music and the rise in crime statistics.

A separation has developed between the terms '*gang*' and '*gangster*'. While traditionally, the gangster represented a gang member, the term gangster has acquired other meanings in MLE and is often used as someone who lives according to their own rules or has achieved visible success in any field. It appears that the term gangster used to mean a person who was a group member but now is used for someone who defines the group prototype. While the term gang member removes a sense of independent agency, gangster implies individualisation, potentially increasing self-worth. It is used widely as a mark of approval and respect. The term is not restricted to its subcultural roots but has spread into wider society. This is further evidence of the symbiosis between street culture, music and the community.

One of the hot topics in UK street life and examples of criminal organisation is the emergence of 'county lines'. In 2019 the government launched the 'County Lines Programme' to combat the rise in,

*'gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line".'*

*(Ministry of Justice, 2019)*



This definition offers a broad description which captures all drug dealing that operates over at least two council authorities. In Tottenham, the term is used for drug dealers from London who move to '*cunch*', a shortened version of countryside, a term used to describe anywhere outside of London. They will move to a smaller town or city and start a '*line*' there. A line is a list of potential customers often stored on a mobile phone. With London being so congested there are not enough potential clients to fulfil the needs of the ever-growing number of drug dealers which forces them to travel across the UK. An active line can then be sold at a wholesale price to any new emerging drug dealers. With increased exposure and revenue unfortunately there has also been a rise in violence associated with the sale of drugs. However, for the purpose of this thesis, it is the county lines' close relationship with drill music that provides background to the ethnographic observations. For example, back in 2019, sixteen individuals were arrested for transporting and selling drugs across five locations in the UK. Eight of the arrested were active members of drill group 67. The money acquired through the sale of drugs was displayed in their music videos in the form of designer clothes, jewellery and expensive cars. Initially, UK urban music did not have a large enough commercial market to be a viable career choice so often artists would support their career through illegally acquired money. However, in the past fifteen years, we have seen the commodification of urban music and its criminal elements to the point making a living through music has become a practical option.

### 2.5.3 - Artists as Cultural Influencers

Several academics have discussed the commercialisation of urban music. Jonathan Ilan documents the shift in grime music through the commodification of street troupes (Ilan, 2012). My time in the music industry saw me directly involved in the commodification of

grime through directing music videos. Record labels were asking for pop-style videos for urban artists to allow them to be accepted on MTV. The involvement of a global company created a new standard to which the subculture adhered. The financial rewards that these companies offer saw the artists adapt their behaviours to benefit from the mainstream's economic incentives. Ilan states that,

*'Potential accusations that these artistes have contributed to the dilution of their subculture to obtain commercial success are problematised by a parallel theme in their value system which calls for the achievement of wider recognition as musicians and (legitimate) entrepreneurs.'*

*(Ilan, 2012)*

It is this very conundrum which was the spark for this thesis. My belief concurred with Ilan that young artists will adapt their norms and values to achieve the most foundational belief which is to make it out of the *hood*. The driller referred to in my introduction seemed to reject the commercial success offered and instead favoured the social rewards of having a name in the *hood*. These social rewards are described by Ilan as subcultural capital,

*'The 'authentic' and 'exotic' nature of ghetto music imbues it with a 'subcultural capital' which drives its popularity among a mainstream audience while prompting connoisseurs to delve for ever more obscure (even extreme) variants (Devereaux, 2007; Thornton, 1995).'*

*(Ilan, 2012)*

This puts music artists in a unique position within the subculture in which they represent the group to the outgroup. Ilan argues that this role resonates with Bourdieu's idea of specialist cultural producers (Bourdieu, 2018). The artists are able to,

*'straddle the apex between perceived authenticity and commercial mass production/consumption.'*

*(Ilan, 2012)*

It is this ability to influence a subculture from a position of authenticity that gives credence to this thesis' rationale. The concept of Bourdieu's capital is used as a theoretical lens in several papers exploring street life (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2018; Bakkali, 2022; Ilan, 2013). In contrast, this thesis uses the Social Identity Approach as the major theoretical lens but the broad concepts of cultural capital can prove useful in understanding relationships within the groups.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

This methodology chapter outlines the research design and approach adopted to explore the relationship between UK urban music and expressions of identity among black males in a youth-oriented culture. The study employs a set of preliminary semi-structured interviews followed by a compressed time mode ethnographic investigation which is supplemented by post-hoc conversational interviews. This provides a comprehensive understanding of how music artists act as community leaders and how social media, fashion, and personal choice reflect their musical identity. By detailing the methodological framework, this chapter aims to justify the chosen qualitative approach and the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory to address the research questions effectively.

### Section 3.1 - Aim

To explore the relationship between UK urban music and expressions of identity in black males in a youth-oriented culture. The particular focus will be on music artists as leaders in the community and the role of social media, fashion and personal choice as the expressions of their music identity.

### 3.2 - Approach

Ten preliminary semi-structured interviews followed by a compressed time mode ethnographic investigation which is supplemented by post-hoc conversational interviews.

### 3.3 - Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between music and expressions of identity in youth-orientated black culture?
2. What is the role of a music artist in the creation, maintenance and development of the group's identity?
3. What is the relationship between street life and music in this cohort?

### 3.4 – Description of the approach

This study seeks to examine the intersection of UK urban music—primarily genres such as drill and grime—and the processes of identity formation among young Black males within North London's youth culture. The study focuses on young Black males, aged 16 and above, who are actively engaged in urban music as either artists or consumers. By focusing on music artists as pivotal community figures, this research explores how musical expression, fashion, social media engagement, and personal choices intertwine to shape both individual and collective identities. Additionally, the study investigates how these elements of identity are reflected and reinforced within broader cultural and social frameworks.

The study employs a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) framework to explore the co-construction of identity between the participants and the researcher, particularly in the context of UK urban music culture. This framework is uniquely suited to addressing the research questions, as it allows for an iterative process where themes of identity, leadership, and cultural influence emerge directly from the data.

Data collection involved a multi-method approach, including semi-structured interviews, a compacted time mode ethnography (CTM), and post-hoc conversational interviews. Ten preliminary semi-structured interviews provided a more structured opportunity to delve into participants' personal reflections on identity and music. The semi-structured interviews generated the dimensions that formed the boundaries for the observations. The CTM ethnography allowed for an in-depth yet time-efficient exploration of the participants' behaviours and interactions within the recording studio setting, offering valuable insights into how music influences fashion, language, and group dynamics. Finally, post-hoc interviews were used to further explore emergent themes from the ethnography and help clarify observations made during the sessions.

The ethnography took place primarily in two key North London recording studios—Infinite Records Studio and Unknown Recordings—each serving as vital hubs of musical creation and identity negotiation for the participants. A total of over 140 participants were observed and interviewed, providing a broad and diverse range of perspectives on the role of music in shaping identity. Participants were recruited through existing networks within the music scene, leveraging gatekeepers with strong connections to recording studios and artists. Supplementary data was gathered at various locations, including video shoots and private recording sessions, which provided additional contexts for observing the intersection of music, identity, and social dynamics. These diverse settings allowed for the capture of both public and intimate moments of musical and social interaction, providing a more comprehensive view of how music shapes identity in real-time.

Reflexivity was critical throughout the research process, especially given the researcher's dual insider-outsider status, enabling an ongoing examination of how personal biases and relationships with participants shaped the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 2006).

## 3.5 - Justification of Approach

This section will outline the philosophy behind the study design. It will look at the details of the initial proposed design and then describe modifications made in response to practical issues. Firstly, I explore the study design in relation to guidelines for undertaking an ethnography in a recording studio provided by Thompson and Lashua (2014) and Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (2013). Next, I provide the rationale for using a compacted time mode ethnography (CTM). CTM was selected over traditional ethnographic approaches for two key reasons. In addition to the practical constraints imposed by COVID-19, CTM ethnography was chosen because it aligns with the fast-paced and ever-evolving nature of urban music culture. The dynamic environment of music production, particularly in genres like drill and grime, requires a research method that captures the immediacy and fluidity of identity construction. Traditional long-term ethnographic methods may not be well-suited to observe the rapid shifts in style, language, and cultural expression that occur within these communities, whereas CTM allows for a more focused and adaptive observation of these emergent phenomena.

### 3.5.1 - Qualitative vs Quantitative

There are two main approaches to research methods – quantitative and qualitative (Bernard, 2013; Silverman, 2011). Quantitative research requires a strong theoretical underpinning to identify the variables to be explored (Fryer, Larson-Hall, & Stewart, 2018). Quantitative can determine that there is a correlation between variables but they often fall short in capturing the depth and nuance of cultural phenomena, particularly when exploring identity in youth-oriented music cultures. Quantitative methods would be ill-suited for a study of this nature, as they cannot capture the emergent, fluid, and context-dependent

ways in which identity is formed and performed through music (Bernard, 2013; Fryer, Larson-Hall & Stewart, 2018). Qualitative methods, particularly ethnography and thematic analysis, allow for a more detailed, exploratory understanding of how music acts as both a cultural and social force within these communities. They enable the researcher to uncover the meanings, narratives, and lived experiences that define the relationship between urban music and identity. Nowell et al. (2017) state,

*‘Qualitative research, [is] intended to generate knowledge grounded in human experience’.*

Qualitative approaches allow the data to dictate the themes. In doing so, it can reduce bias arising from the researcher’s preconceptions. Because my study is on a topic surrounded by so many diverse beliefs connected with race and culture, I regard it as imperative that I use the data to generate significant findings. I have therefore opted for a qualitative approach.

### 3.5.2 - Grounded Theory (GT)

There are a variety of potential qualitative methodologies. Wertz et al. (2011) outline five approaches: phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research and intuitive inquiry. Grounded theory (GT) was chosen as the primary approach for this study. One of the reasons grounded theory is most suitable in terms of analysis for this study is that it has monitored preconceptions rather than imposing the researcher’s bias. Wertz et al. (2011) outline the balance between doing a literature review to give an understanding of the field and maintaining a naivete that allows an honest approach to the data something this thesis aims to do.



The analysis was carried out using a Thematic Content Analysis (Thorogood & Green, 2018; Gerritse et al, 2018), however, the philosophy of my approach was informed by Kathy Charmaz's (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory approach. It is essential to recognise that there is a standing point for the researcher. It is naive to believe that any project can be genuinely grounded theory. Charmaz's constructivist approach is well-suited to this study, as it recognises the researcher's active role in co-constructing meaning alongside the participants. In this study, where I hold '*insider*' status due to my previous involvement in the Tottenham music scene, CGT's reflexive stance allows me to critically engage with my own biases while enabling an authentic, participatory understanding of the data. This approach is particularly beneficial given my dual role as both an observer and a former participant in this cultural space. CGT helps to balance the researcher's influence by continually questioning how my presence shapes the data, ensuring that the voices of the participants remain central to the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This has allowed me to see the social implications of the music, leading me to be more sympathetic to the situation. Having worked as a music video director, I have an insight into the aetiology of the music and how it is portrayed but have also built up a friendship network in these areas.

There are two other main approaches to grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin's (1994) version of grounded theory is very prescriptive, creating a coding paradigm by which to operate. Glaser (2013) countered this approach, saying it was forcing theories. His theory of GT took a much more relaxed view, coding by constant comparison. The significant difference between Glaser and Charmaz is that Charmaz suggests that meaning is co-constructed by the researcher and participants. This is suited to this particular study due to the researcher's heavy involvement with the target population. Reflexivity was a central element of this study, as my prior involvement with the music industry and personal

connections within the community shaped my perspective as a researcher. Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory approach emphasises the importance of continuous reflection on the researcher's role in co-constructing data. Throughout the study, I engaged in reflexive practices by maintaining a journal where I noted my preconceptions, potential biases, and reactions during fieldwork. This practice allowed me to remain aware of how my own identity and experiences influenced the data collection and analysis processes. Reflexivity was particularly important in this study, as my dual role as insider-outsider provided both opportunities for deeper access and potential challenges in maintaining objectivity. In his work *Street Corner Society* (2012), William Foote Whyte documented the experiences of Boston juvenile gangs and coined the term '*reflexivity*', a concept now central to most qualitative research, highlighting the importance of understanding the contextual relationship between the researcher and participants. The aim of this study, however, was not to develop a new theory but to explore the applicability of the Social Identity Approach (SIA) in understanding social issues. Therefore, Charmaz's Grounded Theory was used as a foundational approach rather than as a prescriptive methodology.

### 3.5.3 - Preliminary interviews

Ten qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted prior to the observations in the recording studios. However, one of the interviews had to be withdrawn because, during the interview, it became clear that they did not fit the criteria. The interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was constructed based on theoretical considerations derived from SIT such as self-categorisation, social comparison, self-esteem, inter-group conflict and the norms and values of the group. The dimensions derived from these interviews were used to guide the observations in the recording studio.

Semi-structured interviews allow the participants to express what they see as important while allowing the researcher to explore the areas that are of interest to them (Longhurst, 2003). Structured interviews are not suitable if the data is to dictate the themes. They force participants to talk only about the issue based on what the researcher deems important. Semi-structured interviews can also have this issue if the researcher dictates the conversation's direction. The skill of a good interviewer is to try and make sure that direction is as organic as possible while still addressing the basics of the topic (Adams, 2015).

The interviews were video recorded using a mid-frame shot with a single front camera. This allowed the capture of additional non-verbal communication (Brooks, Horrocks and Kings, 2018). The face-to-face interviews were recorded using a Huawei P20 Lite with factory camera settings. The camera was set up to give a full-frontal view of the interviewee and ran continuously throughout the interview. Once the footage had been recorded, it was transferred onto a password-protected secure USB and laptop. The original footage was deleted from the camera before leaving the interview venue. The USB was then stored in a locked container except when viewing the material. The video recordings were identified by study number. The footage was/will not be shown to anyone other than the interviewer and the supervisor. They will be wiped clean three months after completion of the thesis. All reporting was entirely anonymous.

### 3.5.4 - Observations

This study adopted a compacted time mode ethnography (CTM) (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Hammersley, 2005). Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) noted confusion in the definitions adopted by researchers regarding Ethnography. While some define it as a methodological tool, others understand it as a *'philosophical paradigm to which one makes a*

*total commitment*' (Gobo, 2011). Unlike traditional ethnographies (Coffey, 2018), CTM has a shorter, more focused duration. There were two reasons for adopting this approach. The first was that, due to the COVID restrictions, the time available for carrying out the study was limited. The second was that CTM offers potential advantages over traditional ethnography, namely:

- *Panoramic Perspectives* – The focus on specific locations for any period of time makes it possible to gain a broader understanding of the common behaviours of a wide range of participants. As opposed to traditional ethnographies the focus on location rather than specific participants allows identification of common behaviours. An early example of this is the work of Peter Wood in the Isle of Wight schools (2005).
- *Highlighting Grand Theory Relevance* – Thompson and Lashua (2004) state that CTM is well positioned to present a *picture of subtle realism* by applying a theoretical lens to the observations. In this case, I chose to use the Social Identity Approach to elucidate the interactions I was observing.
- *Bringing out the colour* – This more compacted version of an ethnography can also be used to '*bring out the colour*' of the study by providing a richer and deeper dataset. By carrying out the study in a confined area, Jeffrey and Troman (2004) noted that an ethnographer was able to capture a wide range of expressions by inhabiting the space rather than a specific activity.

One of the facets of a traditional ethnography is the time needed for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the ecology of the cohort under study. I had the advantage of already being at home in the cohort because of my previous career in urban music. Although often I had not met the participants before, I was still considered an insider as can be seen in

the observations. The level of access achieved was enough to provide exploratory data on an under-researched topic. Further studies may require a more extensive study duration to examine the cohort in more detail.

### 3.5.5 - Post-hoc Interviews

The limited time frame of a CTM ethnography can also have its weaknesses. The beauty of traditional ethnography is the extended periods in the field allow for a deep exploration of any topics raised. CTM, while focused, cannot have the same longitudinal considerations that traditional ethnography has. In order to mitigate these discrepancies, I decided to support my observations with post-hoc supplementary interviews. This allowed me to examine the notable topics in more detail. Forsey (2012) stresses the importance of interviewing in an ethnography,

*‘The research interview provides an opportunity for creating and capturing insights of a depth and level of focus rarely achieved through surveys, observational studies, or the majority of casual conversations we hold with our fellow human beings’*

*(Forsey, 2012)*

This concept is further reinforced by Hockey and Forsey (2020), who argue that interviews hold equal significance to ethnography as participant observation. This importance is only magnified under the time constraints of CTM. Another consideration which was highlighted in preliminary interviews is that the more formal the interview the more uncomfortable and less forthcoming the participants were. With this in mind, I tried to adopt what Blum (1952) and Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) described as *interview-conversations*. This is a more relaxed approach in which the ‘*interview*’ resembles a

conversation between friends rather than a formal interrogation. This proved to be a very successful approach.

### 3.5.6 - Location

It was prearranged that most of the study occurred across two main studios: Infinite Records Studio and Unknown Recordings. The choice of two studios was a conscious decision that was a more efficient use of time because it increased the chances of an available session to observe. Having two locations also provides an opportunity for comparing and contrasting the experiences of each studio's participants. The plan for the study was to focus solely on the recording studios, yet as the case studies demonstrate, I was offered the opportunity to collect invaluable data at supplementary locations. Five supplementary locations were used; a department store on Oxford Street, a West London hotel, a graveyard as a video shoot location, a private studio and my car. The car was used as a quiet space to conduct further interviews or provide transportation to the participants. The department store and hotel were attended to capture the potential success that can be achieved from a music career to contextualise the behaviour. The graveyard was used for a scene in a music video. After being in a recording session with an artist, he asked if I wished to attend his video shoot. The next day I met up with the crew near Central London at their offices. Then as a convoy, we made our way to a large graveyard. The graveyard was used to embolden the dark spiritual undertones of the song. I was asked to attend a new studio during another session with *'the gang'*. The studio was a converted flat that the engineer owned. The chance to see them record in their own environment where they felt comfortable was too invaluable an opportunity to miss. As there was no increased threat to my safety, I made sure to attend this session.

This study was focused on the experience of music artists. The recording studio was selected due to being a significant and frequently visited location in the life of a music artist. It, therefore, provides the best opportunity to meet with and observe as wide a sample of music artists as possible. In many notable ethnographies, there is a focus on the lives of a small number of participants. However, this study compares and contrasts the experiences of over 140 participants. The four case studies presented in this thesis were selected based on their ability to illustrate key themes that emerged from the broader dataset. Each case study was chosen for its representativeness within the cohort or its ability to highlight specific variations in how music and identity intersect. These case studies provide a more nuanced understanding of the range of experiences within the broader group of over 140 participants. By focusing on these cases, I aim to '*bring out the colour*' of the data, offering detailed, contextualised insights into the role of music in shaping identity. While the case studies do not encompass the entirety of the data, they offer rich, illustrative examples that deepen the thematic analysis. The study aims to provide a broad understanding of the factors involved in the relationship between identity and music rather than the specific experience of any one participant. This process is analogous to the approach described by Gille and Riain (2002) in a global setting. While there was a predefined location of a recording studio, the study design was flexible to allow for a multisite study that provides a more rounded analysis of the culture of music as opposed to a specific process.

### 3.5.7 - Participants

The majority of the participants in this study met the inclusion criteria for the overall thesis (16+; male; Black; North London; consumers of urban music). Fewer than ten females were inadvertently captured in the study because they attended the recording studios.

There will be no comparison of gender differences as the number of females was too small to allow realistic comparison. However, the data relating to them were not discarded as they offered valuable insights into some of the main themes. There were over 140 participants in the study with an age range of 17 – 34.

The participants were approached by the PI to participate in the research. This was done through contact made with the gatekeepers, Tug and Infinite. Using their contacts, a database of potential participants was built up. The gatekeepers were in direct conversation with the artists and made provisions for the researcher's involvement in the sessions. The sessions were not recorded if there were participants under the age of 16 attending.

The interviewees were over the age of 16. This is to reduce issues of developmental psychology, which may need to be considered if they are under 16. The upper boundary was increased from 18 to 18+. This is in accordance with literature supporting the extension of the boundaries defining adolescence (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2020). It is argued that the more gradual approach to adult commitments such as marriage and homeownership reflects that an individual's lifestyle habits are more '*youthful*' for longer. This is in keeping with the formation of an individual's music tastes. The older participants could give reflections on the social development from their childhood. Lonsdale and North (2011) had evidence suggesting that music's importance was most dominant through the ages of 16-29. The participant's names have been anonymised. The participants were assigned a generic Participant (n) moniker in semi-structured video interviews. However, in the observations, they were given a pseudonym due to the number of participants. It was felt this made it easier to remember and decipher the characters in the study.



Although research can't be entirely objective, the researcher must strive not to put their own bias on the interviewee, so the interviewee must self-define as a consumer of urban music. The word consumer is important as a fan is someone with a passion; a consumer simply uses that product. The interviews aim to capture a wide range of people with different levels of involvement in music. As the study focused on young black males due to their persistent profile in the mass media, a deliberate choice was made not to interview other ethnic groups. This was to focus on the norms and values of this particular cohort. In this instance, comparing and contrasting with another group was not pertinent to the research question.

### 3.7 - Getting In, Getting On, Getting it on Record

The practicalities of the study were based on the frameworks provided by Thompson and Lashua (2014) and Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (2013). Both groups explore the issues involved when carrying out an ethnography in a recording studio. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman present the four stages as 1. Getting In, 2. Getting on, 3. Getting Out, and 4. Getting Back. Thompson and Lashua have a more simplified version which explores 1. Getting in, 2. Getting on, 3. Getting it on record. Using these frameworks, I wish to discuss the specific practicalities within this study.

#### 3.7.1 - Getting in – Issues of access to the recording studio

The first major issue with ethnographic research is access to the field and its participants. There are two considerations when obtaining access, how the participants will accept the researcher and how the manner in which this access is achieved will influence the

dynamics of the relationship with the participant (Glesne, 1999; Glesne & Peskin, 1992).

Access is fundamental for an ethnographic study (Harrington, 2003). Any limitations in access will create limitations in the data.

Recording studios offer their specific complications. Thompson and Lashua (2014) provided unique guidance on the experience of carrying out research in a recording studio. They state that, contrary to media representations of recording studios, (Ray, 2004; Wu-Tang: An American Saga, 2019; All Eyez On Me, 2017) in which the studio is filled with '*groupies*' and '*hangers on*', they actually operate as closed facilities to achieve the best clarity when recording. Access to a studio must be granted by invitation as they are not public places. Also, artists enjoy this privacy with many recording in the dark to enhance this feeling. Often music can be a profoundly personal experience, and large groups' influence can affect the artists' performance (Hennion, 2012). Once a researcher has been accepted by the gatekeepers, they need to operate within a social hierarchy. So, while the studio owner or studio engineer may grant access, the musicians are the service users of the recording studio and operate as unacknowledged gatekeepers. For my thesis, this was important to recognise. I have been granted access by the studio owners who garner much respect within their community. Their social position granted me substantial freedom. However, ultimately, it was the musician who determined who was present at the session.

Harrington (2003) adopts Snow, Benford, and Anderson's (1986) definition of roles as "sets of behavioural expectations" to frame his understanding of the concept. In the research field, multiple roles are often in operation simultaneously. Regardless of whether a researcher adopts a covert or overt stance, they must remain conscious of their role and its implications. Thompson and Lashua (2014) recognised that the role of the ethnographer

presented them as an outsider. Even operating in a role within the studio, such as engineer, did not mitigate this. The methodology must explore the best approach for achieving access. The level of access will then determine the relationships that can be formed with the participants. Due to my relationship with the gatekeepers, I had full access to the studios, yet I did not know most of the studio attendees. The gatekeeper's approval gave me enough insider status to avoid issues during the initial meeting.

### 3.7.2 - Getting on – Social relations in the studio

The major difference between traditional and CTM ethnography is the time allowed to become acquainted with the environment. Firstly, it is beneficial if the researcher can adapt to the fashion and speech of the research setting. Having spent 10 years in the community, I am fluent in Multicultural London English (MLE) (Lee, Brown and Müllensiefen, 2017). MLE is the academic definition of the way young people in London talk. Familiarity with this form of slang helps reduce barriers that another researcher may encounter.

As I had no previous encounters with many of the participants, I needed to outline the study and become an insider within my introduction. Fortunately, it seems the nature of music artists is to share their experiences. Many seemed happy I was giving them an opportunity to express their feelings and provide them with a voice. While trying to assimilate with the participants, a researcher must also present themselves as non-evaluative and non-partisan. Although this is the desired practice, in reality, an understanding of interpersonal sensitivity may require the researcher to show empathy and enthusiasm for the participants' concerns.

Having spent over a decade attending recording sessions, I am very comfortable in a studio. The participants accepting me was my main concern. However, this was not an issue

as people were open and forthcoming. I was only challenged once during my study. In a session with the gang, one of the producers confronted me about what I felt I could add to this topic. I explained that compared to other genres UK urban music is massively under-researched. I told him I did not aim to determine anyone's experience but to document it. He was content with my responses and allowed me to continue my presence.

### 3.7.3 - Getting it on record - Documenting our fieldwork in the recording studio

Thompson and Lashua (2014) highlight the specific complications that may arise from carrying out an ethnography in a recording studio. Firstly, there is the physical location of the studio. The studies they analysed and carried out themselves were concerned with the song-making process. They needed to record what was happening in the main studio room and the studio booth in which the artists would record. A studio booth is a separate soundproofed room in which entry and exit are frowned upon during recording. The engineer and supporting cast will hang out in the main studio room as the artist records their vocals in the booth. In contrast, my study is focused on the relationship between music and identity, looking at the influence of the symbiotic relationship with culture.

The main foci of my observations were:

- How do the participants interact with music as a cultural influence? How does it influence their fashion, speech and mannerisms?
- Does music have any influence over their friendship relations? Does music influence their views and opinions, in particular to the society around them?
- What is the importance of music to the cohort?

These questions are best answered by focusing on the interactions in the main room.

Thompson and Lashua (2014) noted that researchers had taken three main approaches to

solve the issue of not being in both rooms at once. They suggest video recording, audio recording and field notes. The first two create several issues with the potential participants of my study. From my own experience of living within the community, I would be sceptical of participant's acceptance of recording their session for research purposes. One option would be to operate covertly as a documentary maker; this would warrant recording equipment. Unfortunately, regardless of the ethical element, I do not believe I would capture the real experience. The impact of recording on the observed behaviour is not the only issue. There is also a high possibility of illegal activity or, at the very least, discussion of it. Elliott and Fleetwood (2017) documented many researchers, Scarce (1994), Garrett (2013), Lee (1993) and Goffman (2014), who have all had issues with law enforcement and their data recordings. The use of audio and video recordings increases the likelihood that these data could be used in law proceedings. My participants will be only too aware of this risk. The use of continual or covert recordings would in addition create safety complications for myself.

For these reasons, I used field notes to document any events that happened. I used audio recordings with my participants' approval to document follow-up interviews. I was confident the participants would be more accepting of this process, as I have already been able to carry out interviews with similar individuals. Thompson and Lashua (2014) highlight the difficulties of conversation or interview during the actual session. Since the session is both timed and paid for, artists can be very focused on the process and may not wish to be distracted by a nosey ethnographer. Due to this, the in-depth interviews were held after the session was finished.

I was fully immersed in the culture while adopting an opportunistic approach (Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalmans, 2013). I was flexible with any opportunities that arose,

such as attending a concert or doing media work with an artist. The studio provided a basis, but it was essential to allow the participants to guide the study. After the session, I asked any relevant follow-up questions. These questions and answers were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The data from the observations and interviews were then analysed using Thematic Content Analysis [TCA] (Thorogood & Green, 2018; Gerritse et al, 2018). The transcripts and field notes were viewed multiple times to become familiar with the content. The template provided field notes focused on the dimensions derived from preliminary interviews. Formal coding was then undertaken on both the recordings and the template. This formal coding provided a hierarchical thematic landscape. An independent observer then reviewed the coding and thematic analysis.

### 3.8 - Analysis

The analysis process is crucial for interrogating the data. During the initial stages, coding was undertaken on direct viewing of the video footage. This allowed more time with the data understanding it in its rawest form (Markel, West and Rich, 2011). The process for analysis was based on Thematic Analysis Approach [TAA] approach (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015; Gerritse et al, 2018). There was an initial watch-through of the interview with no coding taking place. This allowed the researcher to become familiar with the interview. Next came the first stage of coding. During the coding process, I employed the Thematic Analysis Approach [TAA] to systematically explore the data. Initially, I conducted a broad review of the footage and field notes, recording any significant phenomena alongside their timecodes. These initial codes were often phrases or sentences capturing key ideas. In this phase, I focused on four overarching dimensions that emerged during preliminary interviews: Music, Street Life, Social Background, and Identity. Dimensions are an aggregate of themes with

similar properties (Wæraas, 2022). These dimensions provided a framework for organising the data, yet the coding process remained flexible enough to allow new themes to emerge. After multiple rounds of coding, the data was further refined by grouping codes into lead codes and subsidiary codes, which together formed the foundation for the final thematic analysis. For the second coding stage, each recording was viewed on multiple occasions. The video was broken down into relevant time intervals. The conversation during each interval was then grouped with similar discourses and assigned a lead code. The lead codes were then further subdivided to produce subsidiary codes. This was supported by a memo which gave the researcher's thoughts and reasoning. The conversation required multiple codes in several time intervals. These codes formed the basis of the themes. All of the footage was transcribed, and relevant sections of text were used to check the coding.

