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“Framed as a Criminal, Rather than as Artist”: A Narrative Study into Meaning-Making by UK Drill Artists

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Abstract

While drill music is often talked about in relation to crime, it is often overlooked as an art form and cultural practice. Consequently, its artists are rarely heard from. To address this societal and academic gap, we have conducted in-depth interviews with ten UK artists from this genre and subculture. This article presents the shared meanings these UK drill artists attach to the motivation to make their own music, the music subgenre and its culture, and its ongoing criminalisation. We do so by conceptualising these meanings as counter-narratives. The article departs from the observation that these counter-narratives present themselves in drill, as a form of expression, on two dimensions: drill as the outcome of intra-group expression of emotions and social relations, and as the platform to engage with social injustice on the inter-group level. An interdisciplinary theoretical framework, combining psychological insights on needs, philosophical cues on (mis)recognition, and the lens intersectionality, allows us to study and bridge these two dimensions. We identify twelve counter-narratives that were validated by a majority of respondents. The study, besides analysing these in-depth counter-narratives, also foregrounds UK drill artists' agency generally absent from both societal and academic discourse.

Keywords: drill music; counter-narratives; social justice

1. Introduction

UK drill music suffers no lack of attention—but it is talked *about*, rarely heard *from*. A Drill Music Translation Cadre has been established by the Metropolitan Police of London. Its members act as ‘rap expert witnesses’ by interpreting drill lyrics (Quinn 2018). British legal authorities believe that UK drill music glorifies, encourages, and contributes to criminality and violence (Ilan 2020; Kleinberg and McFarlane 2020; Debo-Aina 2021; Schwarze and Fatsis 2022; Fatsis 2023). In 2018, (former) Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick blamed the drill genre for glamourising violent crime: “Drill music is associated with lyrics which are about glamourising serious violence—murder, stabbings. They describe the stabbings in detail, joy and excitement” (Ferrari 2018). Drill rappers face censorship, surveillance, and abuse of their musical content by legal authorities (Ilan 2020). Rappers’ content has been used as evidence in court, especially if authorities believe that violence or crime is glamorised or encouraged (Kubrin and Nielson 2014; Owusu-Bempah 2022; Fatsis 2023). As with other subgenres of hip-hop music worldwide since the 1990s, British drill music (hereafter UK drill) too has been criminalised because of its association



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with increasing knife crime rates (see e.g., [Allen and Wong 2025](#); [Ng 2023](#)), gangsterism, suspicion and danger ([Kubrin and Nielson 2014](#); [Aprahamian 2019](#)) and inciting criminality among young Black men living in impoverished districts of the city ([Fatsis 2019](#)).

While this subgenre, indeed, involves violent themes, it is questionable if the artists' intentions are about glamourisation or encouragement of violence. Music, like every other art form, must be interpreted in a cultural and historical context. Since most drill rappers seem to be young, Black, and (economically) underprivileged men ([Ilan 2020](#); [Debo-Aina 2021](#)), interpreting the intentions behind their lyrics without using this intersectional lens may be problematic. One may argue that UK drill rappers' lyrics may well be judged out of context when possibly racially biased powerful authorities seek to interpret them.

Importantly, interpretations that just focus on possible violence overlook that the music is an art form. Hip-hop music encompasses rap music with more than fifty different subgenres. Street-authentic personas are oftentimes created by drill rappers, characterised by stereotypes such as being violent, provocative, and surprising ([Ilan 2012](#); [Schwarze and Fatsis 2022](#)). Drill rappers usually represent the characteristics of a roadman in fashion, linguistics, and musical expression ([Gunter and Watt 2009](#); [Bakkali 2021](#); [Ilbury 2022](#)). They represent their own subculture by expressing themselves in distinctive ways. UK drill can relate to people on a personal level and react to their interactions with one another. Through this art form, young people can express their frustration and fantasise about how they would respond to what they perceive to be unfair criticism and practices ([Chapman 2021](#)). In other words, UK drill rappers—and even producers and beatmakers—may utilise their music as a non-violent outlet to express, first, frustrations amongst peers and, second, confront societal injustices, using words as a non-violent form of confrontation ([Chapman 2021](#)).

This paper therefore turns the focus to UK drill as a social and cultural practice, and foregrounds artists' meaning-making around drill as an art form. It specifically looks at the two dimensions of expression within this cultural practice presented above: drill as the outcome of intra-group expression of emotions and social relations; and as the platform to engage with social injustice on the inter-group level. This paper studies both of these dimensions as meaning-making processes. It is important to note here that the first intra-group dimension is much more visible than the second inter-group dimension, while the latter can be seen as a creative undercurrent. The engagement with social injustice is not necessarily explicit in lyrics, but social injustice does form the driving force to create music. Because it relies on in-depth interviews that inquire about this driving force, this research can make this implicit creative undercurrent visible.