The data was analysed using the Thematic Analysis Approach (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015; Gerritse et al, 2018). I followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2012) and made sure all available data was coded with no hierarchical importance inferred.

- Phase 1 was aided by the fact I had to record the notes on my phone and every night I had to transfer them onto the digital pro forma on my computer. This allowed me time to become familiar with the data. Using the preliminary interview dimensions such as Music, Fashion, Street Life and Identity as a guide I was able to categorise the data into the representative dimensions for the ethnography.
- During Phase 2, I examined these dimensions and developed codes. It must be noted that one item of data can have multiple different codes.

- For Phase 3 I spent time with the dimensions and the codes in order to develop them into coherent themes. While the dimensions presented the data in topical areas Phase 3 sought to provide meaning to those codes resulting in the formation of the final themes.
- Phase 4 explored the newly emerged themes in relation to the research approach. This is split into two sections, 1. In relation to the supporting theory that is the Social Identity Approach and 2. In relation to the research approaches developed from the preliminary interviews. This triangulation between the preliminary interviews and SIA provided reassurance on the validity of the data.
- Phase 5 develops Phase 4 further by detailing what this relationship may look like. This phase was particularly sensitive as I was conscious of honestly representing the thoughts and discussions of the participants and not shoehorning the data into SIA.
- Phase 6 culminates the previous 5 phases into a report of the findings. This is a rich descriptive section that demonstrates the data and the themes connected to it.

The analysis process was carried out on the observation notes and the interview transcriptions.

## 3.9 - Data Handling

### 3.9.1 - Data Collection

During the observation, notes were taken using a specially designed template (Appendix 2). The observations focused on the four dimensions generated from the preliminary interviews; Music, Street Life, Social Background and Identity. The template was



separated into four sections. The first section recorded which studios the observation took place in, the number of participants, and their roles within the recording session. The second section recorded the initial observations as the participants arrived, including modes of transport, appearance, demeanour, atmosphere, and general impressions. In the third section, I summarised my thoughts on the session and noted any future actions. In particular, I noted the participants' satisfaction with the recording session and any final reflections I might have had. The fourth section was where I documented the significant 'events' in real-time, such as actions; interactions with each other and their social environment; and the language and rituals they used for communication. The table recorded the title and time of the event, the subtheme to which it related, and a short description of the event. I was fully immersed in the culture while adopting an opportunistic approach (Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalmans, 2013). I was flexible with any opportunities that arose, such as attending a concert or doing media work with an artist. The studio provided a basis, but it was essential to allow the participants to guide the study. I took field notes by hand during the sessions. After the session, I asked any follow-up questions necessary to clarify the observations. These questions and answers were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

### 3.9.2 - Data Handling

The field notes and the recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised by removing or replacing any identifying information (e.g., the names of people, places, and organisations), and participant confidentiality was maintained. The PI was responsible for data entry, quality, and analysis. All the data was stored on the PI's MMU OneDrive, rather than on their personal computer. No identifiable data was

recorded during the study. Redaction took place at the time of note-taking or when the video/audio footage was first reviewed. The interview footage was only labelled with the numerical identifier and contained no identifiable data. This ensured that anonymity was maintained when publishing results.

Ethnography in sensitive, fast-evolving cultural spaces presents unique ethical challenges, particularly regarding informed consent and data handling (Jones & Smith, 2017). While participants were informed of how their data would be handled, the unpredictable nature of fieldwork in a recording studio required flexibility in managing consent. Given the informal nature of the studio environment, participants were provided with both written and verbal explanations of the study before each session. Additionally, as many new individuals frequently joined sessions, consent was re-affirmed whenever new participants arrived. In line with good ethnographic practice, the ethical implications of the study were continuously revisited throughout the research process to ensure that participants' privacy and agency were respected. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. The physical copy of the list was destroyed as soon as the data had been uploaded after the session.

### 3.9.3 - Access to Data

Only the PI and their supervisor had access to the data. Besides them, authorised representatives from MMU were permitted to access the data to allow study-related monitoring, audits, and inspections. However, it was not necessary under the circumstances.

### 3.9.4 - Record Keeping

During the study, the recorded data was safely kept on MMU's OneDrive. The field notes were held in a secured filing cabinet until they were transferred into a digital format and stored on the MMU OneDrive. At that point, the paper copies were destroyed. The PI kept records of all data manipulation (e.g., changes during transcribing) and analysis (e.g., coding).

### 3.10 - Issues encountered

Possibly the biggest impact on my study was COVID. I had planned to do a year-long ethnography relatively soon after the preliminary interviews but as I was waiting for ethical clearance the country was forced into lockdown. This was a disappointment as I was unable to interact with my participants. Initially, I anticipated that the lockdown would be temporary, allowing me to proceed with the original study design. However, as the restrictions extended, I was forced to reconsider the duration and feasibility of the proposed year-long ethnography. This led me to adapt the study design by incorporating compressed time mode ethnography (CTM). While the prolonged lockdown presented significant challenges to the original research plan, it also offered unexpected benefits. The additional time allowed for deeper engagement with the literature, particularly regarding the role of music and identity. This re-engagement ultimately enriched the theoretical framework of the study by introducing new concepts such as the entrepreneurship of identity. The adoption of CTM proved to be a valuable methodological shift, enabling me to conduct a focused yet thorough investigation within a constrained timeframe. The beauty of this thesis was my access behind the scenes of a notorious subculture, analysing online content seemed like a poor alternative. During this time with no new data, I reengaged with the literature. It was

this reconsideration that saw me discover the concept of entrepreneurship of identity which provided me the framework for my analysis. As the lockdown continued for two years I was then forced to reconsider the length of my ethnography due to the practicalities of being a self-funded PhD. This saw me explore the idea of compressed time mode ethnographies to accommodate for the shorter time span. The pros and cons of this approach are explored later in this section.

The lockdown had many practical issues but also many personal ones. A PhD student's role can be a lonely one at the best of times but with lockdown, this was only emphasised. I must be honest although I had a lot of free time on my hands I found it harder to concentrate. Lockdown only emphasised to me why I believe the study of Social Psychology is so important because we need people. I craved interaction with others. As time went on I felt I was losing an understanding of who I was. Without other people, I was forced to rely on historical concepts of myself to provide self-esteem. I had to remember that I am an open chatty person rather than experience it. COVID-19 had a unique impact on my study that I could not have predicted. However, I feel that the added time helped me to understand the literature, particularly Social Identity Theory, more. This meant my initial draft had a substantially larger literature review which would not be common with an ethnography. It also meant the theory was much more prominent than may have been previously considered.

From a practical aspect of carrying out the preliminary interviews, there were two significant issues. Firstly, the unpredictable nature of the participants' routines made it impractical to hold all of the preliminary interviews at the recording studio. To accommodate their routines, I was flexible as to the location of the interviews. If the interviews could not

be held in the recording studio, they took place in their home, where they felt most comfortable. However, this was not a viable option for everyone, so the researcher's car was occasionally used as the interview location. It was not felt that these location changes would impact the data or potential themes raised.

Secondly, it was revealed during one of the interviews that the participant did not meet the study's inclusion criteria. The interview was completed at the time, but the data has been withdrawn from the results and analysis.

The ethnography brought new complications. During the first observation session, the use of a clipboard and paper template created tensions between the roles of the researcher and participants. It appeared to make the presence of the researcher more obtrusive and seemed to interfere with the interactions in the session. After the participants stopped to take a smoke break, I decided to record the notes on my phone. This allowed for a more natural presence of the researcher as the use of the phone was commonplace within the studio. Almost instantly this seemed to alleviate the tension and the participants seemed more comfortable. Note-taking on the phone proved to be an efficient way of recording the field notes following the structure of the template. The notes were deleted from the phone once transcribed to the computer version of the template.

### 3.11 - Ethics

The ethics consent was obtained from the MMU Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee. For the ethnography, verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants in accordance with the ESRC's 'Ethics Guidebook' (<http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Seeking-consent-88.html>).

### 3.11.1 - Ethical Considerations

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the ESRC's 'Ethics Guidebook' (<http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk>). The ethics consent was obtained from the MMU Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee. The participants were given Information Sheets and allowed the opportunity to ask questions. They were then asked to provide written informed consent. Participants were able to withdraw from the study during data collection by asking the researcher to stop the interview. They could also withdraw their consent to the use of the data provided by contacting the PI directly within two weeks of the interview, as stated on the PIS. The participants were warned about disclosing involvement in illegal activities before the interviews commenced. During this process, the MMU Lone Workers Policy was adhered to. Only the PI and their supervisor will have access to the data. Besides them, authorised representatives from MMU will be allowed to access the data to permit study-related monitoring, audits and inspections. During the study, the recorded data was safely kept on the MMU's OneDrive. The field notes were held in a secured filing cabinet until transferred into digital format and stored on the MMU One Drive, at which point the paper copies were destroyed.

The European Commission's document on Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology states that ethnography can be simply defined as “...*the observation, description, depiction and/or representation of lived social experience*” (Iphofen, 2013). This broad definition of ethnography as a methodological approach is necessary to capture the unpredictable nature of the research. It utilises a wide range of different methods, which tend to involve participation observation but may also include interviews, surveys and documentary sources such as social media (Iphofen, 2013). By its

nature, ethnography is unpredictable and reactive to the developing situations in which the researcher finds themselves (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). This unpredictability presents unique challenges in regard to maintaining ethical protocol. In my own study, I aimed to reduce the unpredictable nature by basing it within the studio setting, therefore minimising any external influence that may cause a risk to health and safety. However, I had no control over the individuals booking the session. There is the potential that every recording session could be a new participant. I believe the unpredictable nature of recruitment on this occasion benefitted in supplying varied data. I also aimed to apply a mixed-method approach by combining participant observation and interviews in order to triangulate themes raised during the recording session.

While ethnographies have been credited with being able to provide a rich data set, the unpredictability mentioned in the last paragraph has seen researchers have some issues with the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Due to the biomedical origins of ethical review boards, there has been a strong emphasis on avoiding harm to the participants. In order to protect all involved by providing anonymity and confidentiality, clear guidelines on consent, methodology and dissemination of research have been developed. These guidelines are highly effective for the type of research within biomedicine, particularly when medical interventions are involved. However, an ethnographic study does not have the same potential for causing harm to the participants. In addition, medical research takes place in a highly controlled environment in contrast to ethnography, where ideally, no controls are applied to the participants. However, even the Australian NHMRC understand that,

*'in participant observation studies it is virtually impossible to obtain consent from all observed individuals. ... Obtaining consent would interfere with the strength of the*

*'naturalist' approach of ethnography. Seeking consent from participants in these situations may lead to behavioural changes that would invalidate the research.'*

*(Australian NHMRC, 2001, p E130, cited in Spicker, 2011).*

While informed consent documented by a signature would have been ideal, this was not practical in my study. However, the participants were made aware of the research project and the requirements of the researcher as they made their booking.

Fortunately, the ethical concerns have been resolved sufficiently to allow numerous highly sensitive studies to be completed. Studies such as the UK night-time economy (Monaghan 2004), youth and crime in a working-class community (Yates, 2004) and crack dealers (Jacobs, 1999), have all been recognised as ethical despite the risky environment in which they took place. This allowance is in part due to the naturalistic nature of ethnographic studies. An ethnographer is seeking to observe the participant in the most natural way possible. To do this they need to reduce any external factors that may influence the participants beyond how they would typically behave. For example, when carrying out interviews as part of a research project with SUAB, looking at drug use and associated behaviours. I mentioned to the participant that the research was for the Manchester Metropolitan University. The participant instantly seemed to close up and was very unresponsive to questioning. After further discussion, he revealed he believed the research was to be used by the Metropolitan Police, and this was the reason for his reluctance. The issue for researchers is maintaining ethical conduct in line with IRBs while also not hindering the potential for data collection.



### *3.11.2 - Consent*

As the researcher acted as an observer in the recording studio, they had no control over the comings and goings of the participants. The participants were not required to stay for an allotted amount of time and had the freedom to attend with whomever they wished. Due to the unpredictable nature of the study, gaining written consent from all participants was impractical. In order to provide the participants with ample information and an opportunity to decline, the participants were informed of the research details as they made their booking. The gatekeepers had been informed of the research and relayed this information during the initial phone call. The researcher was only present if the participants were agreeable. Before the start of the session, the researcher was introduced to the participants. At this moment, they explained the research project, details of the study design, their ability to stop the research at any time, and what would happen to the data, and provided a participant information sheet. This granted the participants two opportunities to consent or reject the researcher's presence. A clear verbal agreement was obtained from the participants. Acceptance of the researcher's presence was taken as implied consent. If any new individuals turned up during the session, they were provided with the same information as the initial participants. The participants could request the termination of the study at any time and ask for any relevant data to be destroyed. Finally, in line with good ethnographic practice, the ethical implications of the study and the possible effects on the participants were continually monitored. When follow-up interviews took place the participants were asked to provide informed consent either written or verbal.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from the research, derived from preliminary interviews and ethnographic observations, organised around four key dimensions: music, street life, social background, and identity. These findings directly address the research questions, shedding light on how music acts as a tool for identity construction and the social roles it plays within Black youth-orientated culture in North London. The findings are organised into two major sections: Preliminary Interviews and Observations.

The Preliminary Interviews took place before the ethnographic observations and were essential for identifying the main themes of the study. These themes focus on four key dimensions: music, street life, social background, and identity. The interviews helped establish a framework for understanding how music serves as a medium for identity formation, the emotional impact of music, and its role in social networks. Illustrative quotations from the participants provide depth to the analysis and give voice to the experiences of the study's subjects.

The Observations section follows, offering an ethnographic account of studio sessions with various urban music artists. It explores the social interactions and creative processes in the studio environment, highlighting generational differences between artists and the influence of digital platforms like TikTok. This section is enriched by detailed case studies of specific artists, such as Red and Tik Tokker, offering insights into how identity, status, and professional hierarchies are negotiated within these spaces.

The chapter concludes by synthesising the findings across these two sections, demonstrating the ways in which music, particularly urban genres like drill and grime,

function as both a cultural and social tool for identity construction within Black youth-orientated culture in North London.

## Section 4.1 - Preliminary Interviews

The preliminary interviews provided an exploratory foundation for the ethnography. Initially, the preliminary interviews were supposed to be carried out just before the ethnography took place, however, due to COVID restrictions there was almost a two-year gap between the two parts of the study. This gave me plenty of time with the data from the preliminary interviews. This resulted in a more thorough analysis than initially planned and in turn, they hold a more significant position in the final version of the thesis.

The four major dimensions to emerge from the interviews are Music, Street Life, Social Background, and Identity. The study was not designed to explore the mechanism involved in the operation of these factors. These four dimensions are broken down into themes which are derived from the final coding. The following sections will discuss these dimensions by exploring the themes with illustrative quotations from the participants.

### 4.1.1 - Music

Music was the central dimension due to the nature of the study. The interviews were aimed at understanding the role of music to the participants as individuals and the function of their social network. There were seven final codes: the emotional impact of music; music's cultural boundaries; the role of relatability in music; the process of choosing music; the process of making music; how music influences them; and the business of music.

Understandably, music was a significant dimension throughout the interviews, and while the codes present some of the processes involved, a macro analysis of the final codes provided three themes:

1. A way to form and maintain their self and social identity.
2. A tool for the dissemination of rules and norms
3. Provides an emotional framework

#### *4.1.1.1 - A way to form and maintain their self and social identity*

The most notable function of music was its ability to form and maintain an individual's self and social identity. The participant's music choices helped to develop the individual's group identity and a correlating social network to which the SIA can be applied. However, the social networks formed from their music choices differ from the more defined groups predominantly discussed in SIA research. While SIA is commonly used to describe two distinct groups in conflict, their music networks appear to be less centralised. Urban music was used as an umbrella term, yet the participants identified with different aspects of it. All participants discussed the concept that relatability is essential to their relationship with music. Some were explicit in asserting relatability's role in their music choices, such as Participant 1a + b who stated,

*Ex 1. – Drill being relatable (Participant 1a, 19 m, + Participant 1b, 19, m)*

Ben: So would it be fair to say you follow urban music?

**Participant 1A + 1B: Yes.**

Ben: And that's a wider kind of thing. Within that, though, there's not one particular genre that you're closer to,

**Participant 1A: Yes, all of them. If we're ever talking about, like-, drill is more, that, I like listening to it more.**

Ben: That would be your go-to if you were to listen to a song?

**Participant 1A: It's more relatable, I guess.**

The music network seemed to act as a microcosm with multiple influences impacting the group identity. None of the participants identified a single definitive source of the group's behaviours but referred to specific music genres or artists as their source of inspiration. When assessing the participant's music choices, race seemed to be an obvious factor that impacted their decision. Several participants referred to enjoying all types of music and then would list only black genres such as Gospel or Reggae. They displayed a freedom of choice from their perspective, yet it seemed confined to a particular social framework. This framework first starts to form in the family home.

#### *Ex 2. – Family influence*

Ben: Do you remember a conscious decision, kind of, getting into music? Or, like, kind of, choosing the music that you liked, or?

**Participant 6: No, you know. More as I'm just growing up. What my sister would listen to around me, and some of my cousins. Sometimes I hear what music they like and I'll take it on from there if I like it or not, I'll be like, okay. I guess growing up you just get used to all of the sounds.**

Many quotes like this show how important an individual's close network was in the formation of their musical taste. The first music the participants recall listening to would be that of the parents. This allowed them to gain admiration for more '*traditional genres*'. Yet

these genres did not impact their identity in the way their favourite genre did. Given the choice, they will reject their parent's genres in favour of more socially representative categories. However, Participant 10 explained that the choice of genre was not merely a process of comparative fit to culturally representative factors but was affected by the appreciation of the rhythmic components of the music.

*Ex 3. - The importance of social connections*

**Participant 10: I go to a club, or whatever, that has house music, I automatically feel uncomfortable, because I can't dance, so that's-, even something that my rhythm, and like, it affects all that, and then it affects my ability to even enjoy myself at that motive, even though the sound itself is not that bad, but I won't associate that with positivity, so I won't like that, so I've realised that loads of my friends don't like house as well, so even my friends have been influenced by my music dislikes.**

For Participant 10, his inability to dance to house music meant he could not appreciate the genre, which affected his ability to enjoy himself. The lack of positive reinforcement when listening to house meant he was unable to connect with followers of that genre.

*4.1.1.2 - A tool for the dissemination of rules and norms*

The second function of music within the cohort the coding revealed is disseminating rules and norms. The interviews showed music's significant role in projecting the cohort's practices. Music artists were not the only influence on young people's lives, but they seemed to have the most significant impact on their social identity. While most people were initially influenced by their parents, this is a unique process which can only be shared by their

siblings. Music artists, on the other hand, can sway a collective simultaneously. For some, this created social expectations that conflicted with those of their parents, which generated considerable pressure on the young people as they managed their social and self-identity.

The data seemed to show that everybody did not follow an objective set of rules. Instead, individuals derive their own sets of rules and norms from the music. Inevitably, there is overlap between the different sets of rules and norms. This area of overlap may provide the foundations for group formation. One of the most distinctive areas of norms discussed by the participants was the fashion associated with urban music. The tracksuit has become a 'uniform' for the young people of the UK urban music scene. The tracksuit is now synonymous with drill music. However, this can be an over-generalisation. Fashion is strongly linked with music as part of the culture, allowing the individual to use it as an easily identifiable ingroup characteristic. Participant 7 describes what makes the UK stand out from the USA.

*Ex 4. – Tracksuits are UK uniforms*

Ben: Would you say there's anything in particular, though, that is UK that isn't American?

**Participant 7: Tracksuits.**

Ben: In terms of music, what would you say tracksuits represent?

**Participant 7: Drill music. I hate to admit it but yes, man. I know, it's just urban music, it's us. Like if you're from the *hood*, like, I'm a *big man* and I still have to deal with that *hood* mentality, not with the way that I feel, but the way that the world views me. So, I'm comfortable wearing tracksuits,**

**someone else probably wouldn't be because, do you get me? I don't know, man, I feel like it's tracksuits, personally.**

Other apparent norms were the pursuit of wealth, reputation being the most important currency and wearing designer clothes and jewellery. However, music may have the ability to influence not only their materialistic choices but also their moral ones. I was struck by one participant's exclamation that *'I'd rather have loyalty than love'*. I discussed this concept with the gatekeeper, who told me the line was from a 21 Savage song, 'ball w/o you'. This is an example of a lyric potentially influencing a participant's beliefs.

During the interviews, it became evident that there was no clear distinction between the music artist and the music follower. Many participants were involved in music production or had attempted it in the past. A professional is someone who earns revenue from the activity they are engaged in. As anyone can upload music to platforms that offer financial incentives, it becomes difficult to define what is a music artist. None of the participants spoke about playing instruments, but this was not a factor in their definition of a music artist. The lack of tangible skill as a marker allows the term music artist to become self-definitive. Even if music is not their primary income, the aspirational participants still define themselves as music artists. This suggests no clear separation between the music artist and the follower. The participants saw music as more than an expression of identity or an art form. It was one of three viable paths to improve their situation along with drug dealing and sports. The financial incentive creates another dynamic in the identity process, which future research may be able to explore in more detail.

It was presumed race would be a defining factor in the creation and utilisation of rules and norms. However, race was not as explicitly discussed as it may have been



expected. While they discussed the impact of race in some social situations, such as education, only two participants referred to it in regard to music. Surprisingly, only Participant 7 referred to the conflict between the authorities and drill culture.

*Ex 5. – Government interest in drill music*

Ben: So would you say that the government's only got interested in drill and the music and clamping down on it because it's affecting white kids now?

**Participant 7: 1,000 per cent. Yes. They don't care if people are killing each other.**

Participant 7 described a clear conflict between urban music and mainstream society. He suggests the conflict became more apparent as the music started to reach white communities. It was this impact on the 'ingroup' of mainstream society that finally saw the government and services consider the killing of young people to be a problem. So much of early hip-hop was focused on the conflict between wider society it truly was a shock not to see more evidence of it. However, most of the conflict observed during the study was with other ingroup members. In fact, Participant 2 suggested that racism was not a factor in the music industry.

*Ex 6. – Music is not racist*

**Participant 2: It's not about race no more. I used to think it was but it's definitely not because there's a lot of black people in the industry doing well so it can't be about race, you know what I mean? I feel like the race thing, obviously, it still goes on, but it's a bit old-fashioned when it comes in the music scene. I don't-,**

Ben: Just in the music scene in particular, yes?

**Participant 2: Because there's a lot of black people that are successful so it doesn't make sense.**

Participant 2 provides a contrasting view to Participant 7 and suggests that the music scene is not concerned with race. His evidence of this was the success of black artists and managers. He had a much more positive outlook on potential outcomes. This may be due to the fact he compared when he started music and there were no opportunities to now when there are several black millionaires from UK music. It also highlights the potential differences between ingroup members. To the mainstream, these two individuals may be seen as part of a collective of young black men with shared ideologies. However, the interviews revealed the variety of opinions and outlooks within the ingroup. This may be impacted by the level at which we define a group. So while the outgroup may group them as young black men, they themselves feel no connection with each other and share different perspectives. Further interviews with the two individuals may be able to reveal which groups they feel impact their identity most.

#### *4.1.1.3 - Emotional impact of music*

The participants discussed the affective abilities of music to mediate their emotions. The participants all expressed a need for music. The idea of being able to suppress music seems unfeasible. For Participant 6, music was an all-encompassing art form that impacted every part of his day. He presents music as more than a combination of sounds but something that both reflects and modifies his emotions.

#### *Ex 7. – Importance of music*

Ben: How important is music to you then? How much is it a part of your life and involved in your life?

**Participant 6: Well, it plays a big part, because I can listen to music every day. It keeps me active. Some nights, I listen to it to go to sleep. Certain music, set at certain frequencies, I'll play it. It'll help me to go to bed. When I'm in the shower, I'll play my music. Going for a jog, like, exercising. It keeps me going through the day, man. It helps me with my mood. If I'm angry, upset, I play music, it'll calm me down.**

Music is more than just a social identifier or a group membership marker; it is an emotional support. Participants would find listening to music cathartic, helping them to deal with their emotions. One participant explained it was his way of venting and allowed him to explore a vulnerability that he would not have been able to without music,

*Ex 8. - Emotional release*

**Participant 9: Sixth form, my dad passed away, actually. So that was tricky.**

Ben: Yes. So, was that in the middle of your studies?

**Participant 9: That was at the beginning. Right before I went to-, well, right before I started. And that's even the reason why I kind of, like, even went into music, like my way of venting and escaping that trauma or that event.**

Ben: Yes, yes, so it's like an emotional release?

**Participant 9: Yes, yes. I wasn't a person who was, like, outspoken about my feelings like that. I never liked to be sensitive, or vulnerable. Music was my way of just being vulnerable.**

Music has a deeper meaning for the participants than merely providing guidelines for their materialistic and physical needs. For the ones that currently produced music, it provided them with a release, a way of venting. Participant 9 explains that after his father's death, music allowed him to be vulnerable in a way he could not through social interaction. This may help explain why this cohort has a strong relationship with music and so many participants are involved in music. The cohort receives a lot of pressure from socio-economic causes, and music may help to alleviate the tensions by providing emotional satisfaction. For this to be effective, the participants had to perceive that the music choice was representative of their experience to allow emotional changes. The SIA may not capture this usage due to its design but has the foundations as a framework for further elaborations.

#### 4.1.2 - Street Life (SL)

This section delves into the second major dimension of the study: street life. Initially identified as a theme within the social background of the participants, street life emerged as a significant dimension due to its extensive impact, warranting a more detailed analysis. This dimension encompasses various facets of the urban ecosystem in which the participants operate, highlighting five key codes: the business of street life, glamorising street life, the rules and norms of street life, the violence associated with street life, and the overall impact of street life.

The analysis of these codes reveals how the cohort perceives and engages with street life, leading to the development of two overarching themes. The first theme explores street life as an ecosystem, describing its activities, societal norms, and the practical realities faced by the participants. The second theme examines street life as an originator of rules and

norms, focusing on values such as loyalty and the socio-economic pressures that influence behaviour. The following sections will discuss these themes in detail, illustrating the complex interplay between street life and the participants' experiences.

#### *4.1.2.1 - Street life as an ecosystem*

Street life can include various activities, such as knife crime and drug dealing. However, street life also captures societal norms such as ‘*baby mums*’ or fare dodging on the underground. It is an all-encompassing term to describe activities deemed anti-social in the dominant society but a norm in the subculture. Participant 1B spoke about the need to be involved in criminal activity as ordinary means of financial support, such as loans, were unavailable to cohort members.

*Ex 9. – Street life provides finances traditional methods cannot*

**Participant 1B: Even getting a loan out of your money that you've made on the *streets*. Invest that into the business as well, where you can, how can I say this, where you can then flip that money off the clothes. The money you've made on the *streets*, take that on to your business and flip that money into clothes.**

Ben: And then would you say that's the career path for what a lot of people are trying to do?

**Participant 1B: That's what a lot of people want, but they can't do it because they don't have the correct amount of funds that they need realistically.**

The cognitive group boundaries seem to be reinforced by the practical realities of life. Participant 1B felt the restrictions necessitated criminal activity. This is in keeping with my initial understanding that a group goal is to '*make it out of the hood*'. Criminal activity is seen as necessary until the individual can establish 'legitimate businesses'. Participant 1B saw clothing as a viable option. Using money generated through crime, they could start a clothing business. The multifaceted nature of rules and norms can create contradicting beliefs and behaviours. While the acquisition of money is a foundational tenet of the cohort, when asked if would they rather earn more money as an accountant or less as a rapper/drug dealer, most participants chose rapper/drug dealer. This would suggest that while getting money is a foundational tenet, it must operate within the group's social framework to receive ingroup benefits. Music artists acted as one of the social creators and reinforcers of the group's social framework.

Participant 7, was one of a few participants who discussed the all-encompassing nature of street life. In the following quote, he speaks about being unable to escape the impact of street life at an early age.

*Ex 10. – Watching a friend's mum being stabbed*

**Participant 7: I think that's the only fault with the *hood*, it doesn't matter how far you run, it doesn't matter what you do, it's not even what you're saying, it's the way the world views you, you can't view the world the same way when you know people can (die)-, (I) remember being like nine years old, yes? My boy's mum came, got *shanked*.**

Ben: The mum got *shanked*?

**Participant 7: The mum got *shanked*. I was like nine. You know, like, the nasty butterfly stitches, the old school things, like a horror movie.**

At nine years old, Participant 7 witnessed his friend's mum get stabbed. He speaks about how this left a lasting effect on him. Even if someone rejects the street life, having grown up in the area, they become normalised to violence. Participant 7 felt it became more cognitively susceptible for him to adopt violent behaviour. As mentioned earlier, street life is an ecosystem in which crime is a normality. Mainstream media reinforce this criminal identity, but the ingroup also seems to recognise the negative connotations of their environment. Further research could potentially examine to what extent the media stereotype acts as a determinant of the actual experience of the cohort. While some participants saw it as a badge of honour, as IMS would predict, Participant 5 saw it as the barrier that held him back.

*Ex 11. – Environment impacts identity*

Ben: Do you see that there's any barriers in your way in achieving what you want to achieve?

**Participant 5: Yes. Friends I have around me. It's just the environment, it's really just the environment. The environment has a big impact on you as a person.**

This does raise an epistemological challenge when applying theory to real-world scenarios. All of the participants recognised the reality of the socio-economic conditions of the cohort. However, while Participant 5 acknowledged the environment's effects, other participants seemed to employ the IMS process, 'Re-evaluation of comparison dimension'.

This process allows them to view the negative aspects associated with crime as reinforcers of positive self-esteem. This provides a neat explanation of the findings in which the participant's actions can be seen to increase self-esteem. However, the above quote seemed to demonstrate an appreciation of the direct impact of the conditions in which he was raised. He did not seem to display any evidence of group-based cognitive coping mechanisms.

In summary, "Street life" is a comprehensive term used to characterise behaviours and activities viewed as socially unacceptable in the dominant society but considered commonplace or culturally acceptable within this subculture. Street life was a dimension within the identity formation of all participants.

#### *4.1.2.2 - Street life as an originator of rules and norms*

The previous section highlighted loyalty as one of the values important within street life. When discussing with the gatekeeper later, he revealed loyalty as a valuable commodity within the *hood*. He stated that a person's reputation is often all they can offer due to low socio-economic conditions. From a practical point of view, loyalty is necessary when committing an illegal activity. If someone is not loyal, they are more likely to talk to the police. This is why 'no *snitching*' is one of street life's most famous unwritten rules. When applying this to SIA, the concept of loyalty is a feature of ingroup processes. The more loyal someone is to the group, the higher the deindividuation in the individual. In areas that can reinforce low self-esteem, loyalty may be encouraged to strengthen ingroup membership to provide a higher collective self-esteem. However, the participants would offer more pragmatic reasons for its need. An example of pragmatic reasoning was when Participants 1A and 1B discussed the need to get involved in criminal activity to support their mother.



*Ex 12. – Starting street life early*

Ben: Yes. Would you say that in your culture that a male figure can do certain things that the mum can't?

**Participant 1A: Definitely. When you get to a certain age, you're going to be thinking, 'Okay my dad's not here. Maybe your mum might be going through pressures like bills.'**

**Participant 1B: Stressing. Bills and that.**

**Participant 1A: You're thinking, 'I need to be the man of the house.' So that's a burden. I don't know-, especially when you're in poverty as well, it's, like, people start selling drugs, or robbing people, or doing things that they shouldn't be doing.**

**Participant 1B: They have to do it.**

**Participant 1A: But, that's the only way they're going to be putting money in their mum's pockets so they can get shopping for the week, or whatever.**

Ben: What sort of age would you say that you, kind of, felt that pressure?

**Participant 1A: Young. Twelve, thirteen.**

Participants 1A and 1B claim they did not initially engage in criminal activity due to prototypical ingroup pressures but realistic needs. While self-esteem seems to be a vital motivator for behaviour, the poverty levels experienced by the participants become a more prominent influencer. However, the behaviour responses seem again restricted to the cohort's social framework. So, Participants 1A and 1B perceive selling drugs and robbing as

the solution. Their response also highlighted another tenet of the cohort that they need to be the 'man of the house'. They spoke openly about their mother's difficulty controlling them as they were not fearful of her. They felt a man would have been able to discipline them more strictly. The role of a man in the community is seen as one of strength and leadership, while the woman is seen as caring and nurturing. The majority of the participants admitted to growing up in a single-mother household. There was a correlation between the participants involved in crime and those who were raised in these conditions. None of the participants had experienced a single-father home. It does seem to present a vicious circle where the lack of a father encourages criminal activity in the young boy, meaning they have more chance of being in jail or killed, creating another single-mother household. Without father figures, music artists can be some of the most prominent male role models they have.

#### 4.1.3 - Social Background

Social background is the third major dimension. While there is much overlap with street life, there was enough distinction between the two for it to earn its own title. While street life describes the ecosystem, social background refers to the participants' individual experiences. These include the codes of educational background, family life, community, work, and upbringing. There were commonalities, such as most participants being from single-mother homes or being disengaged with the educational process. The combination of all the factors created unique social backgrounds for each participant. Most of the codes within this dimension offered descriptions of the participant's circumstances rather than explanations of processes.

The coding process revealed two themes that captured this thesis's application of social background.

1. Contextual landscape of identity

2. Social background as a determinant of identity

This section provides a detailed examination of the contextual landscape of identity for the study participants. The theme captures the descriptive elements of their social backgrounds the contextual landscape of identity delves into the varied social backgrounds of the participants and their significant impact on identity formation. It presents contrasting experiences, such as Participant 5's view of his environment as a hindrance and Participant 8's positive outlook on his family and social connections. These differences underscore the complexity of generalising a uniform contextual landscape for all group members.

Additionally, the social background as a determinant of identity explores how social backgrounds influence identity, highlighting Participant 10's experiences of moving away for university and the complications upon returning home. The narrative reveals how language and culture shift his sense of self and relationships. It also touches on the Self Categorisation Theory (SCT) and how self-categorisation and depersonalisation levels affect behaviour.

The subsequent sections will provide a deeper analysis of these themes, illustrating the nuanced ways in which social background and contextual landscape shape the identities and experiences of the study participants.

#### *4.1.3.1 - Contextual landscape of identity*

This theme emerged to capture descriptive elements of the participants' social background, such as the number of siblings, parent's marital status, and educational

experience, to provide a contextual landscape for the thesis. No attempt has been made to quantify the different modalities captured under this theme. Instead, this theme has been incorporated throughout the other themes and dimensions. As recognised earlier by Participant 5, the environment he was raised in was significantly impactful on his identity formation. While Participant 5 saw his contextual landscape as hindering him, Participant 8 proclaimed the benefits of his social connections to family and friends.

*Ex 13. – Family and friends impact on identity*

Ben: What do you think has made you into the person you are? Why do you think you're that way?

**Participant 8: Strongly it's due to my family, and my friends along the way.**

**I've never really been the, I've been expressive, but not like *out on the roads* and do all that life. I know a lot of people who are in that life, but I've sort of separated myself out of that. And I feel going into uni, going through college and everything now, at my work, it's the same person at each scene this whole time. Just gone with the flow. Not humble, nonchalant, or whatever it is. It's genuine. I don't know.**

Ben: You're just being you the whole way.

**Participant 8: Just me being me. I can't explain myself. Others can explain**

The contrasting experiences of these two participants emphasise the difficulties in attempting to generalise a contextual landscape representative of all group members. Such generalisation can lead to the inappropriate homogenisation of the group. In this context, it must be noted that Participant 8 still considered himself a consumer of urban music even

though he engaged in minimal prototypical behaviour due to his family influence and experience at university.

#### *4.1.3.2 - Social background as a determinant of identity*

Participant 10 was the other participant who had moved away for university. He spoke very fondly of his experience there, yet he had found complications on returning to his family.

#### *Ex 14. - Identity shifts and cultural dissonance post-university*

Ben: How do you think people close to you see you?

**Participant 10:** I think, right now I'm annoying my family. Just come back from uni, and-, I speak Ugandan, but like my vocabulary in English has surpassed my Ugandan vocabulary like, dramatically. So, I realised that I speak Ugandan with English, but with very sophisticated English language that I won't be able to translate and they will probably not even know, so it automatically makes me sound like a completely different person, and I'm very sure that annoys a lot of my family. So, I will say that-, I-, They don't say I'm annoying, but I feel like I'm annoying them, I can kind of see their little micro-expressions of no, we don't get it. But you can also tell that people are not comfortable to speak, some people, are not comfortable to speak with like, you know, I don't know, locally. But then, on a larger scale, I think, with people further away like, my-, I shouldn't say lecturers and stuff, but like with them, they find it way easier and I can communicate with them.

This quote offers several points of reflection. A notable feature is that while the practical ability to communicate is important, there is limited comprehension without shared social reference points. Participant 10 claimed that his use of English had far surpassed his knowledge of Ugandan, resulting in him sounding like '*a completely different person*' to his family. He now found more connections with his university lecturers. It appears he has utilised the IMS of individual mobility. When discussed in the Identity section, it was suggested that this form of IMS would be challenging to achieve due to the participant's master status of being black. However, it seems that the social landscape that he experienced within the university was not determined by race. This allowed his identity to be adapted and not restricted by outgroup stereotypes.

Detailing an individual's social background is fundamental to understanding their individual experience with the group. As SCT suggests, the ways in which we self-categorise will lead to different levels of deindividuation. In turn, different levels of deindividuation lead to different predicted behaviour. A complete understanding of an individual's responses to intragroup dynamics requires insights into their social background.

#### 4.1.4 - Identity

Identity was the fourth dimension defined during coding. While the codes varied, they were grouped based on their impact on the concept of identity. The seven codes were: self-identity, social identity, fashion, social media, personal choice, race, aspiration and self-esteem. The first two codes provided the ability to distinguish whether the data seemed to relate to either self or social identity. Fashion, social media and personal choice were grouped based on their means as an expression of identity. Finally, even though race and

self-esteem were initially explored as independent codes, it became apparent that they were inextricably linked to the role of identity.

The dimension contained three themes which provided insight into the operation of identity within this particular cohort.

1. Fashion, Social Media, and Personal Choice as expressions of identity
2. Aspiration as a form of self-esteem influenced by music
3. Race as an undercurrent of identity

In this section, I explore the multifaceted ways in which identity is expressed and managed among participants in a specific community. The study delves into three primary methods of identity expression: fashion, social media, and personal choice. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in how individuals communicate their identities both within and outside their community. The analysis further examines the influence of aspiration, particularly in the context of music, on self-esteem and identity formation. Finally, the discussion addresses the underlying impact of race on identity, highlighting both the overt and subtle ways in which racial identity shapes social interactions and personal choices.

#### *4.1.4.1 - Fashion, Social Media, and Personal Choice as expressions of identity*

The coding revealed three ways the participants expressed their identity within the community. The *music* dimension captured how identity can be communicated through music. This theme, however, depicted the other ways participants expressed their identity. The three main methods used by the participants to express their identity were 1) Fashion, 2) Social media, and 3) Personal Choice. It is through these methods that participants can manage their social identity.

Fashion has already been discussed under the music dimension. While that code captured the specific fashion associated with the group and music's role in its application, this code examined the theoretical role of fashion within identity. It is clear that fashion provides a visual signifier of group membership. As mentioned earlier, for the participants, the tracksuit and designer clothes are essential markers of their identity.

*Ex 15. – Typical black boy*

**Participant 5: Typical black boy is, a lot of the time it just depends on how you're dressed. Like, if I'm just like this (points to his tracksuit), they think you're a hoodlum.**

Ben:. Is that what you wear more time, tracksuits?

**Participant 5: Yes more time I'm just comfortable in a tracksuit. I only dress up if I have to, if I'm going somewhere, then yes. Every time I'm in my car I'm in tracksuit.**

This quote provides insight into the views of the outgroup. It demonstrated that the participants were aware the outgroup sees them as 'typical black boys'. The participant further comments that they have no choice but to dress in tracksuits because that is what JD Sports sells and where they shop. So even though they understand the negative connotations associated with the tracksuit, they have no option but to wear it. This was not just an intergroup definition. The participants recognised that the ingroup also identified them through their fashion. Participant 10 was aware of this perception and discussed wearing red beads in his hair to dissociate himself from the stereotypical perception of the group. The participant had two braids hanging down at the front of his head. At the bottom



of the braids were bright red coloured beads. The beads would bounce around as he got enthusiastic. However, the rest of his fashion was very neutral. He wore hiking boots, a fleece and shorts. This would not be considered prototypical of the ingroup.

*Ex 16. – Trying to fit in*

**Participant 10: That's why I have these things, to not seem too serious. Do you know what I mean? To kind of make myself a bit more relatable in a way.**

Ben: Do you feel that's a conscious thing, though? How would you consider yourself if you didn't have them?

**Participant 10: I feel like, the way I sound, and the things I speak about, if I was wearing a suit, I'd already be that guy, so, I feel like this kind of dilutes that a bit.**

While fashion has served as a visual determinant of social standing for thousands of years, the past couple of decades have seen the technological development of social media as a new marker of social success.

All of the participants used social media, bar one. Participant 8 was the only participant not to be deeply engaged with social media. He did not feel pressured to put himself on social media. His family and close friends provide enough support through an emotional framework that he does not seek alternative affirmation.

*Ex 17. – Staying connected through family*

**Participant 8: I don't have any Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook. I had Facebook at uni. Had 10,000 pictures, nights out, piss up, you know what I**

mean? Soon as graduated I deleted it. I had WhatsApp, or have WhatsApp sorry. So I do know of what's going on. I still go on forums and check out for news, and I've got on my phone notifications on the markets and things that are going on in the world. So I'd say I'm not clued up in terms of the latest things, but I always will have someone that will probably tell me. But I do have a strong community and I think that makes you the person that I am as well. I love my parents, my brother and sister, my family.

The primary functions of social media for the participants are the management of that identity, the presentation of one's identity, and the quantification of the social impact of that identity. Social media allows the participants to create and control a social identity they perceive as acceptable within their ecosystem. They can select the content they feel best represents them, mainly using photos and videos. The social media platform allows for the presentation of this identity to a global network. This level of access to social interaction is unprecedented, which some of the participants recognised has had a negative impact by increasing social pressure within the community.

*Ex 18. – The increased exposure through social media*

**Participant 5: Social media has a big influence as well. Do you remember back in the day you'd have a little something with someone. The most someone is going to do is probably what, record it? Not a lot of people are going to see it, but now if you record something, 100,000 people can see it, a million people can see it. So people feel like they're obligated to live a certain way to prove themselves, which is total bullshit, personally, in my eyes.**

All of these social interactions are now quantifiable. Users can determine which picture and corresponding fashion is more popular or which venues create the most interactions. Participants can assess an artist's popularity by simply checking their social media statistics. The participants confessed to judging an artist before listening to their music based on the number of followers they have. It was proposed that something must make them so popular if they have many followers. This encourages more people to engage with the artist's social media, thus increasing the numbers further. This growing emphasis on quantifiable social interactions through metrics like followers and engagement further highlights how external validation shapes individual identity within the community. Personal choice, in turn, becomes a reflection of this dynamic, as participants make decisions about how they present themselves both online and within the social framework, often influenced by the pressures of these public perceptions.

Personal choice is a portmanteau term used to capture moments the participants demonstrated decision-making determined by their identity. The code was rarely applied to data on its own. Instead, it was used to capture moments when the participants demonstrated personal choice in relation to the community social framework. This was predominantly concerning the music dimension. However, personal choice was recognised as an expression of one's identity. Participant 2 recalled that he did not feel accepted by the grime community when he wore designer clothes. While this suited his lifestyle when he regularly went clubbing, as he took grime music more seriously, Participant 2 consciously changed how he dressed to be more representative of the group. From the participant's perspective, this was a personal decision due to the practicalities of being a musician.

*Ex 19. – Different outfits for different groups*

Ben: So, it was interesting what you were saying about, when you were wearing designer clothes, you didn't feel as accepted in the grime scene as when you were wearing a tracksuit, is there anything else that would segregate you, in terms, kind of similar to that, is there anything in your speech? Or who you hang round with? Or anything like that?

**Participant 2: I feel like, no, you see like with grime, like, how can I put it, right, when I was doing the whole designer lifestyle, yes, I wasn't around Friend A and Friend B. Obviously we grew up with each other, but I wasn't around them. They're musicians, like they're proper like grime, conscious rap, all the stuff they do. With the designer lifestyle, the people I was rolling with they were more on this, going out every weekend, flying out all the time, doing all of this madness and whatnot. With musicians, yes, we would rather be in the studio. Studio first, get the project done, get the video done, then after we might go to one party, but it's not going to be as loud as the people that are doing this, ballin' lifestyle, like this fly lifestyle... I feel like, the two don't mix. It doesn't mix because, like, even the other day I went to a party with them lot in Shoreditch, my friends, and basically I met some of my old friends that I used to party with, and the vibe wasn't the same, we said hello and that, but it's like, that was it, we couldn't hang with each other. I feel like, as I've become a grime artist, my circles become smaller and I've changed my way of thinking, like I don't really care about the bottle lifestyle and all this fly stuff.**

Participant 2 had recently taken his career as a grime artist more seriously. While previously he had a reputation for spending money on designer clothes, holidays and clubbing, he was now investing that time and money into being a music artist. This change of ingroup gave him a new social framework to determine his behaviour. This may suggest that while the individual feels they are making a personal decision, there are unconscious group processes that can impact the results.

#### *4.1.4.2 - Aspiration as a form of self-esteem influenced by music*

Aspiration seemed to be a core tenet of the cohort. While the mainstream media often presents the negative impacts of urban music, the participants recognised it as an essential source of aspiration for the cohort. Most participants only described three routes to work: music, sports and crime, as they felt these professions were relatable. Traditional forms of employment that involve strict work schedules and a hierarchy to which they are responsible do not fit with the ecosystem's dynamics. Participant 2, who was one of the older participants in his 30s, stated.

#### *Ex 20. – Rejecting traditional employment*

**Participant 2: ... I feel like some of us were lucky at getting jobs, like 9:00 to 5:00s and that when we were young. Obviously, our parents wanted us to get jobs, we probably would do it and then we'd quit. It's not for us, isn't it.**

The quote clearly states that '9 to 5' jobs are not in line with the cohort's norms and values. This suggests that his social framework would not provide positive esteem reinforcement even if he were to be successful in a traditional job. This sentiment was confirmed by several participants, who all professed to view criminals as more socially appealing than the roles of accountant and lawyer. This quote also highlights the variety of

prototypes within the black community. Consistent with SIA, mainstream media often portrays the black community as a homogenous ingroup with one set of norms and values. However, ingroup members recognise differing prototypes, in particular when comparing themselves with their parents.

Music has not always been seen as a viable career option. For the older participants, they were able to reflect on the development of the urban music industry and its impact on the cohort. Previously, performing music only provided social rewards such as ingroup appreciation and status, but changes in the music industry have created the possibilities for significant financial rewards. These changes in the rewards of being a music artist may impact the motivations and in turn, the processes involved in identity formation.

*Ex 21. – Financial opportunities through music*

**Participant 2: *Because some people may not like the jobs they do and they want to pursue their career in music or like they probably want to be a producer. They all want to be a manager of an artist that does music. Like everyone wants to be involved in the music culture somehow because it's seeming to be making a lot of people money and changing their lives. So, I feel now there's a bit more hope. Back in the days, it was harder. Until people like So Solid Crew broke the barriers and came through, but it's like they were actually doing it on a mad ting. There were no Spotify streams then, people were actually going to the stores and buying their stuff. Obviously, now things have changed, isn't it. We've got a lot of technology that's running, but I just feel now like, there's more hope in music now. So, a lot of people from my area are now taking that on board and trying their thing.***

The technological developments of the equipment and, consequently, the music industry have made music one of the most appealing career paths to a young person in the community. It can provide financial benefits, security, and high status within a social hierarchy, all while operating within the recognised community framework.

While music plays a significant role in the generation of aspiration within the cohort, most participants' first experiences with aspiration were within the education system. Many participants seemed disengaged with the formal educational process. Their experiences varied from being successful and then attending university to others being excluded from school. Participant 1 provided some of the most extreme insights into the educational experience and how it impacted their aspirations. The school they attended was eventually closed after numerous stabbings; their teacher told them they would not live past fifteen, and the school was situated yards from a block of flats used for drug dealing by the local gang. They recognised these would be considered abnormal compared to broader society, but it was to be expected for them. While most people would define these experiences as unfavourable, this was not their fundamental disillusionment with the institution. Their lack of engagement stemmed from a lack of relatability. They did not feel represented throughout the process, so engaging with the school made future aspirations within mainstream society's framework difficult as they did not have the necessary credentials.

#### *4.1.4.3 - Race as an undercurrent of identity*

For the participants, the overt experience of direct racism was mitigated by living within a predominantly black community. However, they reported encountering perceived racism within the system. For example, Participants 1A and 1B noted the apparent racism

within the education system. They claimed that they did not learn about black history. This meant they had no historical group prototypes through which to understand their identity.

*Ex 22. - Lack of representation in school curricula*

**Participant 1B: They don't teach you about black history.**

**Participant 1A: They're not teaching you about black history, like Mansa Musa. A lot of, various people, like, Dr Johnson, people like that <sup>1</sup>. They're not teaching you about that. They're teaching you about Henry VIII and how he had eight wives, and how he killed all of them.**

Ben: So you didn't find school related to you at all?

**Participant 1A: At all.**

While education was one of the first experiences of perceived racism, other participants noted its occurrence in other areas. For example, as previously mentioned, Participant 5 claimed that the institutions are only concerned about drill music because it now affects 'white kids'. None of the participants recalled specific times they had experienced racism, yet it seemed to dictate their social interactions with non-group members. It should be noted that not all discussions of race involve racism. It seems necessary to examine race as an operational identity factor rather than simply a point of conflict. For example, when the participants spoke of liking all kinds of music, it became

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<sup>1</sup> **Mansa Musa:** Mansa Musa (c. 1280–c. 1337) was the ruler of the Mali Empire in West Africa and is often regarded as one of the wealthiest individuals in history. His reign is noted for the empire's extensive wealth, largely due to its control of gold and salt trade routes. He is also famous for his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, which showcased his wealth and brought international attention to the Mali Empire, contributing to the spread of Islam in West Africa.

**Dr. Umar Johnson:** Dr. Umar Johnson is a contemporary African American psychologist and advocate for Black education and Pan-Africanism. He is known for his work on issues of race, education, and mental health in the Black community. Johnson is a proponent of Afrocentric education and has gained prominence for his outspoken views on the need for Black self-reliance and the critique of systemic racism in education.



clear in further discussion that these choices were restricted by the group boundaries of 'black music'. For researchers to be able to develop our understanding of race and its implications for identity, it must be possible to discuss race without overtones of racism.

#### 4.1.5 – Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of how music, street life, social background, and identity interact to shape the lived experiences of young Black men in North London. These dimensions highlight music's central role not just as a cultural expression but as a vehicle for identity construction, community belonging, and social navigation. Urban genres such as drill and grime emerge as powerful tools for both self-expression and social commentary, reflecting and reinforcing the complexities of life in marginalised communities.

Relating to key points from the literature review, the study situates itself within the broader ethnomusicological discourse, where music is understood as a cultural phenomenon deeply embedded within its social context. As discussed in Section 2.1.1, this research moves beyond seeing music as just a sonic pattern and focuses on its cultural, emotional, and social implications (Rice, 2010; 2013). The ways in which music helps construct social identity align with the Social Identity Approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), revealing how young men in the cohort use music to negotiate and express their collective identity while managing societal perceptions and stereotypes (Roy & Dowd 2010).

Additionally, the findings reinforce the role of music as a means for social competition and identity management within the framework of Identity Management Strategies (IMS) (Blanz et al., 1998). Race, while often less explicitly discussed, operates as a significant undercurrent influencing the participants' identity and social interactions. For

many participants, music becomes a tool to reclaim power and redefine societal narratives about Blackness, a concept that was heavily critiqued in Critical Race Theory (CRT) as discussed in Section 2.3.3. CRT's focus on the everyday experience of racism is echoed in the participants' stories, particularly around their interaction with societal institutions such as education, where the absence of Black historical figures (Participant 1A) illustrates the systemic omission of Black identities within dominant narratives, as posited by CRT (Hartlep, 2009).

Moreover, the complex relationship between music, social background, and street life mirrors the ethnographic findings of Visser (2020) on young Black men in Tottenham, further demonstrating how music offers both an emotional release and a space to navigate the pressures of street life. The interplay between music and identity also speaks to the broader literature on Black British identity formation, especially the influence of African-American culture on Black British youth, as highlighted by Raphael-Hernandez (2004).

In summary, these findings build on existing theoretical perspectives such as the Social Identity Approach and CRT, enriching the dialogue around how music serves as a crucial space for young Black men in London to articulate, manage, and contest their identities against broader societal expectations.

## 4.2 - Observations

This section presents my ethnographic observations from recording studio sessions with various urban music artists. The observations centre around key individuals, providing

insights into the social interactions, creative processes, and identity negotiations that take place within the studio environment.

The chapter begins by focusing on Red, an artist with whom I had a prior relationship. His recording sessions provided insight into the intersection of street culture and creative production, highlighting how artists navigate studio dynamics and express their identities. The discussion then shifts to Tik Tokker, a younger artist heavily influenced by social media, whose music career exemplifies the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping identity and musical success. Tik Tokker's approach reflects the generational shift towards leveraging platforms like TikTok to build a following and enter the mainstream.

Next, I turn to the Gang Sessions with the Manager, where I observed how street life and music intersect in a group setting. The Manager's approach to handling the artists, promoting conflicts for social media traction, and his vision of capitalising on these tensions for success offered a unique perspective on how the business side of street culture influences identity and music production.

I then explore my observations of Hood Drill Rapper, who used music as a form of emotional release and therapy. His rapid and intense recording sessions provided a raw and vulnerable insight into how artists cope with personal trauma and mental health issues, using music as an outlet to process their lived experiences in the *streets*.

Finally, the chapter concludes with my attendance at high-profile industry events, including the King Promise Album Launch Party and Tinie Tempah's Restaurant Opening. These events offered a glimpse into the opulent side of the music industry, showcasing how successful artists negotiate their identities within elite social circles, far removed from the gritty realities of the street. These observations contrast sharply with the earlier studio

sessions, illustrating the diverse pathways urban music artists navigate as they balance authenticity, street credibility, and mainstream success.

Through these varied experiences, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the complex interplay between music, identity, and social status within the urban music scene, revealing how different generations and stages of career development shape these processes.

#### 4.2.1 - A day in the studio (Red)

This section delves into the observations from the first recording session, which took place at Unknown Recordings, featuring Red, a rapper recently released from prison, and two of his friends. The session begins with a description of the studio environment and its layout, providing context for the interactions that unfold. It then examines the social dynamics between Red and his friends, highlighting how identity is performed through verbal and non-verbal cues, such as body language, speech patterns, and fashion choices.

The section also explores Red's creative process during the recording, focusing on the interplay between music creation and self-expression. This includes a detailed look at how the participants engage with the studio equipment and collaborate on lyrics and beats, illustrating the collective nature of music production in this context. Attention is also given to the role of street culture and how it manifests in the studio environment, particularly in the way participants negotiate their personal and professional identities.

In addition, the section discusses how Red navigates his transition from prison to the music industry, offering insights into how his past experiences shape his current identity and ambitions. Finally, the session concludes with reflections on the broader implications of

these observations for understanding identity formation within the urban music scene, setting the stage for further ethnographic analysis in subsequent sessions.

#### *4.2.1.1 - Introduction to the first recording session*

This was my first recording session of the study. It was taking place in Unknown Recordings with a rapper called Red and two of his friends. I have met Red before as he has a close relationship with Tug, the studio owner. Since I had last met him Red had been to prison for a few years. Since coming out he has been focused on becoming a music artist. Others would describe Red as a character who often replies with quick jokes that make the group laugh. Red would define himself as a street guy however he does have family connections to the music industry. This was the perfect session for me to start with as my previous relationship with Red alleviated any trepidation I had about the study. My aim for this session was to become familiar with the process and the best practice for my role within the studio. My time with Red offered insights into the practicalities of the study, the dynamic of an 'average' recording session and observations of group dynamics.

Red was the first to arrive. He pulled up in a luxury hard-top convertible and parked in front of the studio. He was wearing a designer tracksuit and a plain white vest. Even though the tracksuit was designer, Red had an unkempt look about him as though he had rushed to get ready. As he got out of the car he was on the phone. He saw me and tucked it between his shoulder and ear and *saluted* me,

#### *Ex 23 – Introductions with Red*

**Red: 'Yo *wa gwan* Ben, long time, Tug was saying you got some research or something?'**

Ben: 'Yeh I was just wondering if I could sit in your session and watch as you guys record. I won't interfere but I may ask a few questions if that's cool?

**Red: 'Yeh of course it is, My boy won't be here for a minute so I'm just going to *bun* it. I'll be about 10 minutes.'**

Ben: 'No worries, when you are ready.'

I went back into the room and chatted with the engineer while I waited for the session to start. While I love talking to people, and I know Red as a close friend of Tug I was still nervous. My imposter syndrome kindly reminded me that I am not an academic and was entirely ill-prepared to attempt any kind of study. To placate my fears, I ran through my checklist; I made sure I had printed off enough information sheets, my phone had enough battery, and I had my notes, clipboard and pen. I was ready.

The two other friends arrived. They were both wearing high-end clothing instead of the tracksuits they had opted for jeans. They tended to be worn by the older generation; all three were close to 30 years old if not a bit older. Instantly they gave off the vibe of street guys. These were guys who had been or were involved in the *streets*. Regardless of the designer clothes, they had a certain edge to how they carried themselves. It is hard to capture in words how you recognise someone is involved in the *streets*, but there is confidence mixed with suspicion. Red is West African, around average height and makes a point of the fact that he is on the larger side. He has a friendly, cheerful demeanour and is very approachable, a loveable rogue. Friend 1 is shorter but very muscley, with a much sterner manner about him. I am unsure of his ethnic background, but he was darker than Red. Friend 2 was Caribbean and much taller and slimmer with long dreds. He gave off a 'cool guy' persona, and his designer clothes were slightly more flamboyant than the other

two. He was carrying a bottle of Courvoisier, apple juice and a short stack of white plastic cups for them to drink during the session. As they approached, Red introduced me to the other two, and I explained my study to them and offered them the participation sheet. They said it was cool, and the session got underway.

This first recording session with Red was relevant to my study in several ways. It provided a practical introduction to the environment and culture of the recording studio, which is central to my ethnographic research. My prior relationship with Red helped ease my entry into the space, allowing me to observe the dynamics of the session without disrupting the flow. The session highlighted important aspects of identity performance, such as how the participants presented themselves through clothing, behaviour, and language, offering insights into how urban music artists navigate their social and creative worlds. Additionally, the group dynamics and interactions shed light on the collaborative process in music production and how street culture intersects with artistic expression. This session served as a foundation for understanding the nuanced interplay between music, identity, and the lived experiences of the artists involved in the study.

#### *4.2.1.2 - Phone vs Pro-Forma – Practicalities of the study*

With it being my first session, I wanted to ensure I captured as much as possible. I sat in the corner with my clipboard and pro forma. As I was writing my notes, I felt an awkwardness grow in the room. Red, who usually is very open and chatty with me, stayed over the other side of the room. There was a lot of coming and going but very little discussion. Without context, this behaviour is not that unusual, but knowing Red, I was concerned my presence was changing the dynamics. It was at this point I decided to stop using the pro forma and written notes in favour of using my phone. This change allowed me

the freedom to pretend I was simply texting someone or scrolling through social media, things that are much more natural in a studio setting. Even though they were aware I was still analysing the session, this change had an almost immediate impact. I went outside while they were smoking and used this opportunity to chat with them naturally. I felt it was essential to break down the researcher-participant barriers that my use of a clipboard had reinforced. Using Red as my conduit, I wanted to demonstrate to his friends that I could be trusted by indicating my ingroup status. I was able to do this by talking about gossip that was happening in the culture. With everyone using social media, there is always a controversy or point of interest to discuss. This chat allowed me to demonstrate I understood the group's norms and values, which would hopefully make them feel more at ease.

#### *4.2.1.3 - Breaking into the mainstream - Red recording Afrobeats song*

After coming back into the room, the atmosphere in the session was a lot more relaxed. I took my place on the sofa instead of the chair in the corner. They seemed more comfortable with me, and the session started to get underway. Even though all three had booked the session together, they were certainly not a group or even featuring on each other's tracks. It seems the joint booking was more for financial and moral support reasons than for musical collaboration. Red was the first to record. While he is traditionally a rap artist, he wanted to record an Afrobeats song. Typically I would expect street guys to do either rap or drill, as they are the most in keeping with their personas. However, Red was looking to branch out to improve his commercial appeal. He mentioned that he is related to a well-known Afrobeats artist, so he felt it was suitable for him to do so. This was the first of several occasions where Red demonstrated his consciousness about his music career, I will discuss them later in the case study. The two friends stayed in the main room, not paying



attention as Red went into the booth to record. Friend 1 was preparing his *bars* for his track while Friend 2 was talking on the phone. Red had pre-written the lyrics and provided his own *beat*. I did not hear whether the *beat* was an original or a pre-made one from Youtube. The recording was extremely quick, with Red only having to stop a couple of times. He then did his *adlibs* and *stabs* and was finished within 15 minutes. As he came back into the room, he did not seem excited which I thought was unusual.

*Ex 24. – Doing songs to break the mainstream*

Ben: 'You good?'

**Red: 'Yeah I'm cool'**

I laughed because it was unusual how placid he was being

Ben: 'It sounds *hard*, you not happy?'

**Red: 'Yeah it's cool, this Afro ting is easy tho. I don't have to think about it.'**

Ben: 'So why you doing it then?'

**Red: 'I got to get that mainstream market, I'm tryna get out of here.'**

Personally, I found the lack of passion alarming. When he spoke about his career you could see the excitement in his eyes but this song felt more like a formality. He saw the choice of Afrobeats as a commercial decision to increase his popularity. It seems there is no strict boundary between the genres, and he felt comfortable moving between them.

After Red had finished recording his vocals, he returned to the main room as the engineer *mixed down* his voice. He left the engineer to it and did not offer any input into the process. This only takes a couple of minutes to complete. Once done, the engineer played

the track several times through the speakers for everyone to hear. There was a consensus that the song sounded good, although it was not a particularly deep exploration, just a couple ‘Yeah that’s *hard*’ and ‘Yeah that’s *sick*’. I was unable to examine this further, however, I would have liked to ask Red why he seemed to put so much thought into how to *blow* yet does not apply that passion to the process of making music.

#### 4.2.1.4 - *Power dynamics between artist and engineer – Friend 1 Street Song*

Friend 1, on the other hand, wanted to create a street rap song. This was the first time I saw someone select a Youtube beat which would become common practice in the study. He asked the engineer for a Lil Baby *type beat*. Lil Baby is a famous American rapper. Friend 1 had written his bars on his phone prior to the session. Before entering the booth, he took his jumper off to reveal a muscled frame. He had jewellery which seemed to shine even more in contrast to his black t-shirt. There was a steeliness to his face that made him more threatening than the others. As soon as he started recording, it was clear that his lyrics matched his aura. His *bars* were about his prowess in the *streets*, his time in prison and his dominance over his enemies, yet they were not boastful. They were written from his perspective as though he was offering guidance to others in similar situations. The guidance is a transmission of his rules and norms, so the advice may seem contradictory to the mainstream culture's rules and norms. For example, one of his lines was that ‘*his name was ringing across the prisons*’. He asked the engineer to emphasise this line by repeating it, putting reverb on it and cutting out the backing track. It was implied that if you followed his advice, you could gain notoriety in all of the prisons, which would be a desirable trait in his social circle.

This interaction with the engineer was the first example of power dynamics within the recording studio that I witnessed. Due to Friend 1's reputation in the *streets* and the demeanour of the engineer, it's hard to imagine them interacting outside of the studio. Yet due to the engineer's expertise in making music, Friend 1 submits to his advice. The relationship is always in balance because although the engineer has the power momentarily, there is a consistent threat of violence. In this instance, the engineer calmly recommends changes to the beat rather than demanding them. Friend 1 had an idea of how he wanted it to sound, yet it was on the engineer to interpret Friend 1's wishes.

#### *4.2.1.5 - Gimmicks to blow – Red suggests ways to make it big*

During one of the breaks, I followed Red outside while he had a smoke. Friend 2 joined us and poured Red and himself a mixture of Courvoisier and apple juice into the white plastic cups they had double-stacked. Red then proceeded to think out loud about ways to increase his popularity.

#### *Ex 25. – Thinking of a gimmick*

**Red: (Takes a *toke* on his cigarette) 'Yo I need to do something.'**

Ben: 'What do you mean?'

**Red: 'Like I need to have my thing people know me for. I'm thinking of running with my top off in my next video.'**

Ben and Friend 2 laugh as Red mimics himself running.

**Red: 'Yeah I could do it like Khaled' (reference to famous American producer DJ Khaled) 'Or maybe I can just get a tattoo across it like Rick Ross. That's**

**what these kids are doing these days man. It's not even about the music it's about having a gimmick that people notice.'**

Red believed he was on course to *blow* as an artist. He wanted to think of ways to make himself stand out from the rest. He suggested this could be done with a gimmick rather than musical talent. He identified a disconnect between his generation and the younger generation that understood social media. This is confirmed in a later case study with Tik Tokker. It felt as if they recognised a need to adapt their behaviour in order to 'fit in' with the younger generation. Their generation was far more reserved and less expressive, which acted as a barrier to increasing their popularity in music.

#### *4.2.1.6 - Perceptions of status - Red demands to move rooms*

While we were outside, Tug pulled up in his car with one of his friends. As he got out, you could feel he was tense about something. This tension clashed with Red's jovial nature that the Courvoisier had aided. As Tug stepped out of the car, his face showed he was annoyed about something. Red did not seem to notice this and proclaimed in front of everyone that Tug needed to put him in the main room (Room 1) as he was going to be a prominent artist.

*Ex 26. – Argument over which room to hire*

**Red: 'Yo why you treating me like this? You know I should be in the main room (Room 1)!'**

**Tug: 'Huh?'**

**Red: 'I'm saying you should put me in the main room.'**

**Tug: 'If you pay more you can have it'**

**Red: 'But you know me?'**

**Tug: 'So this is my business and it costs more money.'**

**Friend 2: 'You know we are from South (South London)'**

This claim riled Tug up

**Tug: 'So what? What does that mean? Do you know him better than me?'**

**What does you being from South have anything to do with it?'**

At this point, Red could see he was not going to convince him and eased the tension by laughing it off.

**Red: 'Ah you are so stubborn Tug'**

After the recent success of one of his songs and his relationship with Tug, Red felt that he deserved to be in Room 1. Due to confusion with a previous booking which was cancelled Room 1 had already been booked for use. This incident showed evidence of how Red perceived himself as a music artist, yet Tug did not share that perception. While a prior annoyance was impacting Tug's behaviour, I must note that most of the artists I spoke to thought they were the next big thing so this approach could become tiresome to a studio owner.

There were three aspects to this incident. Firstly, Red's perception of himself as an artist. Secondly, the use of a relationship as a form of social capital and finally the use of a location to represent prototypical traits. Having recently released a music video Red had an inflated idea of his position as a music artist. The belief he was a music artist was coupled with perceptions of how an artist should act. Even the studio he was recording in represented his status as an artist. He felt as if Tug was not respecting him as a music artist

even though they were family, a point that Red stressed. For Red, he felt Tug should do this because they were related. Yet it was relatively light-hearted until Red's friend mentioned that they were from South. This instantly caused Tug to react. I found this interesting as they used the stereotypical representation of the area of South. They were playing on its reputation of being violent and criminal to provide them with capital in the argument. These sorts of confrontations are a regular occurrence in my experience. Even though they are tense at the moment they seem to rarely have long-term effects on the relationship. It may have been this confrontation that provided the foundation for the next incident involving an argument about *snitching*.

This incident underscores the importance of perceived status, social capital, and location within the studio environment. Red's demand to be moved into the main room reveals how artists like him perceive success as directly linked to visible markers of status. His recent musical achievements led him to expect special treatment, particularly from Tug, with whom he has a personal relationship. Red's attempt to use that relationship as social capital, and his friend's invocation of their origins in South London to assert dominance, illustrates how social ties and location are used to negotiate power dynamics in the studio. While tensions arose, Red's light-hearted response diffused the situation, revealing how such confrontations, though common, rarely have lasting impacts on relationships.

This exchange, however, laid the groundwork for a later, more serious conflict about *snitching*. The tension stirred by the mention of South London and the symbolic association of that location with violence and reputation carried over into the next incident, where ideas of loyalty, reputation, and street credibility were further tested.

#### 4.2.1.7 - Group dynamics – Jim Jones is a snitch?

After the session ended, Red, Friend 1, Friend 2, Tug and his friend came outside to finish the alcohol. While they stood leaning on their luxury cars, the guys had a chat. Watching them interact and talk about the gossip in the community was engaging. Until the conversation took a turn when the issue of American rapper Jim Jones being a snitch was raised. Jim Jones was part of 50 cents *crew*, G Unit. Recently he had to defend accusations of him *snitching* as part of a conspiracy for murder case concerning another American rapper Tekashi 69. Tekashi 69 is famed for informing on his fellow gang members to reduce his jail sentence. While receiving criticism for *snitching*, Tekashi 69 claimed that Jim Jones was also a snitch as he was involved in the case and did not receive jail time. This instantly split the group down the middle. While before they stood in a circle leaning on their cars, they almost immediately and unconsciously formed two lines facing each other. They started arguing about whether Jim Jones was a snitch. Even though one of them mentioned there was evidence in the form of court documents which would have ended the argument, this was never explored. Instead, the two groups argued. It struck me how passionate they were for a situation which would never directly impact them. After they finished, I spoke to Tug, who believed Jim Jones was not a snitch, to clarify why the topic created such passion.

*Ex 27. – Jim Jones – The last of the real ones*

**Tug: Na it's because he can't be a snitch. He's one of the last real ones out there. If he's a snitch then everything is a lie. I grew up I based myself on him and 50. 50 is still real tho but Jim Jones can't be a snitch. But the *streets* are fake anyway!'**

Ben: What do you mean the *streets* are fake?'

**Tug: 'What I said! They are fake. Nothing is real you could be known as a *badman* but you are just running away when you shoot back'**

Ben: 'What as in you are *shook* and you just shoot anywhere?'

**Tug: Yeah you are shitting yourself but you managed to get a lucky shot.**

**Now in the *ends* you are going to be known as a *badman*.**

Several points from this extract will be reviewed in the discussion. However, it did strike me at the time that the complexity of hypocrisy must be exhausting. Tug recognised that the rules of the *hood* are just a construct but, at the same time, must abide by them. The conversation moved topics and the group returned to a more circular formation. The argument was forgotten about as everyone embraced and said goodbye.

This session was a fantastic start to the study. Having a previous relationship with Red allowed me to test different procedures without feeling any pressure. The switch from the clipboard to the phone was essential for the rest of the study. The fact I was not close with Red meant he became uncomfortable with my role which may not have happened if the first session had been a close friend. Based on my previous experience in the industry I was pleased that the session represented a 'traditional' studio session. It is common for studio sessions to be attended by a group of friends all working on separate projects. For the study, this allowed the comparison of three different styles of music and dynamics with the engineer within one session. However, this was not only the benefit of this session, as this session had some of the most observable instances of the social identity approach in action. Both the situations of *snitching* and wanting the best room demonstrated how behaviour in groups is dictated by implicit processes. This session provided a comparison for the future sessions recorded during the ethnography.



This session provided valuable insights into the group dynamics and the social identity processes within the studio setting. The discussion about the rapper Jim Jones being a snitch sparked an intense debate, revealing how personal values and reputations in street culture are projected onto public figures. The group unconsciously split into opposing sides, showing how deeply they identified with the topic, even though it had no direct impact on their lives. Tug's reflection on the constructed nature of street credibility and the inherent contradictions in these rules highlighted the complexity of living by these codes. Despite the heated debate, the group quickly moved on, demonstrating the fluid nature of such confrontations. This session also allowed me to refine my ethnographic approach, moving from a clipboard to a phone for note-taking, which proved essential for future sessions. Additionally, it reinforced the importance of group behaviour in understanding how identity is negotiated in the music industry, providing a foundational comparison for subsequent sessions in the study.

#### 4.2.2 - Metric-driven Identity (Tik Tokker)

This session was the most revealing in terms of how the younger generation embodied the concept of entrepreneurs of identity. TikTokker, was eighteen years old and full of energy. He had a visible drive to become famous that radiated out from him as soon as I met him. Dressed in a Nike tech tracksuit, he had a fresh and more innocent look than a lot of the other participants. He did not give any indication he was involved in street life but was just focused on building an online following. He was warm and friendly. He seemed almost excited by the opportunity for someone to see how he worked. He had arrived just before me and was already waiting in the studio. As I entered he was listening to a track on repeat. This is a common practice in the studio for those who write their *bars* during the

session, In contrast to Red's session in which everyone had prepared their lyrics beforehand, TikTokker expressed a strong preference for working in the studio environment, claiming it made him feel more creative and focused. Reflecting on this later, I considered how valuable it would be to analyse the differences between artists who write at home versus those who create in the studio. This contrast could reveal motivations and environmental influences that shape the final product, with certain settings possibly aligning with specific music styles or themes. For instance, the studio might lend itself to creating more social or collaborative music, while a home setting could facilitate more personal, introspective work. Such an analysis could deepen our understanding of how creative environments influence authenticity, style, and the social dynamics of music production.

Music did not seem like his only passion but more a vehicle for achieving fame. This was in contrast to his older brother Hi-Life who was wildly passionate about all types of music. Yet they were both warm and welcoming and I found their discussions to be intelligent and insightful. I did not disturb Tik Tokker for the first 15 minutes as I did not want to interrupt his process. Even so, it was interesting watching him listen to the same song on repeat as he wrote each line on his phone. He would keep repeating the lyrics adding an extra word or sentence each time. Sometimes he seemed focused on the word or phrase and would try and make it fit. At other times he would mumble the melody with no words and fill in the words as he goes along often starting at the end of the sentence and working his way backwards. These two approaches were the most common observed during the ethnography. Both highlight the different ways in which people perceive music. For those who concentrated on the words it would appear the content of the lyrics is most important. For those who mumble it is the flow and rhythm of the verse that is vital. Recording techniques are flexible; the best approach depends on the individual's workflow. As Tik

Tokker demonstrated both approaches can be combined. After speaking to him later it was clear to see why he combined these two approaches. Tik Tokker had a marketing plan and was targeting a specific group with a particular message which I will explore in more detail during the discussion in section 5.1.4.. This meant he needed to focus on the message he was trying to promote. However, his brother Hi-Life was very passionate about music and the feeling it gives through rhythm and melody. Tik Tokker was conscious that for his music to be received well it must have a clear message and be catchy.

Once in the booth the assurance and confidence Tik Tokker had while talking seemed to be replaced by uncertainty and self-doubt. In contrast to some of the other participants Tik Tokker was extremely slow. At first, he was trying to record the whole verse in one go. While I have seen this done it is very unusual and people will often break it down into smaller sections to give them better control over their breath which can massively impact the recording quality. Infinite advised him a few times that he should do it in sections before he finally listened. Even then he questioned every section that he recorded and would do numerous takes much to the frustration of Infinite. As soon as the track was finished the confidence resumed and he set about uploading it to his social media.

Tik Tokker exemplified the younger generation that Red referred to in his session. He represented a change in the way people became music artists. Traditionally artists would record an album. Then three to four tracks would be selected as singles. Each single would have a two-month marketing campaign before the release including music videos, radio tours and live performances. Tik Tokker, on the other hand, instantly uploaded his song to Tik Tok subverting the time and expense of the traditional method. This allows anyone with access to social media to start building an international fanbase. Tik Tokker spoke with a

maturity beyond his years. He understood marketing and branding. He continually researched the updates to TikTok's algorithm trying to maximise his exposure on the app. This is a stark difference from when I started in music over 15 years ago. As Ilan (2012) documented during that period grime music went from being an underground music genre to being commercialised by the major labels. As the financial rewards of music increased so did the levels of professionalism.

TikTokker also represents one of the potential threats of social media, metric-driven identities. Other participants spoke about the negative impact social media has on street conflicts. They claimed the increased exposure also increased the pressure for retaliation. However, TikTokker exposed a potentially more troubling concern from social media usage. He seemed to have tailored his online persona in line with the ideals that gained him the most increase in his social media metrics. I discuss this in more detail in section 5.2.2.2.

#### 4.2.3 - Typical Gang Session (The Manager)

In this section, I recount my experience observing a typical studio session facilitated by a figure I refer to as "the Manager." This encounter not only provided an in-depth view of the musical process but also revealed the power dynamics at play between the Manager, the artists, and the broader industry. The following narrative is divided into key moments that illustrate the Manager's strategic influence, the atmosphere within the studio, and the tension between group and individual identities.

The section begins by describing the initial meeting with the Manager and the setting of the studio session, capturing the unique blend of music creation and street culture. It then moves into a discussion of how the Manager positions himself as a central figure in the group's dynamics, using both promises of success and manipulation of social media conflicts

to maintain his authority. The Manager's recruitment of new talent and his strategic goals for the group are also explored, shedding light on the intersection of music, identity, and commercial aspirations. Finally, the session is analysed in the context of existing literature, particularly focusing on depersonalisation and identity management within group settings, as well as the commodification of street culture in the music industry.

For the first few days, I was staying in a low-cost hotel until I found accommodation. On the morning of the second day, I was walking to my car when I heard someone shout 'Ben'. I turned round to see a familiar face who for this study will be called the Manager. We had a quick chat about what we were both up to. I mentioned that I was studying for a PhD and was in London to conduct an ethnography in recording studios. He said he was now managing a few artists and if I needed any help to let him know. I took his number and went on with my day. A few days later, I called him and organised to attend one of his studio sessions. In the end, I arranged to participate in two sessions as, fortuitously, they worked with Infinite and had a session booked a week later.

#### *4.2.3.1 - The feel of a gang session*

The first session I was invited to took place in a different studio, not at Infinite or Unknown Recordings, but it was an opportunity too valuable to pass up. I arrived about an hour into the six-hour session. As I followed the directions on my sat nav, I struggled to locate the studio, as the area appeared to be entirely residential. After calling the Manager for guidance, he instructed me to meet him at the gates of a car park near some flats. I parked my car, and shortly after, the Manager met me. Dressed in a white vest and black tracksuit bottoms, he led me up a set of stairs to a flat. The building itself was rundown—paint peeling from the railings, cigarette butts piled in the corners.

When we reached the door, which had a large steel outer layer and a security camera above it, the Manager knocked. A young, mixed-race guy in a tracksuit answered. He wore a hood pulled up and a balaclava bunched around his neck, which was surprising given that it was one of the hottest days of the year. I was already sweating in shorts and a T-shirt. Despite the heat, he didn't seem bothered and greeted the Manager with a fist bump, offering me the same. Though he seemed cautious of me at first, the Manager swiftly entered the flat, giving him little time to focus on my presence.

Inside, the flat had been converted into a studio, which I later learned was owned by the engineer. The main area was an open-plan lounge and kitchen, connected to a bedroom-turned-recording room via a viewing window. In the middle of the recording room was a sound booth, independently constructed to suppress external noise. Five guys were hanging out in the lounge, while another was in the booth recording. The Manager introduced me to the group and explained that I was conducting a study on music. I asked if it was alright for me to observe, and the group confirmed it was fine.

I thanked them and took a seat on the sofa, the only available spot, next to the young man who had opened the door for us. He shifted a few things—weed, a grinder, and a knife—off the seat to make room for me. I recognised one of the guys, Trappy, from a video shoot I had attended a few days earlier. Trappy stood out from the rest. While the others wore dark tracksuits, he was dressed in a matching shorts and t-shirt combo in vibrant colours, giving him a fresher, more distinct appearance.

#### *4.2.3.2 - Take control from the labels*

The Manager who was standing up next to the engineer was trying to set up a camera to record the session. This task did not stop him from preaching to the group about

how to make it in the music industry. He encouraged them that he would be able to make them famous in music. This claim seemed to be a key tool for the Manager to maintain a position of power. As I spent more time with them I became familiar with his approach of the carrot rather than the stick, in which he promised the artists riches and success for their loyalty.

The artists were taking turns to record tracks. The others would weave in and out of attention between their phones and the artists' recordings. As soon as the Manager had finished setting up the camera, I moved to stand behind it. The Manager said he wanted to capture the process of making the music to use it for content to promote the artists. The Manager has a reputation for being very active on social media. He often interacts with rival artists and gangs and antagonises them. I asked him why he did this.

*Ex 28. – Taking control of the game*

Ben: 'I see you on the socials a lot is that part of your plan?'

**Manager: 'Yeah I like to wind people up and get under their skin. You got to keep yourself relevant. But I'm just doing what these labels do man. Why shouldn't we be the ones to benefit off the *beefs*.'**

Ben: 'What do you mean?'

**Manager: 'These labels be making money out us killing each other. We should be the ones making the money rather than them exploiting us. So yeah I give the fans what they want.'**

His bluntness took me off guard. He saw record labels as capitalising on their lives and the conflicts the artists get into. Rather than others benefitting, he wished to take

advantage of it himself. As part of this, he saw it as his role to poke the fire to increase social media engagement. The Manager used his superior knowledge of the industry to entice the rappers. He kept mentioning how much money they would earn from their production and record deals. This promise excited the rappers and seemed to be the crux of the manager's control, as he consistently referred to it.

#### *4.2.3.3 - Recruiting a new artist*

At one point, the Manager spoke to Trappy as the rappers were recording. He wanted Trappy to sign to him as an artist yet Trappy seemed reluctant. The Manager argued that they would be more powerful as a contingent rather than on their own. He said if Trappy signed a contract, he would have more bargaining power when discussing a record deal with the labels. Trappy was older than the other rappers and was more established in the *streets*. He seemed unsure about the proposal and asked for my opinion. As the researcher, it was not my place to comment, however, I did take it as evidence that I have a respected opinion in the community. Clearly, he was not as convinced by the promises as the others and sought reassurance from an outsider. The Manager continued to argue that the group was stronger than the individual, but in the end, it fell on deaf ears as Trappy would not commit. In relation to the literature, this may be due to his increased levels of self-esteem achieved from being more respected in his community. The Manager's approach may be more effective on those with lower self-esteem who may be more susceptible to depersonalisation.



#### 4.2.3.4 - The carrot

The Manager spoke a lot about record labels and I was intrigued about his plans for the future. I caught a moment to chat with him alone in the kitchen and asked about his strategy as a manager.

*Ex 29. – Change the industry*

Ben: 'So how you going to make it big? What's your plans as a manager?'

**Manager: 'I ain't a manager.'**

Ben: 'Oh you're not?'

**Manager: 'Na g I don't want to be a manager they are expendable.**

**Managers don't have longevity. Think about it once the artist is done so is the manager. Na bro I want to be a music executive, them man are making the real money.'**

Ben: 'I suppose, so how you going to do it with these man?'

**Manager: 'I'm going to change the whole industry.'**

Ben: 'Is it?'

**Manager: ' Yeah I got 12 artists so imagine the power im going to have in those meetings when I'm sat across from the record bosses. They are going to be eating out my hand.'**

Ben: 'I hear that so are going to start your own label and have them signed to you?'

**Manager: 'Na no one will know, I want them all to *blow* on their own ting then so when I'm in the meeting it's a madness.'**

Ben: 'That seems kinda hard to do, won't it mean you will have to *blow* all the artists individually?'

**Manager: 'Yeah but I don't want people to know that will make it even more powerful. Like with the group I don't want to use \*Groups name\*.'**

Ben: 'But doesn't the group already get views with that name? Could you not capitalise on that?'

**Manager: 'I want them to do it on their own. There's too much attached to that name I want them to be leaders on their own.'**

I was struck by the Manager's confidence if not slightly confused by his approach. It seemed to me more constructive to capitalise on the success of the already established name of the group. The previous name had been decided before this Manager had control of the group. It may be he saw his approach as creating a new identity for the members, a form of EoI by developing a new identity of which he controlled the image.

My time with the Manager and the Gang was illuminating. It provided a point of reflection in comparison to many of the other sessions. Even though the other sessions had members involved in street life, the Gang were the only ones actively using music as part of a group process. Many of the other rappers spoke about street life and their involvement in it but it was based on a personal experience. The Gang represented and promoted a specific group through their music. They actively used the music and videos to create maximum difference between them and the outgroup. This was exacerbated by the Manager's view

that they should benefit from the conflict which only saw him encouraging the division further.

This session offered valuable insights into the ways in which music, identity, and power dynamics intersect within a group context, particularly when street culture is actively leveraged for artistic and commercial purposes. The Manager's role was especially illuminating, as he operated not just as a facilitator of the music-making process but as a figure actively shaping the group's identity and strategy for navigating the music industry. His focus on exploiting conflict and division, both between rival artists and within the group's narrative, reflected a broader trend in the commercialisation of street culture. His desire to bypass traditional industry paths, while still depending on the structures of social media and digital engagement, revealed both a rejection and reliance on mainstream models of success.

Moreover, the tension between individual and group identity was evident in Trappy's hesitation to commit to the Manager's vision. This suggests that established artists with stronger personal brands may resist the depersonalisation that comes with group dynamics, while younger or less established artists may be more susceptible to the Manager's promises of fame and success. The session also reinforced the notion that in the context of street culture and urban music, conflict and competition are not merely personal but are often commodified, with artists and managers seeking to capitalise on these narratives.

Ultimately, this session highlighted the complexities of group identity in the music industry, the commodification of street culture, and the power dynamics that govern relationships between artists, managers, and the industry at large. It provided a unique comparison to the individualistic approaches seen in other sessions, marking a significant

point of reflection for understanding how collective identity is constructed and manipulated in the pursuit of success.

#### 4.2.4 - Music as a release (Hood Drill Rapper)

This section examines the experiences of Hood Drill, an emerging drill artist whose life and music provide a lens into the complexities of street culture and personal struggles. The first section introduces Hood Drill, capturing the essence of his appearance, demeanour, and the subtle distinctions in street fashion that reflect deeper social dynamics. The subsequent parts explore his rapid and therapeutic recording process, revealing how his music serves as an outlet for his trauma and mental health issues. Lastly, the text examines his experimentation with autotune, which allows for a broader emotional expression, juxtaposing his spoken ambitions with the apparent lack of strategic planning in his musical career. This section explores a deeper understanding of Hood Drill's life, music, and the socio-cultural factors influencing both.

##### 4.2.4.1 - Introduction to Hood Drill

I was already sitting in the studio as Hood Drill arrived with his friend just before the end of Tik Tokers session. He pulled open the large door creating a much-needed draft that cut through the smoky room. Hood Drill was dressed in a dark grey tracksuit with a black puffer Gillet over the top. He was of mixed race of Jamaican descent with long braids and a sparse beard. He had the look of someone who smoked copious amounts of cannabis, which was confirmed by his friend, who started rolling as soon as he sat down. The friend was white and was wearing designer jeans and a hoodie. At this point, I noticed a subtle difference in how some people dressed. Even though the clothes Hood Drill and his friend were wearing were expensive, that expense did not translate into their demeanour. Without

knowledge of the brands, one might have assumed they were not financially comfortable, yet each was wearing close to £2000 worth of clothing. The difference, confirmed later in the session, between Hood Drill and Red is that his fashion needs to be more practical. Red would often wear tracksuits, yet they would be bright, vibrant colours. His trainers would be colour-coordinated, and his day could be ruined if they were creased. Hood Drill, on the other hand, looked ready for anything. He gave off the aura of someone who was 'active' in the *streets*. To be active means to be currently involved in criminal activity. This level of activity can vary. More often than not, if someone is said to be active, it means they are engaged in street conflicts. This is vital information to know when interacting with someone, as someone who is active will be more vigilant and temperamental. With this knowledge in hand, I was cautious about how I approached Hood Drill. However, I need not have worried because my fears were quickly diminished as he laughed and joked with the group. In fact, as this section will show, I found the complexity of Hood Drill fascinating.

#### *4.2.4.2 - Rapid recording – Music as therapy*

There was a ten-minute wait for Hood Drill before his session started, which he seemed happy about because it allowed him time to roll his joint. He was smoking 'Cali', which is the most expensive weed and is meant to be imported from California. The packets are brightly coloured and often replicate well-known sweet brands like Skittles. Once Tik Toker had finished and left, Hood Drill was instantly ready to go. There was a determined energy that I had not seen in the other sessions. While other artists showed determination, it was always to make it big as a music artist. However, Hood Drill's seemed fuelled by pain. I have never seen anyone record as fast as Hood Drill. By the end, he had recorded seven tracks in four hours in comparison to Tiktoker, who just about managed one. He used beats

from YouTube, which he had written before the session. I would define the genre as 'classic drill'. He was forceful and aggressive as he documented his life in the *streets*. The speed at which he recorded intrigued me. While some artists take pride in being able to record in one take, there is still a lot of thought put into the final draft. It felt more like Hood Drill was getting something off his chest, a release from his tensions. I wanted to ask him more about this so in one of the rare moments he stopped for a smoke, I decided to take my opportunity.

*Ex 30. – Music helps with mental health*

Ben: 'Rah I have to be honest I've never seen someone record so fast'

**Hood Drill: 'Swear? I dunno I just do it. There's no point longing it out.'**

Ben: 'Haha I hear that, it is impressive if you can do it. What's your writing process like? How long does it take you?'

**Hood Drill: 'To be honest I write at night. I don't sleep that well, so when my mind is moving mad I find writing distracts me.'**

Ben: 'So you find writing bars helps you?'

**Hood Drill: 'Yeah bro definitely, when I try and go to sleep is when my head starts running. So I normally get up have a smoke and drink and then write.**

**Some of the things I don't have any other way to process.'**

Hood Drill then had a very open conversation about his mental health issues and the role music plays in mediating them. I did not feel comfortable asking to record him and thought it would ruin the moment, but this was one of the study's most eye-opening conversations. Hood Drill very candidly discussed the fact he has night terrors. For him going

to sleep was a hellish experience as his mind would indulge in past horrors. Thoughts of experiences growing up in the *streets*, seeing friends killed, problems at home, and the constant threat of violence would all culminate in the early hours of the morning. His vulnerability as he discussed his fears was startling. He told how he was suffering from a form of PTSD, which he said had never been treated for apart from his self-medication of cannabis and alcohol. He suggested this was a common problem in the *streets*, with many of the seemingly toughest guys waking up in the night screaming and crying while their beds were drenched with sweat. For Hood Drill, music was his only outlet for these emotions. He would have a smoke and let his feelings pour out. He did this until he was exhausted and would have to fall asleep.

#### *4.2.4.3 - Stepping out of the comfort zone – Use of autotune*

Most of his tracks were typical drill bars; however, he started to try autotune during this session. He found the use of drill bars restrictive and did not allow him to express his full range of emotions. Yet autotune allowed him to sing, enabling him to capture the softer emotions. He mentioned that it was uncool to sing when he was younger, but now that he was older, he did not care what others thought. While he was initially nervous about others hearing him sing, the engineer put the autotune effect on as he was recording. This meant he heard his voice as though it was already edited, removing the fear of embarrassment. The autotune allowed him to capture more emotions and Hood Drill believed this would enable him to connect with more people. There was a contradiction between his words and his actions. It was apparent he was using music as a form of release. So even though he spoke about *blowing*, it felt like this was just a generic response as none of his actions supported this ambition. He had no clear plan for how to market himself and his music. He aimed to

just release songs with the hope that one may go viral. This situation highlighted one of the weaknesses of my study design which was not analysing the tracks made during the session. It would have provided rich data to examine how these emotions are expressed through his lyrics. At the time, I saw them as standard drill songs with aggressive street lyrics and potentially missed the nuance that may have been hidden.

I wish I could have had more sessions with Hood Drill. His candour was disarming. I am used to guys of Hood Drill's profile of being active in the *streets* as very closed and unreceptive when being questioned. Yet Hood Drill provided some of the bleakest and most shocking revelations as he opened up about his experiences in the *streets*. This session acted as a reminder of the importance this field of research could have. There are young people across all our major cities dealing with similar issues and a lack of resources to support them. In Hood Drill's case, this led him to use drugs, alcohol and music as a form of remedy. Yet music does not always have a positive impact as this section about Elektrik and his identity issues reveals.

#### 4.2.5 - The pressure of music (Elektrik)

One of the most insightful interviews was with Elektrik. In his early 30s Elektrik has been involved in music since he was 18. Growing up in North London in the early 2000s Elektrik was into grime music. He was part of a music collective that was also represented by Wretch 32 a successful number-one artist. Now grown up Elektrik has long dreadlocks and a welcoming fashion sense. He often has a big smile and a warm persona. He gives off the aura of someone who is cool. His fashion while urban is on the brighter happier side rather than the typical tracksuit of his counterparts. I had not arranged to meet him as part of my study and he did not have a session booked at the studio. It was the studio's function as a hub or



meeting spot that saw people just come and hang out at the studio. It was as he did this that I asked whether I could interview him. I did not gather many observations of Elektrik during the thesis however with the strength of his interview I felt it was important to provide the context. In the discussion, I explore the specifics of his interview.

I have known Elektrik for many years having worked with him in his music career. I saw first-hand how the impact of a social identity derived from urban music had significant detrimental effects on him. Elektrik is from a notorious estate in North London where he is surrounded by the negative stereotypes of the hood; the drug dealer, the scammer the gang member. When I first met Elektrik around the age of 19 he had a threatening aura. He did not interact the same way other artists did. He kept himself to himself and stayed close to the other guys from his estate. He had a reputation for carrying a knife on him. However, over the next few years, we became very close friends as I ‘managed’ the group that he was in. I put ‘managed’ in quotation marks because I may have had the title of a manager but I was not adept at the role. However, the group were explicit in stating they felt my whiteness helped their representation in the music industry. Unfortunately, my adeptness at the role was limited to the colour of my skin I did not enjoy the constant interaction needed to be a successful manager. It was over these years I began to understand the beauty and complexity of Elektrik. We would spend nights on end talking about the world, the Illuminati and what we want to achieve.

It was during this time that Elektrik began to explore the esoteric side of the world believing he had access to unfiltered human knowledge that would allow him to unlock all of his capabilities. While starting fairly harmless with books such as *The Secret* it began to take a darker turn when he began questioning the reality of the world around him. *The Secret* is

based on the pseudoscientific law of attraction. Which proposes that the universe will answer your requests if you have a true belief in a particular outcome. For Elektrik, these requests were to be an internationally famous music artist. At the time his music career was on the rise, his group were being brought in label meetings with Sony who unfortunately opted for JLS instead of them. Regardless things were on the up and it correlated with his new beliefs of the world. This new identity for himself also created a lot of internal pressure. Elektrik had a concept of what a prototypical music artist should be and measured himself by this standard. At the time he would not travel on public transport or get a normal job as he felt it was detrimental to his image as an artist. The pressure of this identity started to have a negative impact on Elektrik's well-being culminating in him *being sectioned* after concerns of his mum for his long-term health. Since then Elektrik has been *sectioned* four times with the most recent happening during this thesis.

This has not deterred Elektrik from pursuing a music career but instead, see him combine his passion for music with his need to tell his story in the hopes of helping others. This allows him the freedom to be honest about his story which many others from his area cannot be. He is open when discussing the negative impact his music identity had on his identity. I discuss his perspective in more detail during the discussion section. However, for this section, I wanted to describe the context in which this happened to Elektrik. The argument around music particularly drill is surrounding its negative social impact such as knife crime and drug dealing but very little is paid to the negative personal impact music can have. This is not to discourage the pursuit of music but just to add a warning that as with anything in life, there can be unseen negative impacts and one must judge whether the pros outweigh the cons. Certainly looking at Elektrik and his career now it is impossible not to see the net positive influence of music on Elektriks life.

#### 4.2.6 - The spiritual side (Hitman)

My parents are Christians and growing up in a traditionally white middle-class area I would often be teased about it. It was not until I started visiting Tottenham and saw all of these 'gangsters' talking about a relationship with God that I became truly comfortable with it. This may be in keeping with Tekman and Hortascu's (2002) revelation that music genres can be associated with particular traits. It may be as a young white middle-class teenager I found solace in the freedom the black community gave me to talk about spirituality. The topic of spirituality was only discussed in passing during the preliminary interviews which were very focused on the topic of music. The ethnography allowed more exploration of the surrounding topics. Hitman, in particular, seemed to view music and spirituality as inseparable. While it is common to see researchers explore the mental and physical effects of phenomena in the modern world the exploration of the spiritual is seen as esoteric. Yet for my cohort, it is a very real experience which adapts their behaviour and identity. Hitman states,

*Ex 31. – Music is god*

Ben: What does music mean for a young black male, what is it in his life?

**Hitman: Music is the god that speaks to you when all you see is darkness, that's what it meant for me.**

The idea of music being God is not a purely abstract one. God is a very real and lived experience for a number of the participants. For Hitman music is one of the ways that God is able to connect with his people. The ability of music to help heal our pains is not by chance but a tool given by God to aid humanity. Spirituality is as real as mental health for the cohort. Hitman further says,

*Ex 32. – Artists provide guidance*

I lost a lot of people, I've been through a lot of things, I've been through a lot of torture, mental, spiritual, physical, I've been through it at my young age. There's a balance, the light and darkness, no matter what you've been through in life as a human being, if god hasn't blessed you with the ability to balance that out then you'll never be able to balance that out. When these artists, shout out to them, I'll give them their flowers for fucking ever. If I wasn't able to listen to their music growing up I wouldn't even be on the path really that I am, I would've had no way. Eminem, the Game, 50 Cent, all these types of artists. Fucking hell, thank you.

Hitman places the importance of spiritual well-being alongside both physical and mental. As the son of a Christian doctor, I have always been taught that well-being is built on the symbiosis between these three dimensions yet rarely are all three explored in modern society. For Hitman his ability to make music was a gift from God that allows him to combat the negativity in his life. Listening to his lyrics it may feel ironic that his overtly violent content actually provides him with a sense of balance. The darkness of the lyrics actually provides him a catharsis.

*Ex 33. – Dark music for dark emotions*

Ben: When you were going through something dark, what type of music did you listen to?

**Hitman: I listened to a lot of dark music.**

Ben: You kind of indulged in the emotion?

**Hitman: 100%. This is the thing about music, music is a thing where you can have days, upon weeks of conversation, it's that amazing, because when god**

**made his angels and then he made demons or whatever, the most beautiful and desirable was the angels, the angel of music.**

For Hitman music is a gift given by God. Its importance to Hitman is highlighted by his belief that the most beautiful angel was the angel of music. Similar to the hypocrisy discussed by Ilan Hitman has no qualms about believing that music is a gift from God and talking about killing his enemies. For Hitman, his success in criminal exploits was due to his blessing from God. The more crime he got away with the more blessed he is by God. Hitman did explain this may be due to the unique understanding of religion in Jamaica. Similar to Haiti Jamaica has an amalgamation of catholicism and voodoo which can lead to confusing scenarios such as people doing demonic rituals but believing they will be protected from evil because of God. Referred to as JuJu

I was intrigued by the idea of music being a conversation. In line with social psychology, I believe that humans are defined by their interactions with others. Hitman does not see it as a one-way relationship but as a consistent conversation which highlights music's role in dictating our behaviours.

#### **4.2.7 - The end goal (King Promise Launch Party)**

This section offers a recount of a couple of high-profile events attended as part of the ethnography. Beginning with a reconnection with Vibe, a former participant and now an established label owner, it provided me with the opportunity to capture the more successful side of the industry. The narrative follows attendance at an Afrobeats artist's album launch party, capturing the event's opulence and the artist's engaging personality. The subsequent after-party experience contrasts the past and present dynamics of music events, highlighting the industry's evolution. Finally, this section recounts the launch party of Tinie Tempah's new

restaurant, providing insights into the growth and success of individuals within the urban music scene. This section emphasises the transformative impact of the music industry and the subsequent success can have on personal identities and social interactions.

#### *4.2.7.1 - Vibing with Vibe*

During the study, I reconnected with one of the participants I interviewed for my undergraduate degree. My dissertation looked at the self-esteem of non-creative professionals working in the music industry. I was intrigued by whether there was an addictive quality correlated to the perception of working in the music industry. At the time, Vibe was working for a small independent label. He had visions of becoming a manager but was at the beginning of his journey. Now almost 6 years later he is a record and distribution label owner and manages some of the world's most prominent Afrobeats artists. After explaining, that I was now studying a PhD looking at music and identity, he offered for me to follow them as he attended events with his artist. While not based in the studio, this opportunity was too fruitful to pass on. I was invited to two events, The album launch party for his artist and the launch party for Tinie Tempah's new restaurant.

#### *4.2.7.2 - Album Launch Party*

The first event I was invited to was the album launch party for his Afrobeats artist. The artist's fanbase is predominantly from Africa, with most of his performances taking place in West Africa. However, the UK market provides an artist with substantial financial and engagement impact, so is essential to cater for. The event itself took place in a high-end bar in West London. I went with Tug since he has a close relationship with the manager and artist. As we arrived, we were instantly greeted by the sounds of Afrobeats. On the ground floor, a DJ and an *emcee* were in front of a bar. The *emcee* had tribal face paint on and an

extravagant outfit made out of Ghanaian patterns. He was providing a high-energy performance in which he danced and rapped along to the songs in front of a captivated audience. We made our way upstairs to the main room. At the door, we gave our names and were escorted to the green room for the artists. In there, we met up with Vibes and the artist as he got ready to perform. Green rooms can vary wildly from glorified cupboards to luxurious lounges. This one was certainly the latter as we walked into a high-ceiling room with velvet sofas. The room was filled with photographers, stylists, friends and other artists. The artist did not seem nervous in the slightest as he chatted and connected with everyone. This was my first time meeting the artist. I had no preconceptions, but I found him to be charming and engaging. Considering it was only moments before he was due to perform, he welcomed me, enquired how I was and thanked me for attending his performance. The way he acted was in contrast to the perception that music artists are self-serving attention seekers. After only 10 minutes, he was ready to perform so we made our way into the crowd so we could see the performance.

#### *4.2.7.3 - The Performance*

An album launch party is different to a typical live performance. The crowd has been selected through invitees and often works in the music industry or is a person of note. The artist will usually engage more with the crowd and discuss their inspirations and motives behind the album. As with the green room, I was struck by the luxurious nature of the venue hall. There were long light pink velvet curtains around the walls. In the middle was an open space designated by a well-oiled wooden floor. Around the room's edges were groups of sofas and chairs which again were high quality with gold frameworks. It was hard not to feel the wealth of the situation. On the sofas were the VIP guests, who ranged from premier

league footballers to international music artists. Even the so-called 'general public' in the middle of the room looked like celebrities. Everyone was wearing colourful, expensive designer clothing, with many wearing large diamond chains and watches. If that was not enough to make me feel self-conscious, I was also the only white man in the room. While I have become accustomed to this, it does always make me more self-aware. Fortunately, the lights were dimmed as the performance started and people's eyes were drawn to the stage. A host introduced themselves and explained the format of the evening's show. The performances were interspersed between question and answer sections in the style of 'An Evening with...' TV show. The music was typical Afrobeats aimed at a more female audience. It is a far softer and more commercial genre than drill which meant this crowd was a more even split between male and female than would be normal at a drill event. The performance lasted around 90 minutes and was met with rapturous applause at the end. People milled around afterwards until I was informed there was an after-party on the venue's top floor and I needed to make my way to the lift.

#### *4.2.7.4 - The After-party*

Tug warned me to stay close to him as he could not guarantee us access to the after-party. As we reached the entrance to the lift, there was a large group forming outside. No one was allowed in yet and tensions were growing. People started to push and shove as they tried to get themselves to the front. As the doors opened Tug grabbed my arm and dragged me through. Without his persuasion, I would have felt too self-conscious to push through but thankfully with his persistence, we made it to the lifts. We entered the lift with a few people who started to discuss the live performers for the after-party.

*Ex 34. – Who, What, Where is Ampiano?*



**Party-goer 1: 'Yeah that show was lit.'**

**Party-goer 2: 'Its not over yet I heard Ampiano is up there.'**

Ben: 'A man with a piano? I like it but I was expecting a DJ.'

**Tug: ' You did not just say that. I'm sorry about him.'**

Ben: 'What you mean?'

**Tug: 'Ampiano is the genre'**

After that embarrassment and a seemingly never-ending trip to the top floor, we finally made it to the penultimate floor. On this floor, there was a bar which led out to a rooftop swimming pool and a spiral staircase in the lobby. The staircase led to the top floor which was also a bar where the after-party was taking place. There was no VIP area with everybody interacting with each other. Tug made his way to the corner of the room where most of the people he knew were. The DJ was playing a mixture of Afrobeats and Dancehall with only a small amount of US and UK urban music. I could not help but be struck by the difference of this event to the ones I used to go to in the 2010s. I was used to dark, dingy, sweaty nightclubs with everyone wearing tracksuits and packed in like sardines. Yet here there was, champagne flowing, stunning views and everyone having a good time. There was not even a hint of trouble or aggravation generally associated with urban events. However, there was a slight smell of weed as some of the guests popped out to smoke. Seeing how much the industry and culture had grown as I stood in a room full of young black millionaires was astounding. It is hard to recognise the underground tag that has long been associated with this collection of genres. The guests partied and networked hand in hand with relationships being made that only further the culture.

#### 4.2.7.5 - *Tinie Tempah Restaurant Launch Party*

A couple of days later Vibe invited me to another event, the launch party for Tinie Tempah's new restaurant, RAPS, which conveniently sells wraps. I met up with Tug in the afternoon and made our way to Central London. Once parked up we waited for Vibe and the Artist to arrive. They pulled up in two Mercedes and parked on one of the side roads. The event was being held in John Lewis on Oxford Street. Once the group was ready we made our way to the side door which had been roped off and protected by two bouncers. Vibe introduced himself and the group and we were escorted into a lift. As the doors opened, I could see we were on the rooftop. The view was stunning as you could see over Central London. The space was split into two, half being an astroturfed garden area and the other half being a covered bar area. As we walked in the group was asked to take photos in front of an advertisement board. I tried to stand by the side but Tug dragged me into the pictures, much to my embarrassment. The weather was amazing that day with the sun beaming down, we made our way to our seats. Much like the album launch party, I was reminded of how far the culture had progressed. I met Tinie Tempah when working as a music video director at the start of his career. It must be noted he was one of the nicest people I have met in music. To see him go from a struggling grime career to performing at the Olympic ceremony and starting his own restaurant was inspirational. The attendees were all young, attractive and well-dressed. There was not quite as much wealth on show as at the album launch party but still a stark contrast to the council estate identity of urban music.

#### 4.2.8 - Conclusion

Together, these observations illustrate the complex interplay between music, identity, and social status, revealing how artists, regardless of generation, use music as a

medium to both express and shape their identities. For younger artists, like Tik Tokker, the evolving digital landscape offers new opportunities for self-promotion, allowing them to craft and perform multiple personas to reach wider audiences, all while challenging traditional industry gatekeepers. On the other hand, older, more established artists often navigate the studio with a heightened awareness of their status within the industry, reflecting the importance of experience and reputation in maintaining professional relationships and creative control. These dynamics reveal how social and cultural capital are negotiated in the studio space, where music production becomes more than just a creative process—it becomes a stage on which identity, status, and power are performed, contested, and redefined. By observing these generational differences, I was able to see how music acts as a bridge between personal identity and public persona, while also serving as a form of resistance, collaboration, and self-determination in a rapidly shifting industry.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter synthesises the key findings of this research, structured around the three primary research questions to provide a comprehensive view of the role music plays in identity formation within youth-oriented Black culture. Through a detailed examination of participants' experiences, this chapter illuminates the ways in which music acts as a powerful medium for self-expression, social connection, and identity negotiation, particularly for young Black men navigating complex social landscapes.

The first section, "The Relationship between Music and Expressions of Identity", explores how music provides emotional support, acts as a framework for identity formation, and aids in navigating social worlds. Building on insights from Social Identity Theory and drawing from participant narratives, this section considers how music genres, especially drill and grime, serve as cultural tools that shape self-concept and group affiliation.

In the second section, "The Role of Music Artists in Group Identity Creation, Maintenance, and Development", the discussion shifts to the impact of music artists as 'Entrepreneurs of Identity' who model values and norms within their fan communities. By engaging with social identity processes, artists become influential figures who not only reflect but also shape group identity, reinforcing shared beliefs and behaviours that resonate deeply with their audiences.

The third and final section, "Mediums of Identity Expression: Personal Choice, Fashion, and Social Media", delves into the practical mechanisms through which identity is expressed and negotiated. Through an analysis of personal choices, fashion trends, and the

growing influence of social media, this section reveals how these mediums enable young people to navigate their self-presentation and group affiliation in both physical and digital spaces.

This chapter seeks to reveal the intricate relationship between music culture and identity formation, uncovering its broader societal impact and highlighting the cultural significance of music within Black British youth communities.

## Section 5.1 - The relationship between music and expressions of identity in youth-orientated black culture

In this section, I will explore the multifaceted role music plays in the lives of young Black men. A young person will experience high levels of uncertainty as they try to figure out their place in the world (Colombo, & Rebughini, 2019). Music artists/genres can ease that uncertainty by providing guidance on how to act and feel, social connections and a clear identity. It goes beyond entertainment, serving as a source of opportunity, guidance, and emotional outlet. Through the participants' voices, we see how music provides structure and meaning in their lives, reflecting not only their personal experiences but their social identities as well. Music, particularly in the context of drill and grime, is not merely a form of artistic expression but a critical tool for these young men to navigate their social worlds. As Participant Participant 3 noted, 'Music is everything; it's where I find myself.' This reflects the findings of DeNora (2000), who argues that music functions as a social and emotional resource, providing both structure and meaning to everyday life. These narratives align with

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), where shared musical preferences reinforce group membership and personal identity within communities shaped by marginalisation.

In this section, I will examine how music plays a crucial role in shaping identity, self-expression, and social belonging within youth-orientated Black culture. I will then look at how drill and grime, beyond being mere musical genres, act as lifelines of emotional support for these young men, helping them navigate personal struggles. This exploration will also address how music choices, fashion, and social media become tools through which identity is expressed, negotiated, and reinforced in their social circles. Finally, by drawing on the participants' personal experiences, I will demonstrate how these mediums, influenced by music, contribute to shaping their identity, well-being, and self-esteem.

### 5.1.1 - Music as a Medium for Expression and Emotional Support

To better understand the emotional depth that music offers to these young men, we can look at the way it creates a space for them to reflect, express, and even heal through its power. Next, I will focus on how individual participants, such as Hitman, use music as an emotional resource and form of therapy. This analysis highlights how the cathartic nature of music can shape emotional resilience and identity formation, especially when other forms of support are lacking. For Hitman, music provided him with someone to talk to,

*Ex 35. – Music is a conversation*

**Hitman: 100%. This is the thing about music, music is a thing where you can have days, upon weeks of conversation, it's that amazing, because when god made his angels and then he made demons or whatever, the most**

**beautiful and desirable was the angels, the angel of music. That's why music is so important.**

Listening to a song for Hitman was not a one-way experience. While the artists may produce the song with particular intentions it is the listener who gives it reason. He was not simply a recipient but an active participant in the meaning of the song. The symbiosis between the artists and the listener provides insight into the power dynamics of cultural leaders which are discussed in the next section. Yet on a more personal level this 'conversation' can be an invaluable resource for some of the young men. As Hood Drill Rapper explains, '*Music is my therapy when nothing else works*,' highlighting how urban music becomes an emotional outlet, offering a release in ways that formal services fail to. However, it does seem to create a vicious circle in which these young men experience violence and then listen to and create violent music as a cathartic response which in turn proliferates more violence. Hitman spoke about the cathartic nature of music and how he would indulge in the very negative emotions he wished to be alleviated.

*Ex 36. – The cathartic nature of music*

Ben: What does music mean for a young black male, what is it in his life?

**Hitman: Music is the god that speaks to you when all you see is darkness, that's what it meant for me.**

Ben: When you were going through something dark, what type of music did you listen to?

**Hitman: I listened to a lot of dark music.**

Ben: You kind of indulged in the emotion

The quote from Hitman highlights the deep emotional connection young Black men have with music, describing it as a form of guidance or solace during difficult times. Hitman refers to music as *"the god that speaks to you when all you see is darkness,"* suggesting that for him, music provided comfort and understanding in moments of emotional struggle. He acknowledges that during dark times, he would listen to equally dark music, suggesting that he indulged in the very emotions he sought to alleviate through his listening habits. In line with Social Identity Theory, music allowed individuals to position themselves within social groups, both reinforcing and challenging existing group norms.

The findings of this study also align with Reid's (2023) analysis of the psychosocial drivers of street life engagement among inner-city youth. Hitman and others described their involvement with drill and grime as not only an artistic outlet but also a response to external pressures, including socio-economic constraints and the need to assert resilience. This supports Reid's assertion that cultural engagement within urban youth contexts often serves as a coping mechanism in environments where institutional support is limited, highlighting the dual role of music as both a personal and social strategy for managing adversity.

It feels unproductive to try and restrict Hitman's interactions with dark music but to ask why he is going through dark times in the first place. When raised in this example the restriction on music seems naive as clearly there are issues that Hitman needs to resolve first to stop him from seeking that dark music. I believe this argument can be applied to the wider conversation of drill music and violence. This aligns with Hall's (1997) ideas on cultural identity and media consumption, whereby the musical experience acts as both a reflection of personal struggles and a means to negotiate identity within a complex social context. This



means it is far more delicate a situation than either the media's motion to ban or the artists' opportunities suggest.

In accordance with Social Identity Theory, music enables individuals to position themselves within social groups, either by reinforcing or challenging group norms. In Hitman's case, the authorities' attempts to limit his exposure to dark music, such as drill (Fatsis, 2019), seem ineffective. Instead of focusing on limiting access to the music itself, it would be more effective to examine the underlying reasons why he feels drawn to such music in the first place. Socio-economic challenges and difficult life circumstances are likely contributing factors to his need for emotional expression through dark music. Therefore, restricting the music without addressing the deeper issues he faces appears naive, as the music itself is not the cause but a reflection of the unresolved struggles in his life.

My study was designed to understand how the cohort conceptualised and related to music. One of the study's limitations was not focusing on the lyrics of the songs that the cohort listened to. This would have allowed more reflection on the personal experience of the participants. The study, however, focused on mediums by which identity is expressed to understand how these impact the identity derived from the participants' music choices. The three main mediums were Personal Choice, Fashion and Social Media. The next sections explore how these three mediums were informed by music and the effect it had on the participants' expression of their identity. Having explored the emotional significance of music, I now turn to its practical role in forming and expressing identity through personal choices and social interactions.

### 5.1.2 - Personal Choice as a Reflection of Identity

In the following section, I will explore how personal choices, ranging from music preferences to behaviour, are tied to identity formation. These personal choices are not made in isolation but are influenced by the internalization of group norms, as outlined in SCT. This shows the symbiotic relationship between individual agency and group influence in identity formation. By examining personal choice as a social expression, we gain deeper insights into the ways identity is both shaped and constrained by group dynamics.

This section will not discuss the specifics of these choices but their relationship to the concept of group prototypes. The connection is another example of symbiosis. It seems an individual has freedom of choice but within a social framework defined by the group prototype. One example that demonstrated this was people's music choices. In the preliminary interviews and the observations with the participants, only three declared to like genres that would not be classed as black music, although the majority claimed to enjoy all types of music. When further examined, they would name genres generally listened to by their parents, such as gospel or soul. Two of the three who liked genres like rock participated in the preliminary interviews. Their music choices expanded when they went to university and made new friendship groups. It seems this broadens their prototypical behaviour by adding a new group prototype to their catalogue.

*Ex 37 – Social influence of music*

**Beads:** Because like, music is one of those things like, you can't run away from it. And music is so influential in ways that I don't even know. Like, I feel like the clothes I wear, the people I meet, the friends I have, are all based on like, certain music that I listen to. And-

Ben: Okay. No, carry on, yes.

**Beads:** Yes. It was certain music that I listen to, and the best example I think to give with that is I don't go to house raves. And that's because I can't dance to house music-

Ben: Same.

**Beads:** And that's possibly because I don't have any friends that-, that-, are very fascinated with house music, or like house music, so all the time I go to a club, or whatever, that has house music, I automatically feel uncomfortable, because I can't dance, so that's-, even something that my rhythm, and like, it affects all that, and then it affects my ability to even enjoy myself at that motive, even though the sound itself is not that bad, but I won't associate that with positivity, so I won't like that, so I've realised that loads of my friends don't like house as well, so even my friends have been influenced by my music dislikes. So, my music likes are like, rap, hip-hop, like different like, neo-soul and various things. So, I have those sorts of friends, and having those sorts of friends, they tell me different sorts of things, and then that kind of influences my thought processes, so it's like I don't even know what extent to which that is, but if I had classical listening to friends, and that was my predominant thing, my whole vibe would be different-

For Beads, his music choices were defined by his social circle. However, he also defines his friend's music choices as a symbiotic relationship. It is this symbiosis that provides evidence that identity is not independent of the world around it but constantly in a flux of comparison. This comparison takes place within a tightly-knit social circle which may

limit the potential opportunities for the expansion of his identity. This example shows how identity may be formed and subsequently restricted by our social frameworks.

One of the things I became interested in during the study was the dominance of certain values. Based on my initial interaction with the Drill Rapper that inspired this thesis I wanted to know what was more important social reputation or financial reward. I crudely asked the twins if they would rather be an accountant who earns five hundred thousand pounds a year or a rapper who makes two hundred thousand pounds a year.

*Ex 38. – Accountants ain't hood*

Ben: So, what if you came back and said, 'I'm an, we'll go for I'm an accountant,' again? Were you successful?

**Blocka: Yes, you're successful. People look at you, like, 'Wow, that man's done his thing, but he's not gang, he's not, he doesn't do road, yet he still made it out of the *hood*. He's still successful. So, at the end of the day, I have to give him his dues.'**

Ben: If he was wearing the brands that you were saying before, your Givenchy's and stuff like that, came back to the *hood*, and he's in his Givenchy but he's an accountant, but he looks, dresses, but he's not acting gang, but he's dressing in the clothes that you're-, or he comes back and he's dressed in white chinos, and he's got a shirt on, and he's-, Would either of them have any influence or, because the fact that you know he's an accountant?

**Blocka: The fact that you know he's an accountant. You'd be thinking, 'You're doing your thing. Just keep your thing on the low and don't make people know that you have so much money.' Otherwise, you will end up**

**getting robbed. If you come back here and you've got a chain on, you've got this on, you've got that on, you've got no one to protect you, so something is definitely going to happen to you.**

One thing I had not considered is that social reputation is not simply a social facilitator but a necessity for preservation. This may add pressure when trying to create social change as the rejection of the traditional traits needed for survival may elicit fears of life and death rather than just social isolation.

The concept of traits is something I wanted to explore with the gatekeeper Tug. Inspired by Tekman and Hortaçsu's study of identity and music preference (2002) which showed that particular traits were associated with specific music genres, I wanted to understand how an insider views the traits of hip-hop music from both an internal and external review.

#### *5.1.2.1 - The norms and values of hip-hop*

Music has the capability to create, disseminate and reinforce norms and values of multiple prototypical identities. I wanted to understand how the participants conceptualised music and identity. In the following extract with Tug I discussed how he would describe the traits of hip-hop;

*Ex 39. – Hip-hop is we riot*

Ben: What traits is it that you identify with?

**Tug: Like when it comes to music?**

Ben: Yes, in like a trait way, what is hip-hop?

**Tug: In a trait way, hip-hop is unique, hip-hop is black, I feel like I don't expect anybody that's into hip-hop to be racist.**

Ben: Yes that would be mad.

**Tug: That's the thing, if I go in to like an all-white-, and everyone's skinhead and they're playing hip-hop in there, I'll feel safe in there because I know they're playing hip-hop, they might look like racists, they're not going to be racists. Do you get what I'm trying to say? Hip-hop is-, it's the *streets*, it's real. It can be violent, go with the flow and you have to know your place, know how to deal with people. If you deal with somebody in the wrong way you can get swift judgment, it's not going to wait for the police to come. Hip-hop is fuck the police, hip-hop is we riot when police brutality. It's a lot of things.**

Tug mentions race as a significant factor in describing hip-hop. However, rather than seeing it as divisive, he then gives the example of how if he saw skinheads listening to hip-hop, he knew they would not be racist. So, while identifying it as black music, he still recognised its global appeal. Interestingly, he states that 'hip-hop is the *streets*', implying that hip-hop can be violent. He then alludes to its practical teachings of the *streets* that individuals have to know their place and how to interact with people. This description is most in line with the stereotypical opinion of hip-hop that is born out of the gangster rap craze of the 90/00s. The quote captures the symbiosis between music, street life and identity and was one of the few occasions where a participant demonstrated the hypothesised conflict between young black men and mainstream institutions. It appeared that race significantly affected the participants' identity and behaviour. However, for hip-hop

to have the wide appeal that it does, it must transmit norms and values that are acceptable to members of different races. Tug went on further to describe a nuanced view of hip-hop and its positive applications;

*Ex 40. – Hip-hop is family*

**Tug: Knowledge, healthy eating, veganism, a lot of that, cooking, family. hip-hop is growing as well, hip-hop is becoming a lot more family like, Hip-hop is becoming rich, success, business. If I know somebody that listened to hip-hop and depending what kind of hip-hop they listen to, you can tell what they're on. There are subgenres of hip-hop now, like when you're talking to Dredd, you say like drugs music, or like weed music, they pop pills and they take balloons and that. Then you've got another side of hip-hop which is like knowledge as well, just like knowledge, eating right, going against the system, coming together, Black people being united, you know what I'm saying.**

In his first description, Tug seemed to describe the intergroup or stereotypical view of hip-hop. The description of the drugs, violence and anarchism within hip-hop has been adopted by mainstream media when discussing young black men. However, the second description provides a much more positive outlook on the group's traits by describing them as healthy, knowledgeable and family-orientated. This description is more in keeping with an intragroup or prototypical narrative. This demonstrates the capability of the prototype to have contradicting traits such as family orientated and anarchism without causing internal conflict for the individual. Tug also highlights hip-hop's community values such as bringing

people together. Future research could explore how an individual's perception of the group's prototype impacts their personal identity.

Often hip-hop culture is used as a synonym for black culture, particularly in America. This can have adverse repercussions as the negative stereotypes of hip-hop are associated with the wider black community. Tug clarified that this was not the culture of his parent's generation but a new amalgamation of cultures in keeping with Visser's (2020) research based in Tottenham showing the creation of new identities in second-generation immigrants.

*Ex 41. – Black culture is not just hip-hop*

Ben: Would you say that that's your mum's culture? Is hip-hop your mum's culture?

**Tug: No my mum doesn't listen to hip-hop, she's been introduced to hip-hop through me. In terms of her, she was not from a hip-hop background.**

In this section, I will expand on the notion that identity is not a fixed construct but a dynamic, multifaceted network influenced by different social prototypes. By examining the participants' experiences, we will see how their identities are shaped by shifting group affiliations, social pressures, and personal choices. The young people in Tottenham simultaneously represent this 'new' identity while maintaining a prototypical understanding of more 'traditional' identities. In stark contrast to the experience of many African Americans all of the participants of this study had close connections with their cultural origins. How these young people navigate these multifaceted networks may reveal significant data on the lived experience of salience.



Understandably, with each group that an individual becomes a member of, they must adopt a new framework for prototypical behaviour. While SCT explores the salience of group identity, group prototypes allow us to examine the social wants and expectations of the group. This may help to analyse times in which the group prototypes of different groups cause a conflict in the individual (Ilan, 2012). For example, Tug's reference to hip-hop being both violent and bringing people together. Social identity theory discusses groups in terms of in and out, yet this does not capture the relationship of subcultures within a predominant culture. This study recognises a conflict between young black males and wider society, but the evidence in the data was limited. It did, however, reveal a cognitive relationship between wider society's group prototype and their own group prototype.

Further research is necessary to explore this cognitive relationship and how it may manifest. It would be interesting to understand whether there is a comparison to the dominant group prototype that may be positive or negative or a blending of the prototypes to form a new individual prototype. It is easier to understand how self-esteem works with one clear identity than with multiple identities that have conflicting markers by which to attain positive self-esteem. The concept of personal choice is deeply intertwined with social frameworks and group prototypes, as evidenced by the participants' music preferences and social behaviours. Rather than being purely individual, these choices are often shaped by the groups they belong to, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between personal identity and social influence. Beads' reflection on how his music tastes are influenced by his friends—and vice versa—illustrates this symbiotic connection, where identity is constantly negotiated and reinforced within a social context. This dynamic also extends to broader life choices, where individuals' behaviours and preferences are framed by the norms and values of their social circles. The data suggests that, while individuals may adopt a variety of group

prototypes, each group framework provides an underlying structure that subtly directs personal choices, showing that identity is rarely independent of its social environment. Understanding this relationship between personal choice and group identity offers insight into how young people navigate multiple social identities, balancing individual desires with collective expectations.

### 5.1.3 - The Power of Fashion in Defining Group Identity

Fashion plays a significant role in the expression of group identity, particularly in youth culture. In this section, I will discuss how the participants use fashion as a visual indicator of their group membership and social status, with particular attention to the cultural significance of specific fashion items, such as the tracksuit, in urban youth culture.

Famously, Vivienne Westwood rose to fame designing for the punk era, and urban music is certainly no different. While music provided an emotional and psychological outlet for identity expression, fashion served as a more overt and immediate marker of group belonging. In this cohort, fashion choices, particularly the tracksuit, acted as a uniform that both reflected and reinforced social status within the group. Most of the participants recognised fashion's role as a visual identifier of the group. For Notts, music was fundamental in defining the fashion choices of the group;

*Ex 42. – Music inspires fashion*

**Notts: That's very true, also music inspires fashion greatly, depending on what you listen to, do you get me? So like, I grew up from grime, so that was the tracksuit era for me, loads of people that listen to grime wore**

**tracksuits, maybe people that listen to rock will wear like the jeans with the little metal thing to the pocket.**

Notts recognises a distinct difference between the visual representation of the ingroup members of rock and grime. He notices that a rock fan will wear jeans with metal chains hanging from the pocket. Like most of the participants, he identified the tracksuit as the uniform of drill and urban youth in general. In the early 2000s, there was a strong influence from American hip-hop culture with people wearing large Avirex jackets and baggy jeans. However, over the last 15 years, a distinct UK aesthetic has emerged. Tug identifies this as originating in London. In this following quote, he describes the differences between the UK and USA,

*Ex 43 – The tracksuit*

**Tug: You can definitely tell there's a style of London.**

Ben: The whole of London?

**Tug: Well from what I can see anyway, there's a style. That's why if I see Italian artists doing rap music and I see them dressed, I can see that they're dressed like Londoners. Like that might just be the brands, or the fit, like Americans used to dress very baggy and that was their style, English Londoners have always been like slim fits, straight fits, it's gone a bit more tighter now that fashion has evolved. Tracksuits.**

Ben: That's quite a big one.

**Tug: Tracksuits are a big thing and it changes, you've got a different kind of tracksuit, so you've got the Nike basic tracksuit and then you've got the**

**Lacoste tracksuit, then you've got Stone Island tracksuits. So, depending on where you are, you see different vibes, you go to Amsterdam you see a lot of high-fashion tracksuits, like Gucci, Louis, you might not see Stoney as much, but you see a lot of fashion, a lot of the tighter fit jeans with the designer jackets.**

Tracksuits may be the uniform, but even within this category, there is a level of differentiation and hierarchy through brands. These are the sort of intragroup nuances that an outgroup member would not recognise. Tug confirms that the difference between the UK and the USA is the fit of the clothes. However, he also notes that he is able to identify an Italian rap artist through their similarity in fashion. Drill music's expansion across the world can be seen in the adoption of fashion signifiers such as the tracksuit or balaclava. Ingroup members would be able to determine nationality based on subgroup specifics such as brands or particular fits. The participants' consistent reference to tracksuits as part of their identity can be understood through Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, where their fashion choices align with their symbolic positioning within the urban music culture. Drill music not only dictates their music taste but also establishes the socio-economic boundaries they operate within. By adopting the uniform of drill culture, participants are actively constructing their social identity, reinforcing their in-group status while also protecting themselves from being excluded or marginalised by the broader society.

When attending the Afro artist, King Promise album launch (Section 4.2.7), fashion was used as a signifier of success. The attendees were dressed in high-end expensive clothes and jewellery. In contrast to the tracksuits and dark attire of drill music, there were many bright, outrageous clothes in keeping with the colourful perceptions of African culture.

While many of the participants in the studio wore designer clothes, they were more reserved in their appearance. The attendees of the album launch party looked in keeping with London Fashion Week, whereas the studio participants looked more in keeping with a gangster. People's fashion choices seemed to be linked to their collection of prototypes. While all the study's participants could be identified as part of the same cohort, salience based on intragroup categorisation can identify internal subgroups. Fashion lends a visual stimulus to the categorisation process, which is signified by young people's musical choices.

#### 5.1.4 - The Impact of Social Media on Identity and Self-Esteem

While music provides a foundational sense of belonging and a tool for expressing identity, the rise of social media has introduced a new dimension to this process. The rise of social media introduces a new, quantifiable dimension to identity negotiation. Here, 'likes' and 'followers' become tangible metrics by which identity is measured and validated, influencing both self-perception and behaviour. This feedback loop can often push individuals to present an identity that prioritizes online engagement over personal authenticity, complicating the traditional notion of identity formation. This section explores how social media both complements and complicates the expression of identity in young Black men.

While Tiktoker demonstrated the practical applicability of social media in gaining a following, several members spoke about the negative impacts of social media. There was a general disdain for social media and its adverse impacts on society. In particular, they spoke about the amplified social pressure that increased exposure creates and its impact on self-esteem. For some, this is a pressure to keep up with the latest trends but it can have severe consequences for many when combined with street life. In the conversation with Elektrik,

when discussing authenticity, he explained that social media is exposing people to a broad audience. In the past, being robbed would be shameful because it contravenes the group's values. However, if the individual were to move to another area, it is unlikely the new social group would have heard about their past transgression. The term transgression may be seen as inappropriate as they are the victims of the robbery, but the transgression is against the cohort's value that they should not get robbed. Now social media creates a recorded history, so unless retribution is sought, the individual will forever be branded as weak; a trait seen as unfavourable within the cohort's norms and values.

Social media introduces new challenges to the ways individuals negotiate their identity, particularly through phenomena like cancel culture. In this section, I will explore how social media platforms create new spaces for identity expression but also increase the pressure on individuals to conform to group norms. These digital dynamics reshape traditional concepts of identity in significant ways. It is a concept heavily linked to the processes of the SIA, particularly the Black Sheep effect (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002). Elektrik explained how he perceived differences between '*hood* cancel culture' and 'mainstream cancel culture'. For Elektrik, mainstream cancel culture is when an individual does something contradictory to the group's norms and values. *Hood* cancel culture is when an individual does something contradictory to their perceived individual norms and values. He references a comedian who made inflammatory statements about American singer Lizzo's weight. While this would have seen him cancelled by mainstream society, because the comments were in keeping with his projected persona, this increased his social capital in the community. If these comments were found not to be consistent with his previously projected image he would then be cancelled by the *hood*. This further reinforces the predominance of authenticity as a norm and value of the cohort. Elektrik then goes on to

explain how the revealing nature of social media is creating more social pressure on people to live their authentic selves,

*Ex 44. – People have to be real because social media exposes them*

Ben: On a rough average, what percentage are people faking and people real?

**Elektrik: I think in 2022, the percentage of realness is way higher. Way higher. I don't know what happened in the universe but things just got really real. And social media, I think the whole social media age is exposing you anyway. It's really hard to hide in this era. Do you know what I mean? The amount of people that's been caught outside somewhere, do you know what I mean? 'I just saw Will Smith here'. You'll get caught in this era. It's an era that is actually forcing people to live in their truth, if that makes sense. It's not like back in the day where like I can rap about being the baddest man on the road, get beaten up and then people hear the rumours that I got beaten up and I got my chain snatched but you won't actually see it. I'd come on an interview and say it's not true. Now there's probably footage to go with that robbery, do you know what I mean? Shortly after the robbery, the footage should come out. So this era is forcing you to live in your truth which I'm not mad about.**

For Elektrik, social media has the capability to 'expose' an individual. This exposure is in relation to perceptions of authenticity in line with the group's norms and values. Several participants discussed the snowball effect that can happen to social media content. There seems to be a turning point when the content gains so much traction it influences the society's values. Almost all of the participants discussed how powerful social media is for

positively or negatively affecting their self-esteem. This sentiment was echoed by several participants, particularly the older ones who had a point of contrast before social media became widespread. For many a video of someone getting robbed or beaten up would garner sympathy and support. However, in this cohort, the exposure is of the individual's weakness. One of the issues of social media's role in forming prototypical behaviour is the display of the interaction metrics on social media, which provides a concrete reference point to determine a post's popularity and influence. However, scrutiny of that post will highlight the factors that are important to the cohort. This process was carried out by some participants, such as Tiktokker who used the metrics to determine what was popular. As social media continues to dominate the cultural landscape, its role in shaping and quantifying identity requires closer examination. The intersection of music, personal expression, and online validation creates new complexities in how young Black men, in particular, negotiate their identities in an increasingly performative digital space.

#### 5.1.5 - The Black Community's Relationship with Music

Musical talent serves as a source of identity management within the Black community, providing a positive dimension of comparison to contrast against the dominant outgroup's markers of success, such as financial achievement. Through Hitman's perspective, music is framed as a spiritual and cultural asset unique to the Black community, offering a profound sense of group pride and esteem. He argues that, despite historical oppression and colonisation, the Black community continues to excel in music, creating a collective identity that transcends the negative perceptions often imposed by the wider society. This conversation highlights the deep-rooted connection between music, race, and identity within the African diaspora.



As an identity management strategy, recognition of musical talent can provide a positive point of comparison. For Hitman, the black community has a special relationship with music and acts as a new comparison dimension, on which to base group esteem.

*Ex 45 – God has blessed the black community with music*

**Hitman: Ask black brothers, god has blessed the black people with something spiritual especially when it comes to music, bro. Not even on a racist vibe if you put a white choir and a black choir and you make them sing the same song, trust me blood that black choir is going to kick the soul out your bum. But unfortunately, we have as a people been brainwashed to a point where we hate each other so much, that's there's so much blood shed on our hands that the grace and the light that we were blessed with before can't even shine anymore. Do you understand me?**

Hitman claims that the black community's relationship with music is spiritual. He specifically contrasts their ability in this regard to that of the white community. Based on these parameters Hitman was able to achieve positive appraisals of the group's traits in contrast to what he sees as the negative appraisal by the dominant outgroup. He expresses this passionately in the following quote on black music. He speaks from the perspective of a group member by using 'we' language.

*Ex 46 – Music as resistance*

**Hitman: We were weakened by the people that tried to colonise us, and we let ourselves be weakened by that, do you understand? Unfortunately, we didn't really have the heart then because we were beaten and enslaved for**

**so long. We didn't have the heart at that point to say, 'Are you fucking stupid? Don't let me rise this suttin.' Do you understand me? Now, look at the posters we have behind us, music is the most influential art of this world. Name one nation greater than black people in music. Right now in 2022.**

**Hitman: You fucking can't.**

Ben: The only ones I would say are genuinely close-,

**Hitman: Is Reggaeton and everything else, yes.**

**Hitman: Even them they-, most of are countries from black slave trades. Do you know what I'm saying? Way back then, slave trades and all that, do you know what I'm saying? We are the people who have to say, 'Listen, alright, we have to catch a balance now.' In order for us to love each other and rise and do what we need to do, we need to love ourselves. We fucking hate ourselves, bro, hate ourselves.**

Race was not discussed as much as may be expected unless directly questioned.

However, in this quote, Hitman shares how the community views their relationship to music. Ability in music acts as a *new comparison dimension* in contrast to the predominant marker of success in mainstream society, finances. He suggests that the Black community produces the best music in the world. Even second-best, reggaeton—rooted in Latino communities—has been influenced by the rhythms and traditions brought by enslaved Black people. This perspective aligns with the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM), proposed by Gaertner et al. (1989, 2000), which posits that intergroup bias can be reduced by re-categorising distinct

groups into a more inclusive superordinate category. By recognising the shared Afro-diasporic heritage in both Black and Latino musical traditions, the boundaries between these groups become blurred, creating a sense of unity under a broader cultural identity.

This superordinate recategorisation allows for the pooling of musical influence from these historically marginalised groups, fostering a narrative of collaboration and interconnectedness rather than division. In this way, the evolution of genres like reggaeton exemplifies CIIM's premise that emphasising commonalities can transform perceptions and promote mutual appreciation across different cultural groups. The origins of reggaeton, rooted in 1980s Panama, illustrate this blending of musical traditions, where the children of West Indian canal workers fused Jamaican dancehall with other Afro-Caribbean genres to create a new sound (Herrera, 2021). Wayne Marshall (2007) highlights how reggaeton draws heavily on Jamaican dancehall's rhythms and vocal styles, reinterpreted within a Spanish-speaking context. This fusion reflects reggaeton's role as a hybrid genre born of cultural exchange, embodying the shared histories and interconnectedness of Afro-diasporic communities.

This quote also highlights how vital the community's historical context can impact current group values. This is why it was important in the literature review to capture the historical context of group identity as it plays a formative role in personal and group identity. Hitman uses very strong 'we' language as he includes all African diaspora as an ingroup identity. He links the group identity to low self-esteem as he suggests '*we hate ourselves*'. He also perceives music as a tool to improve the group identity by providing a positive group identity.

Hitman's reflections reveal how he believes that musical ability acts as a powerful identity management strategy for the Black community, offering an alternative comparison to mainstream measures of success. It also underscores the role of music as a tool for enhancing group self-esteem within the Black community, which aligns with Social Identity Theory's emphasis on positive group membership as a source of self-esteem. By asserting that Black people produce the best music in the world, he redefines group esteem through the lens of cultural and artistic excellence. His use of collective language—emphasising a shared history of struggle and resilience—demonstrates how music serves not only as a source of pride but also as a potential tool for healing and strengthening group identity. However, Hitman's sentiments also point to a deeper tension within the community, as he suggests that internalised self-hate continues to undermine this positive identity. In connecting historical context to modern group dynamics, this section illustrates the importance of reclaiming cultural strengths like music to counteract the effects of colonisation and racism. Music, for Hitman, is both a reflection of past trauma and a means to improve the collective self-esteem of the Black community.

#### 5.1.6 - Conclusion: Music as a Core Component of Identity Negotiation

Ex 47. – Music is food

**'Growing up was like, music in my house. We've always been playing music, my dad loved music, my mum, my sister, my cousin makes music. Music is just your food.'**

**(Participant 6)**

I believe this quote from the preliminary interviews answers the question of what the relationship between music and youth-orientated black culture observed during this study. The participants suggested that music was a part of life. All of the participants who

were asked spoke about the influence of music on them from a young age. Any celebration or family gathering is focused on food and music. These were not individual perspectives in which the participants felt they had a unique relationship with music but a shared experience of the community. In this next quote Hi-Life shares what makes music such a powerful influence.

*Ex 48. – Music influences emotions*

**Hi-Life: 100%, like any music that doesn't make you feel something, that's not music. That's garbage, that's what it is. Like even music that makes you angry and you're like, 'What is this?' It's triggering your feelings, it's triggering your emotions. That's what music is, it's an art, it's an expression.**

For Hi-Life music is the expression of emotions. This perspective can change how we view the youth crime/music debate from one disdain to one of understanding. If music is the expression of emotions then why are the youth creating so much music with violence and pain? Answering this question may provide more solutions than banning music which does not resolve cataclyst which is causing the pain and violence in the first place. However, the answer to the question of what is the relationship between music and the expression of identity in youth-orientated black culture is multi-faceted. Participant 2 suggested that the reason he got into music was not as honourable as expressing his emotions but that it helped him get girls which in turn made him popular.

*Ex 49. – A badge of honour*

**Ben: So, that's what made you popular?**

**Participant 2: 'And music as well. Because girls used to say I'm handsome and whatnot, but music as well. Because I was like very good at grime, at that time if you were good at music, you were the popular kid. Yes, so, it was one of them ones.'**

Ben: Yes. So, music was quite like a statement, like a badge or whatever?

**Participant 2: 'Yes, a badge of honour them times, yes.'**

For Participant 2 music was a form of social capital that made him popular among his peers. From my own experiences in the early days of grime, this was all music could offer. There were no record deals, merchandise opportunities or sponsorships just the respect of other members of the subculture. While these quotes give an understanding of how the participants related to music they did not capture how music relates to the expression of identity in youth-orientated black culture. Over the course of the study, it was apparent that in keeping with the literature both the personal and social identity of the participants was in constant flux. However, the means by which they expressed their identity was relatively stable. I therefore made a conscious decision to focus on the mechanism by which the cohort expressed their identity and its relationship to the music.

The analysis revealed three main mediums by which the cohort expressed their identity: Personal Choice, Fashion and Social Media. While this study focused on a particular cohort I believe these findings may be applicable to a wider population. This thesis shows that by observing these three mediums one is able to study a young person from an urban area's expression of identity. Without delving into a philosophical debate it must be noted that these mediums only capture the expression of identity and not the individual's self-perception. There could be a wealth of data by comparing these two concepts and the

potential effects of dissonance, a topic that is discussed in more detail in the next section. By observing their expressions of identity I was able to understand some of the rules, norms and behaviours shared by the cohort. The choices that an individual makes determine how others will view them. Even the rejection of the group's rules and norms like Participant 8 helps to define his identity. Personal choices help inform an individual's social framework while in turn the social framework dictates the individual's personal choices. This is an example of symbiosis which was a recurrent observation during the study. The frequency of symbiosis calls into question traditional understandings of identity. It seems that symbiosis conflicts with the concept of fixed identities as it presents an amalgamation of different functional identities. However, symbiosis also advances the understanding of fluid identities as the individual is not switching between different profiles but embodying them all at once.

Fashion is clearly a visual identifier in society, however, with this cohort it had particular importance. Participant 1 discussed one of their goals being able to buy expensive designer clothes. This would signal to others that they are successful. Yet fashion choices were not based purely on reputation but some had practical applications such as the balaclava or tracksuit. Even though the participants recognised the negative reputation associated with the tracksuit, nevertheless, they still regularly wore them due to a lack of different options. The tracksuit is recognised by both the ingroup and outgroup as being the uniform of the urban youth. The fashion choices then provide visual authentication for ingroup membership. While the outgroup sees the wearers of tracksuits as a homogenous group the recognition of nuanced differences in fashion denotes ingroup understanding.

Although Fashion and Personal Choice have long been ways of visually expressing identity, the advent of social media has expanded this process into a more public and

quantifiable form of self-expression. Social media platforms now offer a space where identity is not only performed but also scrutinised, and participants are constantly aware of how they are perceived by their digital audiences. Personal Choice has been with humans since we could make conscious decisions. These decisions have built social frameworks which in turn have laid the foundations for culture. However, social media has only existed even its earliest forms since 1997, a mere speck in the timeline of human history, yet it defines our interactions in modern society. Never before have we had the ability to quantify our interactions with others (Van Dijck, 2014). Popularity is now a visible metric with which we can compare to others (Bolin & Velkova, 2020). As Bolin (2020) discusses social interactions have always been dictated by a value-based judgement system. However, now these values are quantifiable and visible it has increased the pressure on the processes of identity formation such as acceptance, self-presentation and autonomy. There is a substantial amount of research on social media particularly considering its relative recency (Aichner et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Miller et al., 2016). The particular area of concern that this thesis revealed is the idea of data-driven identities. When going through Tik Tokkers social media profile it was clear to see the growing use of the *red pill* content something that Tik Tokker (Section 4.2.2) admitted he just did because of the engagement it created. As the mainstream media demonstrates it is sometimes the most negative aspects of human life that garner the most interactions. This means that some young people are creating an identity that creates engagement not the most beneficial for their own self-esteem.

These findings reinforce the research question, showing that music functions as a core component of identity negotiation. It is not merely a passive act of listening but a dynamic process of self-expression and social alignment, which is particularly salient in Black youth culture. Through the lenses of Personal Choice, Fashion, and Social Media, music



shapes and reflects the identities of young people in ways that allow them to navigate their social environments both individually and collectively.

While Personal Choice and Fashion have long been integral to identity expression, Social Media adds a relatively new and complex dimension. The quantifiable nature of social media through likes, shares, and engagement metrics, introduces a data-driven form of identity validation. This could significantly influence self-esteem, encouraging the creation of identities that may prioritize online engagement over authenticity.

As music continues to play a crucial role in identity formation, the impact of social media must be considered carefully. The rise of these platforms has added a layer of performativity to identity expression, making the negotiation of self in Black youth culture more visible, and at times, more precarious. Moving forward, it is vital to explore how these quantifiable metrics are shaping not just the expression but the very construction of identity within these communities.

## 5.2 - What is the role of a music artist in the creation, maintenance and development of a groups' identity?

Whether it is the Swifties and Beliebers or Little Monsters and the Beyhive, top artists formalise their support into fan groups with names derived from the artist's moniker. The music artist now represents the leader of an army of followers. Understanding how this 'leader' relates to their supporters may provide insight into the distribution of rules and norms within a cohort. Several prominent SIT scholars have labelled the research around a leader's ability to influence the social identity of their followers as 'Entrepreneurs of Identity' (EoI) (Fladerer, Steffens & Haslam, 2022; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Brown, 2020). Brown (2020) attributes the conception of the term to French academic Besson (1990) in his book, 'Identites et conflits au Proche-Orient'. However, it is within the last 15 years there has been a development of the ideas into a new and exciting branch of SIT.

In this next section, I explore Electrik's account of rapper Kendrick Lamar and the impact he had on developing a more fitting identity to represent Electrik. I then explore the theoretical underpinning of Entrepreneur of Identity and its basis in the famous BBC Prison Study (Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). I provide empirical evidence of the Entrepreneurship of Identity which offers insights into some of the tenets that can be applied to music artists. Finally, I examine the observational data to understand the process of entrepreneurs of identity from the perspective of the artists.

### 5.2.1 - The Influence of Music Artists on Personal Identity Formation

Music and music choices have a significant impact on the lives of young people. As proposed by SCT, there is a network of group identities that all influence the individual. Sindic and Condor (2014) identify three outcomes of self-categorisation on influence: first, our self-categories shape whom we connect with and influence, as we tend to agree with in-group members over out-groups. Second, in-group members are judged by how closely they fit the group prototype, with those best embodying group norms gaining the most influence. Finally, influence within the group depends on whether messages align with group stereotypes, values, and norms, making prototypical leaders influential only when their messages resonate with group beliefs. This implies that *leadership group prototypicality* which applies the theory of group prototypicality to the field of leadership could apply to these data. Both perspectives are reliant on social identity as a core process, which has allowed researchers in leadership categorisation (Lord & Hall, 2003) and group prototypicality (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) to agree on the reliability of leadership group prototypicality as a viable theory.

The literature review demonstrated that music's importance in young people's lives is substantial, yet group membership based on music choice is not as straightforward as racial identification. The study's observations show that a person's relationship with music can be unique. For example, there was evidence in this thesis that at a superficial level, an individual may idolise one artist or a collection of artists, support a particular genre, or consume music as part of everyday life. All of these scenarios will have differing levels of group identification and deindividuation, leading to differences in predicted behaviour. Elektrik provided a fascinating insight into his support of American rapper Kendrick Lamar

and how it influenced his life as a fan, an artist and a community member. While musically, Kendrick inspired Elektrik to be an artist, he also gave a voice to an underappreciated persona within the *hood*. Elektrik discusses how he felt on hearing Kendrick's debut album *Good Kid Madd City*, in which he describes what it is like to be a normal kid growing up in a *hood* and trying to deal with conflicting identities.

*Ex 50. – Kendrick Lamar represented as an identity prototype*

**Elektrik: 'So when Kendrick-, when Good Kid come out and Section 80 come out, and I saw him getting success, getting played on radio. He's a part of the festivals, I was like that's what I want to do. I want to do it like that. I want both. I want success with it.**

Ben: You saw him as inspiration for your own career.

**Elektrik: Yes.**

Ben: Is that the only way you see him or do you connect with his music on an emotional level as well?

**Elektrik: I connect with him as a person too, as a human being. I feel like there's so many like similarities. Like, I see myself a lot in him. Like, ...me coming from Tottenham and him coming from Compton. I related to that. I'm so happy you asked that question so you know when Good Kid, M.A.A.D City came out? He gave a voice to the side of the ends of everyone that was not on the road which we've never had that voice before so most-, and this was what was going on before the album. What was happening was that most youths that really wanted to talk about not the street shit, the other**

side, didn't feel comfortable talking about that because we didn't know how to or it wasn't cool yet. Do you know what I mean? Kendrick made that cool and I feel like I fell into that category of like the Good Kid. Do you know what I mean? Yes, but before I saw how he did it I was talking about *straps* and like-, do you know what I mean? And all that mad shit. Even though I had the license to talk about that because I'm from ends but I didn't have the oomph with it because it wasn't really my life and then he gave me the confidence to talk about *being sectioned* and shit. I probably would've never taken that leap of faith to talk about that if he didn't make Good Kid. I probably thought there's no way I'm coming out from Tottenham talking about going to a fucking mental home. No way. I'm just going to stay in this lane talking about clothes and whatever and just be safe. Yes, he gave me the inspiration to take that leap.'

This quote has a lot to unpack in terms of music's relationship with identity. Firstly it must be noted that up until hearing Kendrick, Elektrik was forced to embody an acceptable identity to his surroundings that did not represent him. Within Good Kid Madd City, Kendrick presented an identity that matched Elektrik's experience and provided positive self-esteem reinforcement. Before Kendrick, Elektrik had felt he had to adapt his behaviour in line with the prototypical criminal behaviour of his community. This would suggest he felt there was a 'true' identity which had a more suitable comparative fit with Kendrick than any previous prototypical inspiration. It must be recognised that different individuals may have alternative concepts of the group prototype despite apparently being members of the same group. It would appear that the modal characteristics of the individuals' prototypes coalesce to form the basis for the characteristics of their perceived group prototype.

Kendrick's role in Elektrik's identity development can be likened to the role of an Entrepreneur of Identity (Section 4.2.5) (Fladerer, Steffens & Haslam, 2022; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Brown, 2020). (\*\*\*)Elektrik also Eol) Before listening to Kendrick, Elektrik embodied the prototypical role of a 'gangster'. He states that he had the license to adopt that role because he was born in a notorious area. This provides some data towards the concept of authenticity and its use within the cohort. Elektrik is validated to talk about criminal enterprise based on his location rather than his own exploits. However, Kendrick provided a new identity which Elektrik found more congenial. Kendrick is from Compton, a famous *hood* in America that many credit with the birth of Gangster Rap through the group N.W.A. The similarities in the socio-economic standards of the area allow Elektrik to categorise himself with the experiences of Kendrick. In keeping with the literature, Kendrick actively created a new shared identity in which he defined the norms and values of the followers of that identity.

In line with the EoI framework, Kendrick Lamar's work exemplifies how music artists can redefine group identities by creating new norms that resonate with their audience's lived experiences. This shift in the group's prototype, as articulated by Elektrik, highlights the artist's ability to act as an identity leader, offering alternative scripts for individuals navigating conflicting identities within their communities.

#### *5.2.1.1 – Street Names and Alter-Egos in Identity Formation*

Elektrik also mentions how he attended a 'mental home' which was something we discussed in more detail. In this following quote, he describes the differences between his alter ego Elektrik and his authentic self.

*Ex 51 – Elektrik vs Jeremy*

Ben: Obviously you've had mental health things and have been *sectioned*, and that's a big part of your music and your campaign. Can you talk about what happened?

**Elekrik: Yes it was linked to identity because my identity came from music and this is the thing, the character that I created for myself, the Elekrik character, because there's Jeremy and there's Elekrik and obviously Elekrik became the popular one because I do music and shit, and then I got lost in that character and I never knew who I actually was as a person. So when music wasn't doing good, I felt like my identity, me as a person, was actually being destroyed. When it wasn't, it was just literally just the Elekrik brand but I felt that. So say like, I was getting dropped from my label, I felt like I couldn't go back and get a job. Do you know what I mean? Because I'm Elekrik. Now I'm older I look back and think, I could have got a job. Like, no one really gave a fuck. Do you know what I mean? I really could have just got a job and gone back to *the ends* but because I was so into that character and into the noise of what's going on in the ends, I got lost into that world. I got lost into that world but in hindsight, it wasn't as much as a big deal as I thought it was.**

For Elekrik, the dissonance between his perceived reality and actual reality caused him issues with his mental health. Elekrik's self-esteem became linked to the perceptions of his alter-ego. Most of the participants developed alter egos through the street names they used. They create names for themselves to be referred to in the *streets*. There are practical

reasons to adopt these names when involved in criminal activity for anonymity. However, Elektrik suggests there may also be psychological reasons when he claims that,

*Ex 52 - Creating alter-egos*

**‘They’re not comfortable with being themselves so they create this next alter-ego of who they really want to be’.**

The creation of Elektrik at first allowed him to cope with the social expectations of the cohort. As time went on, it was the prototypical expectations he put on himself that developed the dissonance. By the time of the interview, Elektrik had been *sectioned* four times. While he credits his recovery to the NHS and mental health services, he also notes Kendrick’s role in presenting an identity that he found to be more in keeping with what he perceived to be his ‘authentic’ self.

The use of street names to help create and define an alter ego surprised me. I had become accustomed to street names. I often chuckled at the juxtaposition between the cryptic, criminal nature of the street name and the poshness of their traditional British names such as Winston and Gerald. Yet I had never considered the psychological conceptualisation of the street name. I never asked the question of why are street names so prevalent in urban communities. Gangsters have used nicknames for decades however they often included their government name, which refers to an individual’s legal name as recorded on official documents, as well such as Al ‘*Scarface*’ Capone. The nickname was used similarly to that of a boxing prizefighter which promotes a trait they wish to demonstrate. However, street names nowadays often completely replace government names. There are people I have known for several years only by their street name. Before the study, I assumed the use of a street name was purely pragmatic to avoid any criminal



repercussions but the conversation with Elektrik made me consider the psychological reasons.

Street names are not just criminal. Most of the young people in the study identified themselves by their street name. It would not be considered etiquette to ask for their government name which is why they are referred to by pseudo-street names in this thesis. Elektrik revealed his own experience that the line between his alter-ego and his authentic self became blurred. In Elektrik's instance, this blurring had detrimental effects on his mental health. When he stated that young black men were not comfortable with themselves so created an alter-ego of who they wanted to be it resonated with Carl Roger's concept of the 'Ideal Self'. Yet it also made me consider whether identity management strategies would also be applicable. Although they are generally applied at a group level it seems reasonable to consider the identity management strategies at an individual level. Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke & Klink (1998) suggested that 'permeability', i.e., the ability to move between identities, was the determining factor of whether someone acted based on individual or collective identity. However, there seems to be evidence of intragroup identity management strategies that an individual employs when permeability cannot be considered. Initially, I saw street names as an intergroup response to create more separation between them and wider society. However, Elektrik's interview suggested that the name helps them to find an identity within the group. They can project their wants and desires of their ideal self through their created identity which helps them to positively manage their self-esteem.

#### *5.2.1.2 - Entrepreneurs of Identity and Their Role in Shaping Group Identity*

Identity entrepreneurship describes a process by which leaders develop the social identity of the group. These leaders or entrepreneurs of identity are ingroup members who

continuously create or promote a particular identity in order to lead the group. By understanding the current prototypical behaviour framework of the group, leaders can adapt these behaviours.

*‘By shaping category boundaries, leaders can define who acts together, who supports each other, and who we care about, while by shaping category content (i.e., the values, ideas, and goals) they can influence what the group is mobilised for.’*

(Fladerer, Steffens, & Haslam, 2022)

However, leaders do not have free reign, the group members must feel the adaptations are in line with their own perceptions of the group. Within urban music, there have been examples of this concept. Ilan’s (2014) observation of Grime artists muting street aesthetics for broader appeal parallels my findings within drill music, where artists walk a fine line between maintaining authenticity within their community and appealing to a broader market. This process of ‘identity entrepreneurship’ is not unique to Grime, as demonstrated by participant Red’s awareness of the need to balance street credibility with marketability. This suggests that both Grime and drill artists engage in a delicate negotiation of identity to retain their in-group status while capitalizing on the commercialisation of their music. Since Ilan’s (2014) paper the UK urban scene has seen a complete 180 turn with the emergence of drill, which is hyper-violent in its lyrics and imagery (Ilan, 2020). This may be due to grime becoming too mainstream and therefore not representing its core ingroup members. They have therefore lost their right to act as an entrepreneur of identity for the group and have been replaced by contemporary versions.

#### 5.2.1.2.1 - The Prison Study

The most notable study referenced when discussing identity entrepreneurship is the BBC Prison Study (Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). The study took 15 men and split them into two groups; Prisoners and Guards, and then placed them in an artificial prison environment. Due to the hierarchical structure of the study, power dynamics and subgroups, the prison study is pertinent to the study of leadership in general.

Research showed the importance of the leader's rhetoric in establishing a shared identity. Language is essential in defining us versus them and what 'us' stands for. Reicher and Haslam draw on examples of the prisoners and guards both engaging in group-defining language. In particular, they reference one prisoner, DM, who attempted to redefine the prison structure. The group believed DM was a prototypical group member concerned about the other group members. This belief that he is sympathetic to the well-being of all group members allows him the credentials to be the leader. He further uses the concept of collectivism to restructure the prison's power hierarchy, instead of being conformed to pre-agreed roles of power.

The use of we-referencing language is one tool that helps DM create new social pathways. This seems to be an example of *superordinate recategorization* identity management strategy (Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke & Klink, 1998; Jung, Hogg & Choi, 2019). Using the experimenters as a reference point, he highlighted a new social hierarchy with new power dynamics. The guards are no longer the most influential group. This strategy of creating *new comparison dimensions* is risky by DM as there is the potential that within this new hierarchy, the guards will feel threatened. By combining with a lower-status group, the

guards risk losing their position of relative power. Fortunately for DM the guards did not have a clear leader and were disorganised in their leadership hierarchy. Unfortunately for DM, he was pulled out of the experiment, and relations between the prisoners and guards deteriorated soon after. Without DM's presence, there was a lack of guidance and belief in a workable structure.

#### *5.2.1.2.2 - We-referencing language in music*

The same we-referencing language is rampant across many music genres. There are exceptions, such as EDM, which does not require the use of lyrics to create a successful song. However, within urban music, the lyrics and the creators of those lyrics are fundamental. For example, in Dave's song 'Black', the lyrics capture the variety of experiences the black community faces. I have chosen to use Dave's song as a reference point because I did not directly observe or analyse the lyrics of the songs used by the artists in my study. This allows me to explore and relate key concepts derived from my study to an example that aligns with the themes of my research.

Dave does not talk from his own perspective but creates a shared vision using the term 'you'.

*Look, black is beautiful, black is excellent*

*Black is pain, black is joy, black is evident*

*It's workin' twice as hard as the people you know you're better than*

*'Cause you need to do double what they do so you can level them*

*Dave (2019)*

In this extract, Dave defines his target audience as the Black community and highlights key traits associated with Black identity: beautiful, excellent, pain, joy, and evident. The inclusion of "evident" is particularly striking because, unlike the other traits, which are subjective, "evident" conveys both inherent visibility and undeniability. Being Black is not something that can be hidden; it is an intrinsic and observable characteristic. This word choice emphasises the salience of Black identity as something that is both unchangeable and outwardly recognisable, making it clear that his message is directed at anyone who identifies as Black.

. After outlining the target audience, Dave then switches his language to 'you'. This switch is fascinating because he captures personal and social identity simultaneously. While Dave is not explicitly using the term 'we', by presenting the group and then using 'you', he can talk to the individual about their group experience. Personally, I feel this is much more impactful than using 'we'. 'We' would traditionally be more inclusive by increasing depersonalisation. Dave instead focuses on the individual and shows them how the group actually shares their 'unique' experiences. With the lyrics discussing such broad concepts, it is easy for a listener to connect. The song acts as a further affirmation of their group identity. For Dave to be able to portray this, he must be seen as group prototypical. For example, the message would not work if I were to deliver it because I am not prototypical of the black community.

Alternatively, there are examples of when an artist acts in opposition to the group prototype. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the discussions among Red and Tug, two participants in this study, about the allegations of snitching against US rapper Jim Jones. The participants highlighted that if these allegations were true, it would render Jim Jones

incapable of maintaining respect and influence within the wider Black community. The no-snitching rule, as they explained, is a critical norm that shapes identity and respect within their cultural context. Tug's defence of Jim Jones, grounded in his personal identification with the rapper as a role model, further underscores the deep connections between music artists and their fans as identity prototypes.

The process of exclusion observed in this context aligns with Marques and Yzerbyt's (1988) Black Sheep Effect, which suggests that ingroup members are judged more harshly than outgroup members when they breach community norms. This heightened scrutiny is driven by the group's motivation to preserve a positive collective distinctiveness. In this case, the allegations against Jim Jones not only threatened his individual reputation but also the shared values and identity of the community he represents.

### 5.2.2 - Artists' Conscious Role in Shaping Identity

During the thesis, the question was raised as to whether artists were conscious of their role as an Entrepreneur of Identity. I found some insight into this process during my sessions with Tiktoker. Tiktoker was one of the younger participants in the study but also one of the most determined to make it as a successful artist. When discussing the fact that he was now going 'live', in which he streams live content to his followers, he spoke about developing his own niche,

*Ex 53. – Creating a niche*

**Tiktoker: Yes, I'm going to start going live now more, still, but right now, what I'm focusing on is, literally, which is the most important in my opinion, becoming a unicorn within my niche. Do you get? You see, in music, you**

need to be a unicorn, as in, different from everyone else, so that you can stay afloat. If you're giving something that everyone else is giving, there's a way you're going to fall off. That's what I see it as. You have to come with a different sound, different, something that nobody's doing. It's the same on TikTok. If you establish yourself in your niche, as one of the main people, it's hard to fall off. The struggle about TikTok is, it's not a fanbase all the time. It's not a fanbase all the time, like, they won't always support you. You can go viral tomorrow, and get a million views, and the next post you can post has 100 views. You get me? Your biggest plan should be that you're trying to become a unicorn in your niche. I don't know how to explain it, but you know what I'm saying?

Ben: What would you say your niche is?

Tiktokker : My niche is probably quotes or emotional stuff. Obviously, you see, remember what I showed you? All that stuff I do, toxic quotes, stuff like that, that's what I do. My niche is kind of like, what's it called, for the boys. I have many boy fans, because obviously they're the people that relate to what I post. Yes, so, it's like quotes, toxic, relationship, girls, about girls, but boys is what it's going to resonate with... To me, they say stuff like what they say to Andrew Tate, you know when they're like, 'In Tate we trust,' and stuff like that? They say that kind of stuff to man.

Tiktokker saw 'going live' and interacting with his followers as essential to building his profile as a music artist. Ten minutes before the session ended, the engineer sent him the track they had recorded that day. I was surprised because he immediately attached the song

to several posts and released them on TikTok. When discussing his plans, he was not concerned with the quality of music but that his message was consistent with his branding of 'emotional stuff'. For Tiktoker, building a loyal fanbase was the most effective way to become a big artist. To achieve this, he had a clear concept of what his niche was, which focused on the emotional pain of young men in regard to relationships. At the time of interviewing him, Andrew Tate, an online personality who rose to fame promoting a message of misogyny and wealth, was at the peak of his popularity (Haslop et al, 2024), so Tiktoker was finding a lot of success with this message. Followers of his content can find positive self-esteem as he reinforces the community's beliefs, such as women being a toxic influence on their lives. With many of the community being single, they can compensate for the low self-esteem caused by not achieving wider society's monogamous relationship standards.

This is an example of the identity management strategy, 're-evaluation of comparison dimension', in which the negative connotations of singleness are modified to provide a positive framework. This cognitive framework offers a logic to support the change in their self-esteem markers. Tiktoker described how he would adapt his content in accordance with whatever would get him the most engagement with his followers. Currently, this approach seems to be effective. However, in light of Elektrik's experiences with mental health, music and identity, it seems there would be the potential for catastrophic results if one's personal identity becomes solely influenced by the need for increased engagement. This was just one example of the potential dangers of the sense of self becoming inextricably linked to one's social media metrics or a metric-driven identity.



In contrast, Red discussed things he could do that would make him go viral, such as getting a tattoo or running while he has 'a larger frame'. These reasons are relatively innocuous, but the Manager in the gang session wanted to exploit the *beef* to create more interaction with their content. This can have real-world implications that go beyond the façade of entertainment. However, I raise this example to highlight that both Red and the Manager were more concerned with creating momentary infamy rather than establishing a long-term fanbase. They reasoned that continually achieving high levels of interaction represents a fanbase. The success of these differing approaches was not captured in this study. However, leadership theory would suggest that Tiktokker may have a more sustained position due to developing an identity with rules and norms for his followers to adhere to.

### 5.2.3 - Final Reflections on Music Artists as Identity Leaders

To be able to quantify the power of music to influence a community seems like a futile task, however, the ethnography allowed me to observe the processes in action. When observing the culture it became evident the power of the artists to influence the rules and norms. It was clear as soon as the study started how important music was to this cohort. It infiltrated every aspect of their life. Conversations would focus on the latest song or the latest gossip about an artist. It is through these conversations that both positive and negative appraisals are made of the artist's message and behaviour. These appraisals can help to define the social framework of the group. This concept speaks to their wider influence on the community but the specific focus of this thesis is their active interaction with their fanbase. It was in these interactions there is evidence of the characteristics of entrepreneurship of identity. Although entrepreneurship of identity is typically applied to business organisations this finding suggests that it may have wider applicability.

It might, at first sight, seem that the role of music artists as entrepreneurs of identity could be used by government bodies to promote social change. It would appear that their influence within the community could be capitalised upon to transmit mainstream society's rules and norms. However, the evident symbiotic nature of the artist-follower relationship suggests that any attempt to do so would be a failure. An artist can only initiate change if they are considered by their followers to be prototypical of the group. Any behaviour not considered to be prototypical such as working with police or the government renders the artist's message ineffective. It does however highlight the need for people working with young people to understand the specific prototypes that define their attitudes and behaviour. This would help to create more effective approaches to help young people build positive social frameworks.

## 5.3 - What is the relationship between street life and music?

The reason drill and urban music in general receive so much media attention is its relationship to street life. It is impossible to deny the overt references to criminal behaviour that feature in the songs and videos of many drill rappers. Due to the epistemological foundation of ethnography, there was not a specific focus on street life, however, the frequency of street life as a theme was undeniable. Within this thesis, the relationship between street life and music was most clearly observed through the operationalisation of music in gang conflicts, highlighting how music can be used as a tool for expression, communication, and confrontation in this context. In this section, I explore examples of street life and how it relates to the cohort's use of music. Due to it being a sensitive topic, I aim to examine the data from a more sociological perspective to avoid specificity. I start with an analysis of the recording session with the Manager/Gang. I describe observations which demonstrated his role as a leader and his methods for maintaining control. Next, I describe the famous Gully vs Gaza gang *beef* that was centred around music in Jamaica as this was referenced by several participants. The reason for using this example is that the gang session provided invaluable data on the operationalisation of music by gangs but presented too many risks to discuss. This approach maintains the anonymity of the participants. The well-documented conflict between Gully and Gaza allows me to reflect on the observations made without putting myself or the participants at risk. Finally, I discuss one of the most notable rules of street life, 'No *Snitching*'. An interaction between Red and Tug gave an insight into how the rules of street life are embodied in real life and how music artists play a vital role in the authenticity of the rule.

### 5.3.1 - Leadership and Control in Street Life: The Manager's Approach

The gang session was the most stereotypical session from the mainstream media perspective. The attendees were all wearing tracksuits, there was a strong smell of cannabis and there were knives on display. The attendees, while outwardly conforming to a stereotypical 'urban' image with their tracksuits and visible weapons, displayed complex identities shaped by their surroundings. The tracksuits were more than just clothing—they were symbols of their social standing and belonging within their community. For some, the knives were not merely tools of violence but protective measures borne out of necessity in their environment, highlighting the profound insecurities and survival instincts present in these individuals' lives. This layered portrayal speaks to the intersection of music and street life as survival mechanisms. It must be noted that out of all of the observations, the sessions with the gang were the only ones that would fit the mainstream media's portrayal of urban music. Within the sessions, the Manager provided the most points of analysis. In particular, two things stood out during his interactions;

1. The methods he used to maintain control of the group
2. His rationale behind manipulating the 'beef' for marketing purposes

So far the concept of entrepreneurs of identity has fitted quite neatly with the role of a music artist. However, this was not the only display of leadership during the study. The Manager of the group has a unique duality of representing the group in the music industry and on the *streets*. The Manager must embody two prototypical approaches at once. First and foremost they must have respect in the *streets* but also be able to present to music industry representatives. This is a common conundrum for managers of gangs. I, myself have managed a drill artist. However, to accommodate for my lack of street reputation, the drill

artist also had a street manager who was in jail at the time. As we waited for the next session, Tug mentioned the need for security in a conversation. Artists will often have a person with a high street reputation that provides protection that traditional security firms cannot offer. This highlights the importance of reputation as a form of social capital. Without revealing specific details the Manager in these sessions is known in the *streets* mainly through association rather than personal exploits. In order to maintain a position of power, he presented opportunities for hope.

There were several occasions when the Manager displayed active attempts at manipulating the group. One moment in particular was when he walked around the room pointing at each of them stating, '*7 million, 4 million, 5 million...*'. At the end, he says that this is how much each of them will be earning when they finally make it big. This was fascinating to watch as he gave them hope for a financially sound future while he also created a social hierarchy of importance based on the sums he suggested. When one of the artists proposed this was not enough, the Manager quickly pivoted, stating that this would be what their cut was for the first year. During both sessions, the Manager was proactively managing his position as leader of the group by demonstrating that he understood the needs of the participants. The Manager's efforts to manipulate the group through promises of wealth and success reveal the complexities of leadership within the cohort. He adopted an '*entrepreneur of identity*' role, capitalizing on the cohort's aspirations to rise out of street life through music. This echoes Haslam and Reicher (2005; 2006; 2007) who discuss how identity entrepreneurship can both reinforce and reshape group norms and values. A longitudinal study would be necessary to determine the effectiveness of this strategy. However, while the Manager attempted to maintain leadership by addressing the group's needs, his lack of the prototypical attributes of a street leader made it more challenging for

him to assert and sustain control over this particular group of rappers, who are deeply rooted in street culture. The manager did demonstrate an understanding of the importance of prototypical representation. In a discussion about the music industry, he claimed that the record labels capitalise on the gang *beefs* for financial gain. He argued that why should someone else make money from their conflicts? He presented a sound argument that criticised the approach of multinational companies exploiting real people's hardships for financial gain. At this point, I was sympathetic to his argument until he explained that he was deliberately creating online conflict between gangs as a public relations exercise. However, it can have severe consequences unless everybody involved is aware of the motivations. For this reason, I will discuss the issues raised during the gang sessions by referring to the Gully versus Gaza conflict.

### 5.3.2 - Gully vs Gaza as a Case Study in Music-Driven Conflict

One of the classic examples that the participants referred back to was the gang conflict Gully vs Gaza in Jamaica. It started as a musical battle between Beenie Man and Bounty Killah. Over the years, they were replaced by younger artists, Vybez Kartel and Mavado, respectively. Gully and Gaza are the nicknames for the areas the two artists originate from. Vybez Kartel is from Waterford Portmore, Gully, and Mavado represents his hometown, Cassava Piece, Gaza. The artists would record '*War Dubs*', the lyrics in these tracks focus on their opponent. The artists often attack their opponent's character, with Mavado calling Kartel a snitch and Kartel questioning Mavado's criminal credentials. The tracks are laced with direct threats of violence that unfortunately spilt out from the recording booths into the *streets*. The violence rose to such a degree that in 2009, the Jamaican Government was forced to intervene for a second time and hold peace talks

between the rival gangs. Although they were made to denounce their feud on TV, and in 2011, Vybez Kartel was sentenced to 35 years in prison for murder, their conflict has had a lasting effect on the social landscape of Jamaica.

What started as a lyrical competition between two emerging artists has developed way beyond the music. The gangs are not simply the group members but anyone from the hometown and surrounding areas of the artists. This allegiance changes the nature of being a fan from a choice to a formality. Social identity theory predicts that this lack of salience would lead to an increase in deindividuation, with the person unable to identify with another group (Hogg, 2016). The lack of social mobility forces the ingroup to compete with the outgroup. This competition is undoubtedly seen between Gully and Gaza. Further research would be needed to uncover whether this competition was social or realistic. From a musical perspective, it can be argued that the competition is both social and realistic, as a fan symbolises social control and financial resources. The more significant the artist's social impact, the larger the fanbase, which results in increased financial reward for the artist. This greater financial reward increases the social impact, another example of the symbiotic relationship between the artist and the fan.

It is of note that this example demonstrates the groups creating maximum difference rather than ingroup profit, as proposed by Tajfel (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). All groups would be able to achieve more by working together and creating a solid framework that allowed artists to develop. However, these groups seemed more concerned with separating themselves from local rivals than increasing the urban music market overall. This must not be misquoted as a behaviour unique to this group but the behaviour of most groups in competition. Another factor that must be considered is *does controversy sell*

*better?* This would then suggest that in this setting, maximum difference can increase ingroup profit if the profit is based on the conflict.

### 5.3.3 - No Snitching: Music and the Street Code

One of the most representative displays of all of the themes in action was the conversation about Jim Jones *snitching*. The interaction demonstrated how a 'rule' can manifest itself and dictate behaviour. It was just after Red's session had ended and the guys went outside to finish their drinks and chat. The conversation quickly turned to a hot topic, American rapper Jim Jones and his alleged '*snitching*'. Potentially, one of the most famous rules and norms of street life is '*no snitching*'. *Snitching* is informing the authorities of criminal activity in any format and a clear display of intergroup dynamics. It is seen as the ultimate betrayal of the ingroup and can often result in violent retribution. Jim Jones had recently been accused of *snitching* as part of a murder trial. Almost instantly, the group formed into a visual representation of the conflict by subconsciously forming into two lines. One side believed he was a snitch the other side that he was not. The energy of the conversation changed as each side defended their points. Tug, who thought Jim Jones was not a snitch, explained his reasoning for his position. He stated that,

Ex 54 – The streets are fake

**Tug: Na it's because he can't be a snitch. He's one of the last real ones out there. If he's a snitch then everything is a lie. I grew up I based myself on him and 50. 50 is still real tho but Jim Jones can't be a snitch. But the *streets* are fake anyway!**



This quote has several implications regarding identity. Firstly, there is a recognition of the negative perception of being a snitch. However, more critical is how Tug perceives Jim Jones. He admits that he finds it hard to believe Jim Jones is a snitch as he regarded him as an idol growing up. This is another example of a music artist acting as an entrepreneur of identity. Tug had based his moral standing on Jones and 50 Cent. It was their principles around *snitching* that informed Tug's own rules and norms. Idolisation of a prototype meant Tug could not be objective in the argument. Accepting Jim Jones was a snitch meant he would have to question the foundational beliefs his identity had been built on. His perceptions of Jones had elucidated his own self-identity, so criticism of Jones felt like criticism of him by association. Finally, Tug ends it by saying '*the streets are fake anyway*'. This was a point I wanted to question him further on. He described how no one really lives up to the '*rules of the hood*'. He very much acknowledged that a set of unwritten rules dictated social interactions in the *hood*. However, adherence to the rules is more concerned with perception than reality. Faze, recently released from prison, claimed *snitching* was motivated by selfishness to maintain a positive ego.

This theme identified some of the cohort's norms and values and how the group interacted with them. There was evidence of an agreed-upon set of rules and norms but how the individual or group adhere to them is less clear. Tug's exclamation that the *streets* are fake at the end of an argument about *snitching* raises questions about how groups define and apply rules and norms. For Tug the rules and norms that he followed had been informed by music artists operating as Eols. When the group admonished Jim Jones, Tug saw this as a personal attack on his own foundational beliefs. The rules and norms appear to act as a pseudo-objective moral standard that seems to be applied when convenient. Further research could focus on the salience of the rules and norms.

### 5.3.4 - Conclusion on Music as a Social Tool in Street Life

The term 'street life' much like 'urban' is unfairly associated with the black community. While street life can refer to the way of life for many people in urban communities such as Liverpool or Glasgow the term street is often connected to black youth gangs. Yet this does not capture the variety of experiences within street life that I witnessed during this study. Street life is better explained as the way of life in marginalised urban communities. It is neither positive nor negative but simply a term to describe the social framework of a particular outgroup community. Its negative appraisal seems to happen when contrasted with the dominant community's set of rules and norms. Many of the participants reflected on how they felt mainstream media viewed them, stating they were seen as '*typical black boys*' (Ex 15.) a moniker that is associated with drug dealing, stabbing and gangs. It would be understandable for outgroup members to see a young man smoking a joint, wearing a tracksuit and jewellery and to assume they are involved in gangs. However, the majority of the participants would not have defined themselves as criminals even if they did commit crimes such as smoking weed. There are so many intriguing aspects of Street life that deserve the full attention of a study. For example, I was fascinated by the idea that there is a social capital hierarchy of different criminal activities which means that drug dealers carry more social capital than fraudsters. The drug dealers more closely fit the prototypical traits of strength, violence and power as opposed to the more deceptive and sneaky nature of fraudsters. However, due to the lens of social identity theory adopted in this thesis, the most prevalent data surrounds the use of music by gangs to facilitate intergroup processes.

The most important thing the data revealed is that social identity theory is a capable and effective theoretical model for observing non-traditional conflicts. While the rest of the analysis has focused more on the SCT processes gang conflicts are best captured by SIT. There are clear examples throughout drill music of gangs using music as a tool to create maximum intergroup difference. Colours are used as visual representations of the gangs. The gang questioned during the thesis also wore a particular colour in all of their music videos to denote ingroup membership. Just as in the Gully/Gaza example non-gang members from the respective areas are also unconsciously drawn into the gang war. During the study period, Infinite told how he was chased in his own neighbourhood after a rival gang suspected him of being involved in the gang war. SIT also proposes that lower self-esteem will lead to depersonalisation and higher group membership. This may explain why gang membership is so high in socially deprived areas where resources for self-esteem are limited. Applying SIT to issues surrounding youth gang membership may provide more effective solutions. For example, I am currently working with a youth charity to reduce violence. Our approach aims to provide a positive self-esteem framework as a foundation to build on interpersonal skills, employment opportunities, and personal well-being.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This study demonstrates that UK urban music, particularly genres like drill and grime, serves as a vital platform for identity formation among Black youth in North London.

Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, this research illustrates music's dual role as both a tool for self-expression and a means of negotiating personal and collective identities within marginalised communities. Central to this process are music artists, whose roles as creative leaders can be better understood through the framework of identity entrepreneurship. This approach highlights how their work shapes cultural norms and values, offering a valuable way to interpret their influence on group identity and cohesion. By embodying aspirational identities, these artists offer guidance and validation, providing young people with a framework to navigate social and economic challenges. In doing so, they help reinforce and reimagine the collective identity of their communities.

Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2021) explore the impact of socio-economic marginalisation on youth, focusing on how systemic inequalities and a lack of opportunities can foster feelings of insignificance. Central to their argument is the concept of mattering, which provides a framework for understanding how structural and historical factors influence individual psychologies. They argue that the quest to matter can drive some young people towards violence when their sense of significance is diminished. This study builds on their work by examining how marginalised youth, rather than turning solely to violence, use drill music as a means of asserting visibility and reclaiming their sense of belonging in a society that often renders them invisible or criminalises their cultural expressions.

My findings suggest that drill and grime are not merely musical genres but function as social tools for navigating and resisting marginalisation. In line with Billingham and Irwin-Rogers' critique of British government policies such as Gang Injunctions and Knife Crime Prevention Orders, this study highlights the importance of addressing the connections between marginalisation, mattering, and violence. Rather than focusing disproportionately on the music young people create or the specific weapons they carry, it is crucial to consider how these cultural practices provide a platform for resilience and identity negotiation within marginalised communities.

The data from the preliminary interviews revealed three primary modes through which individuals construct their identity frameworks, manage self-esteem, and navigate social belonging: Personal Choice, Fashion, and Social Media. Each mode has distinct qualities that impact how identity is constructed and communicated within the social framework of Black youth in North London. In particular, personal choice represents an accumulation of decisions that reflect both intergroup and intragroup dynamics. Although participants described listening to '*all genres*' these were confined to black music genres such as gospel or reggae, indicating a social landscape that frames and constrains options. Individual choices reflect personal preferences yet are deeply intertwined with social background and identity.

Fashion could easily have been categorised as a subtheme of Personal Choice, as the decision around brands that best represent individuals is integral to forming one's social landscape. However, fashion's visual aspect grants it a unique status; it provides instant, visual identification of personal choices and affiliations. This visual component makes it possible to identify urban music followers without the need for conversation. Tracksuits, in

particular, emerged as a recurring symbol among participants, acting almost as a uniform that denotes group membership. Yet participants also mentioned that their fashion choices were limited by what was available in stores like JD Sports, a retailer they felt specifically catered to their demographic. This scenario raises the question: what came first—JD Sports' targeted marketing or young people's preference for tracksuits? Regardless, this dynamic suggests that external factors influence personal choice, framing it within available options and consumer marketing.

At the intergroup level, these fashion choices act as a boundary, distinguishing the group from mainstream identities. Within the group, however, shared fashion choices reinforce cultural cohesion and belonging. Within the group, shared fashion choices reinforce cultural cohesion and a sense of belonging by providing visible markers of identity that align with the group's values and norms. These choices signal membership and solidarity, creating a unified cultural aesthetic. However, on a more nuanced level, subtle variations in fashion can also shift group boundaries or delineate hierarchies within the group. For instance, specific brands, styles, or the way items are worn may signify varying levels of status, authenticity, or influence among members. This interplay between personal choice and fashion highlights how identity within Black youth culture is constructed within a framework that both supports individual autonomy and enforces cultural continuity. Through this dynamic, fashion serves as both a unifying force and a tool for navigating distinctions and expressing individuality while maintaining collective identity within cultural groups. In the next section, I discuss the role of Social Media as another powerful vehicle for identity expression in urban youth culture is examined in greater detail.

It can be assumed that both Personal Choice and Fashion have been fairly consistent as modes of identity expression throughout history. Social Media, on the other hand, is a relatively new phenomenon that is creating complications in the expression of identity. With individuals creating more content than ever before there are even more possibilities to develop parasocial relationships with celebrities. This allows more people to create followers and become their own entrepreneurs of identity. Stuart's (2020) analysis of drill music's digital footprint highlights how social media amplifies the visibility and, at times, the infamy of individuals engaged in urban music. For young people in this study, platforms like Instagram and YouTube serve not only as outlets for self-expression but also as arenas where cultural capital and social status are contested. Following Stuart's concept of 'online infamy,' the findings suggest that social media acts as a double-edged sword: it provides youth with visibility and validation but simultaneously exposes them to the risks of stereotyping and criminalisation, reinforcing negative societal perceptions around Black youth culture.

Social media should be a serious consideration when contemplating youth issues. While my study is limited to highlighting the importance of social media, future research could explore the potential implications of a metric-driven identity on the well-being of young people. The phenomenon of adapting one's identity based on the quantity of interactions, rather than the quality, raises questions about potential long-term effects on self-esteem, particularly if these metrics begin to decline. This decline could lead to negative self-esteem, which may have broader social implications, including poorer mental health, social unrest, and even the emergence of forms of social extremism (Mann et al., 2004; Pantic, 2014). Investigating these potential outcomes could provide valuable insights into the societal impact of social media on identity and well-being.

As with Fashion, our social media choices may become self-fulfilling prophecies that inform the content that we see. Social media algorithms play a significant role in shaping identity, particularly in marginalised communities. As Fatsis (2019) and Bakkali (2022) suggest, these platforms can reinforce existing power structures by perpetuating certain images of Black youth culture, while limiting exposure to alternative narratives. The findings from this study align with these critiques, demonstrating how social media, in tandem with music and fashion, contributes to creating an 'echo chamber' effect that magnifies intergroup identities and constrains the possibilities for identity expression. This gives the algorithms on streaming services such as Apple Music or Spotify the power to make or break an artist through their recommendations (Aguiar & Martens, 2016). It is these algorithms which have taken the endless possibilities of the internet and reduced it into an echo chamber.

By creating echo chambers, algorithms on streaming platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify curate personalised content based on users' listening habits, repeatedly exposing them to similar types of content. This process reinforces preferences, limits exposure to diverse alternatives, and amplifies group dynamics by magnifying the uniqueness of the ingroup while contrasting it against the outgroup's perceived homogeneity (Anderson et al., 2020; Cinelli et al., 2021). While this is a general phenomenon across all users, it is particularly relevant to this study's focus on Black British youth who are followers of grime and drill. For this cohort, the algorithms amplify content that aligns with their lived experiences and cultural narratives, reinforcing the centrality of these genres in their identity formation. This process embeds grime and drill as vital tools for negotiating and expressing identity within this community.



As part of a broader lineage of transnational exchange, these genres resonate with the historical cultural flows Gilroy (1993) describes in his concept of the Black Atlantic, reflecting an enduring connection to shared global Black cultural heritage.

This study has demonstrated that identity entrepreneurship provides a valuable framework for understanding how music artists influence and shape group identities. By engaging in this process, artists often come to embody the role of entrepreneurs of identity, actively constructing shared symbols, narratives, and values that resonate with their communities. This distinction is significant because it moves beyond individual expression and instead highlights the potential for these figures to redefine social frameworks within disadvantaged communities. By applying SIA to non-corporate settings like music and street life, the research expands the understanding of leadership in non-traditional environments. The concept of entrepreneurs of identity tends mainly to be applied in business. However, the data from this study on music artists suggests that it may be equally applicable to non-corporate forms of leadership such as friendship groups, parent/child or teacher/student. This factor also emphasises the effectiveness of utilising SIA as a theoretical framework rather than being restricted to a testable hypothesis. After the preliminary interviews and limited data on a perceived conflict between the participants and the establishment, I felt restricted by the intergroup conflict tenet of SIT. However, due to COVID, I reconsidered the utilisation of SIT inspired by the work of Rupert Brown. Brown (2020) proposes that in its modern form, SIA can be understood as a pragmatic framework which provides a structure for data analysis. The utility of this approach was confirmed by its effectiveness in providing new insights into forms of leadership within a social context.

For many of the participants, music artists were a major influence on their personal and social identity. This may be because the music artists provide them with a relevant social framework with opportunities. Participant 5 discussed how 9-5 jobs were not suited for them. This was not based on laziness or entitlement but a form of appraisal through social categorising the jobs as not fitting with their perception of themselves. Drug dealers, rappers and footballers did fit with their self-perceptions as they are part of an accepted social framework. The traits of an individual are not respected if they do not hold a role that is considered authentic to the group prototype. One key implication of this study is the potential role music artists can play in social interventions. As 'entrepreneurs of identity,' these figures are well-placed to influence norms and behaviours within their communities. However, the research also suggests that any formal collaboration with the establishment, such as government initiatives, risks undermining the authenticity of these artists. Policymakers should therefore consider more subtle forms of engagement that support artists in maintaining their grassroots connections while leveraging their influence to encourage positive social change. However, based on the symbiotic relationship between artists and followers, working with the establishment may undermine their authenticity as an entrepreneur of identity and therefore their ability to transform community norms and values. It may be advisable for artists to support initiatives that are in line with the community values such as entrepreneurship or sports.

One revelation from this study was how important emotion in music was to create a connection between the follower and the artist/song. This may indicate that there is a role of emotion in being an effective entrepreneur of identity. This offers a possible area of future research within leadership theory.

The final finding of the study was related to the relationship between street life and music. However, a major part was understanding what Street Life was in a more general sense and then how it relates more specifically to the study's cohort. Street Life is the social landscape of the underprivileged. Street life refers to the social landscape of individuals and communities navigating marginalised or disadvantaged circumstances. It does not adhere to a single definition or standard but is shaped by the choices and experiences of those often excluded from mainstream society. Its meaning is contextual, defined by its relationship to dominant societal norms and structures. Many of the behaviours are normalised through necessity such as Participant 1 discussing the need to engage in drug dealing at 12 to support their mother, Participant 5 witnessing his friend's mum being stabbed or even the fact that most sessions or even almost every session having the presence of a weed smoker which Hood Drill Rapper claimed helped with his trauma (Ext. 30). These narratives shed light on the harsh economic realities faced by these young people and the necessity of engaging in activities that mainstream society criminalises. By providing space for participants' voices, this study moves beyond academic theorising to highlight the lived experiences shaping their identities, revealing the complex interplay between survival and identity expression in marginalised communities.

Street life, as explored in this study, is neither an inherently racialised nor exclusively judgemental concept. Artists such as Mazza L20, Morrison and French the Kid are just some of the white rappers that discuss similar themes of struggle and survival, it is important to recognise that these narratives are shaped by shared socio-economic conditions rather than racial identity alone. Research, such as Visser's (2020) and Elster's (2020) exploration of socio-economic adversity and its role in shaping urban identities, has consistently shown

that the themes of urban music, including systemic neglect, marginalisation, and the pursuit of identity, resonate across racial and ethnic groups.

However, the dominant association in mainstream culture between street life and Black identity cannot be ignored. This association is deeply entrenched, reinforced by the visibility of Black artists in the drill music scene, and perpetuated through media narratives that racialise urban struggles. Fatsis (2019) critiques this phenomenon, highlighting how institutional powers, particularly the police, perpetuate stereotypes through the criminalisation of drill music, framing it as a cultural threat. While it is essential to acknowledge these associations, this study emphasises the importance of situating these themes within their broader socio-economic and cultural contexts rather than reducing them to racial constructs.

There will always be Street Life for the fact it captures the outliers of acceptable behaviour and without the outliers the majority has no positive comparison by which to achieve self-esteem. As society changes so too does Street Life. New technologies are continually creating new ways to make money in a constant war of attrition with the police. However, this study aimed to capture what Street Life meant to this cohort and how that correlated with music. While UK urban music is sometimes wrongly associated with street life, there is no mistaking drill's relationship. This relationship to street life and a need for authenticity in UK urban music means many of the artists are involved in criminal activity or at the very least create a façade. Combining the concept of entrepreneurs of identity with that of music and street life may provide insights into how 'anti-social behaviour' becomes prevalent. If many of the artists are demonstrating violent traits within their content then it is safe to assume that this is seen as a positive trait within the ingroup. This for me is the

heart of the problem, why is violence seen as a positive or necessary trait for young people to have? My answer is because of their social landscapes. As humans, SIT suggests we adopt behaviours and attitudes that will positively reward us. If for these young people this is violence then we have an issue with the society in which this exists not the young people that are born into it.

This study's findings underscore the importance of recognising that young men's choices are shaped by both personal autonomy and the constraints of their social environment. In addressing issues related to youth culture and urban music, social and policing responses must avoid placing full blame either on the individuals or on societal structures alone. While these young men exercise personal responsibility, their choices are often limited by social and economic constraints that shape their environment. Effective responses, therefore, require an approach that acknowledges these dual influences—addressing systemic barriers while supporting positive individual agency. This balanced perspective can lead to more nuanced policies that engage with the complexities of identity within marginalised communities.

Self-esteem emerged as a central theme throughout this study, particularly in its relationship to identity expression. Social Identity Theory underscores the role of positive self-esteem as a motivator for group behaviour, and my findings extend this by showing how low self-esteem, shaped by socio-economic hardship and media misrepresentation, limits ambition and self-expression among participants. This aligns with Roberts' (2019) critique of punitive approaches like knife crime prevention orders, which he argues do not address the root causes of violence but instead risk criminalising vulnerable youth. Roberts' advice supports my findings that fostering positive group identity and social connections may

reduce criminal activity more effectively than punishment. For instance, the drill artist's choice of a familiar *chicken shop* over a Michelin-starred restaurant reflects a self-perception confined by cultural stereotypes. Addressing such socio-cultural influences on self-esteem and identity offers critical insights into how reinforcing a positive self-concept within marginalised communities could do more to mitigate crime than punitive measures alone.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Interview schedule for Study 1

### Interview Schedule

These questions have been worded in plain English. This is not necessarily how they will be delivered in the interview. The interviewer will use local slang to relax the participants.

#### Identifier

- How do you see yourself?
- Who do you look up to and Why?
- How important is music to you and the people you look up to?
- How did you come to be a follower of this music?
- What does music do for you? How does it affect you?
- How do you think other people see you?
- How bad would it be for others to consider you a traitor to the group?
- How do you spend your money? (What type of brands)
- Who do feel is against you? Do you feel there is on going conflict?

#### Capital

- What makes someone popular?
- What are your ambitions and how do you think you will achieve them?
- Why do you think artists are so popular?
- Does having a large social media following affect how you see someone?

- Is the artists image more important than the music?

#### Demographics

- Tell Me About Yourself?
- Age, Ethnicity, Location
- Educational background
- Family background
- Music Choices

## Appendix 2 – Pro Forma for Study 2 Ethnography

Date:	Time:	Duration:								
Studio Location	Foreign Studios <input type="checkbox"/>	Limitless Studios <input type="checkbox"/>								
Roles (No.)	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Engineer</td><td>Artist</td><td>Producer</td><td>Extras</td></tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> </table>		Engineer	Artist	Producer	Extras	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engineer	Artist	Producer	Extras							
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							

Initial Observations	Incl. Atmosphere, Clothing, Mode of Transport, General Thoughts

Final Observations	Incl. Thoughts on Session, Atmosphere,

## Appendix 3 – List of Quotes

*Ex 1. – Drill being relatable*

*Ex 2. – Family influence*

*Ex 3. - The importance of social connections*

*Ex 4. – Tracksuits are UK uniforms*

*Ex 5. – Government interest in drill music*

*Ex 6. – Music is not racist*

*Ex 7. – Importance of music*

*Ex 8. - Emotional release*

*Ex 9. – Street life provides finances traditional methods cannot*

*Ex 10. – Watching a friend's mum being stabbed*

*Ex 11. – Environment impacts identity*

*Ex 12. – Starting street life early*

*Ex 13. – Family and friends impact on identity*

*Ex 14. - Identity shifts and cultural dissonance post-university*

*Ex 15. – Typical black boy*

*Ex 16. – Trying to fit in*

*Ex 17. – Staying connected through family*

*Ex 18. – The increased exposure through social media*

*Ex 19. – Different outfits for different groups*

*Ex 20. – Rejecting traditional employment*

*Ex 21. – Financial opportunities through music*

*Ex 22. - Lack of representation in school curricula*

*Ex 23 – Introductions with Red*

*Ex 24. – Doing songs to break the mainstream*

*Ex 25. – Thinking of a gimmick*

*Ex 26. – Argument over which room to hire*

*Ex 27. – Jim Jones – Last of the real ones*

*Ex 28. – Taking control of the game*

*Ex 29. – Change the industry*

*Ex 30. – Music helps with mental health*

*Ex 31. – Music is god*

*Ex 32. – Artists provide guidance*

*Ex 33. – Dark music for dark emotions*

*Ex 34. – Who, What, Where is Ampiano?*

*Ex 35. – Music is a conversation*

*Ex 36. – The cathartic nature of music*

*Ex 37 – Social influence of music*

*Ex 38. – Accountants ain't hood*

*Ex 39. – Hip-hop is we riot*

*Ex 40. – Hip-hop is family*

*Ex 41. – Black culture is not just hip-hop*

*Ex 42. – Music inspires fashion*

*Ex 43 – The tracksuit*

*Ex 44. – People have to be real because social media exposes them*

*Ex 45 – God has blessed the black community with music*

*Ex 46 – Music as resistance*

*Ex 47. – Music is food*

*Ex 48. – Music influences emotions*

*Ex 49. – A badge of honour*

*Ex 50. – Kendrick Lamar is an identity prototype*

*Ex 51 – Elektrik vs Jeremy*

*Ex 52 - Creating alter-egos*

*Ex 53. – Creating a niche*

*Ex 54 – The streets are fake*





# Glossary

## **140bpm**

This stands for 140 beats per minute. This is the speed of the track. Grime music used to be strictly 140 bpm, however, there have been grime tracks not at 140. Drill music is also often created at 140 bpm, although it is not as much of a defining feature.

## **808s**

808s in the context of music, are about the deep, subsonic bass tones that are characteristic of the TR-808 drum machine. These bass tones are frequently used in modern music production,

## **Adlibs and stabs**

Adlibs and stabs are terms used when recording an artist. After recording the main vocals, the artist will record stabs. The artists will double their vocals generally at the end of a line to add emphasis. Adlibs are background vocals that provide atmosphere to the track.

## **Authenticity**

Authenticity refers to the degree to which an artist's music, lyrics, and overall image reflect their genuine experiences, emotions, and identity. An authentic urban artist is seen as being true to themselves, their background, and their community.

### **Badman**

A synonym for gangster. Badman is a Jamaican term to describe someone with a street reputation. It is seen as a positive term and can be used more broadly. For example, a footballer who just scored a goal may be described as a badman.

### **Bando**

A synonym for trap house. A bando is the term for the house/flat that dealers sell or store their drugs in.

### **Bars**

A synonym for lyrics. Bars is the cultural term for written lyrics, not normally associated with singers. Rappers and *emcees* use the term. Bars is the collective term. They will typically write 16,32 or 64-bar verses. In this example, a bar represents one line of the song. Bars can also be used as positive appreciation. If someone does a good rap, people will simply say, 'Bars'.

### **Beef**

Beef is a synonym for conflict. A beef is a conflict either between individuals or, more commonly used to describe gang conflicts in which they would be described as beefing.

### **Being sectioned**

Electrik used this term to describe being referred to the mental health services with in the NHS.

### **Big man**

Big man is generally used to describe age. A big man would be a grown adult. However, it can also denote level of reputation. A big man would be well-respected.

### **Blow**

Blow as used in this thesis describes becoming a successful artist. Blowing up is the process of becoming famous and someone who has blown has made it to the top.

### **Bun it**

This term has a number of different senses. A Jamaican term it means to smoke. For example someone would bun a cigarette. However, the term smoking is often used to refer to killing someone. So to bun someone would be to kill them.

### **Cheffed up**

This term is a synonym for stabbing. To chef someone up is to stab them

### **Chicken shop**

A chicken shop is a fast food takeaway that specialises in chicken. There are a number of them in Tottenham.

### **Crew**

This term describes a group or collective. Normally used to describe a group with in music. I started my career by managing Marvell Crew. A collective of three rappers.

### **Double time**

This is a term given when the lyrics are written to include twice the amount of words per beat.

### **The Ends (also see Hood)**

This is used to refer to the person's neighbourhood where they live. It can also be used as a descriptive term, similar to the streets, conceptually to describe those active in street life.

### **Emcee**

Often written as MC, the term is used as a synonym for rapper. It is more commonly associated with grime, jungle or drum n bass. Performances for these genres often involve the MC performing their lyrics over a random assortment of backing tracks.

### **Hard**

A synonym for good. There are several uses for the term hard, but it is generally used as a positive appraisal. This may provide insight into what the ingroup considers positive traits.

### **Hood**

A synonym for area. The term is a derivative of neighbourhood

### **Hood classic**

A hood classic is a term used to describe a film, book, song, or other work of art that is highly regarded and widely appreciated within urban and, specifically, low-income or inner-city communities. These works often resonate with people who have lived or grown up in a similar area.

### **Hood mentality**

This is an ingroup term to describe the cognitive framework of rules and norms. It is often used as a negative term to describe someone who is limiting themselves.

### **Hood star**

A hood star is a term used in urban and hip-hop culture to refer to an individual who has gained a level of recognition, status, or fame within their local community or neighbourhood (often referred to as "the hood"). This recognition is typically based on their talents, achievements, or contributions in areas such as music, sports, entrepreneurship, or other aspects of urban culture.

### **Mansa Musa**

The ruler of Mali between 1312-1337. It is claimed he is the wealthiest man in history, although these claims have not been confirmed.

### **Opps**

Short for opposition, the term opps is used to describe rival gangs and enemies.

### **Out on the roads**

See 'Roads'. Out on the roads is used to describe someone who is active in criminal activity.

### **Popping at the minute**

Popping is a shortened version of popular. Someone who is popping is currently being talked about in a positive light.

### **Rapper**

A rapper is a musician or performer who specializes in the art of rapping, which involves delivering spoken or lyrics in a rhythmic and often rhyming manner. The term given to someone who performs rap or a derivative genre such as drill.

### **Roads**

Refer to streets

### **Safe**

A synonym for okay. The term is used to show positive confirmation. It can be used to describe a person, 'that guy is safe'.

### **Scarface**

Is a 1983 American crime drama film directed by Brian De Palma and written by Oliver Stone. The film follows Tony Montana (Al Pacino), a Cuban refugee who makes his way up the criminal underworld in America. The film is often referenced in songs.

### **Shanked**

A synonym for stabbed. The term 'shank' originated in prison to describe an improvised knife.

### **Shook**

Shook is a synonym for scared

### **Sick**

Sick is a synonym for good.

### **Snares**

The percussive sound primarily hits on beats two and four in music production.

### **Snitching**

Snitching is a slang term used to describe the act of providing information, especially incriminating or sensitive information, to authorities or other parties, often about the wrongdoing or illegal activities of others.

### **Spitting**

Spitting refers to the act of delivering or performing lyrics, typically with a rapid and rhythmic flow. When a rapper is "spitting," they are delivering their verses or rhymes, often characterized by their wordplay, rhythm, and sometimes complex rhyme schemes.

### **Strap**

A strap is another term for a gun.

### **Streets**

The streets can carry a cultural and social connotation. In this sense, it refers to the environment or lifestyle associated with urban neighbourhoods, particularly those with a reputation for crime, poverty, or a distinctive local culture. This usage often appears in phrases like "growing up on the streets" or "life on the streets," which can refer to the experiences, challenges, and survival strategies of individuals who have spent significant time in such neighbourhoods.



## **Toke**

Toke refers to the act of inhaling any type of smoke, such as from a tobacco product. However, its most prevalent usage is within the context of cannabis consumption.

## **Trapping**

Trapping typically refers to the act of engaging in illegal activities, often related to drug dealing. People who are involved in trapping are colloquially referred to as "trappers." The term is often associated with a fast-paced, high-risk lifestyle

## **Whipping**

Whipping is a term associated with drug dealing. For example, in the case of cocaine, "whipping" might refer to the process of converting cocaine hydrochloride (the powdered form) into crack cocaine, which is a smokable form of the drug. The term originates from the drugs being 'whipped' in a Pyrex bowl.

## **Wa gwan**

"Wa gwan" is a Jamaican Patois phrase that is derived from the English phrase "What's going on?" or "What's happening?" It is commonly used in informal conversations and serves as a greeting or an inquiry about someone's well-being or current situation.