Here, we build on conceptualisations of Hip Hop as both a philosophical and cultural phenomenon ([Price 2006](#)). Hip Hop means being conscious (hip) of your own movement (hop). According to artist KRS-One, Hip Hop is the philosophical ground of the culture and its products. He explains: "Hiphop doesn't exist as a physical thing. Hiphop its actual existence is as a shared idea. We all share this idea called Hiphop" ([Lss Tlk 2015](#), 57:45). Hip Hop moreover encompasses the culture, "the philosophy in action" ([Lss Tlk 2015](#), 58:25). Hip Hop also refers to the products of the Hip Hop collective consciousness and the Hip Hop culture. KRS-One said: "If you don't know about the collective consciousness of Hip Hop, it will reflect in your product. If you don't know the culture of Hip Hop, it will reflect" ([Lss Tlk 2015](#), 1:05:13).

Luckily, recent academic research has been acknowledging this philosophical, historical, and cultural embeddedness of drill. Academic research by (cultural) criminologists and sociologists generally concentrates on the subgenre's cultural value, the narratives portrayed in the media, and how it affects young people and society ([Fatsis 2019](#); [Kleinberg and McFarlane 2020](#); [Ilan 2020](#); [Debo-Aina 2021](#); [Fatsis 2021](#); [Schwarze and Fatsis 2022](#);

Owusu-Bempah 2022; Fatsis 2023). Several scholars have examined and interpreted the lyrics of UK drill (Kleinberg and McFarlane 2019; Hall et al. 2022). Hall et al. (2022) argue that violent lyrics may be interpreted as a reflection or ethnography of these young artists' lives. They concluded that the criminalisation of it may be "deflecting attention from risk factors for serious youth violence that are evidence-based" (Hall et al. 2022, p. 1).

What is missing from these accounts, however, are the artists' own narratives. To address this research gap, this paper focusses on the subjective and shared meanings UK drill artists attach to the motivation to make their own music, the music subgenre and its culture, and its ongoing criminalisation. This can widen our research and societal perspective on what UK drill music and its criminalisation mean to artists within the genre. This also addresses an important social inequality in itself: the lack of agency commonly experienced by drill artists as a consequence of wider structures of marginalisation. This paper addresses this knowledge gap and social inequality by looking at how artists themselves understand their music.

Thus, this paper returns our gaze to the artists themselves, and the meanings they give to their art, rather than the meanings that are given to them—either by society or academics. We study how young UK drill artists attribute meaning to their music, the subgenre, and its current criminalisation. We do so by studying these meanings as narratives. Rappers' and producers' own perspectives of UK drill music and its criminalisation can hence be seen as counter-narratives. A counter-narrative is a story that is told to counter a widely accepted narrative that is used to defend the oppression of a social group (Lindemann 2020).

This article identifies twelve such counter-narratives, which we have divided into three categories. First, the paper discusses the motivations of young UK drill artists to make this type of music. Second, we will focus on how UK drill artists narrate their relation to the subgenre. Third, we will study the meanings that UK drill artists narratively attribute to the ongoing criminalisation of the subgenre. The two intra- and inter-group dimensions are present in all three categories. With this research, both during the process of generating data and through this publication, we hope to humanise these rappers as equal, sentient human beings instead of objectified artists. This may help reduce the stigmatisation of drill rappers and the polarisation between artists and legal authorities. While this study takes drill seriously as an art form, this article does not analyse its musical structure, poetic form, or sonic conventions. Instead, our focus is primarily sociological and anthropological: we examine how drill artists interpret their own practices, identities and experiences of misrecognition.

Theoretical Framework: UK Drill Artists as Social Actors

As presented in the introduction, this paper aims to take drill seriously as an art form and conceptualises drill artists as social actors by looking at two dimensions: the music as intra-group expression of emotions and social relations; and as a way to address collective social justice issues on the inter-group level. Our interdisciplinary theoretical framework, building on social psychology, philosophy, and sociology, thus delves into both dimensions and sets out to connect them. It is in this connection that the position becomes clear of UK drill as an art form in relation to violence and criminalisation—in reality as well as perceived. Given the article's focus on narrative and social interpretation, we do not engage with musicological debates about drill's sonic or poetic form; such an analysis lies beyond the scope of this study.

First, we look at drill as an intra-group platform to express emotions and social relations. Human beings can be said to have to fulfil three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2017). Self-determination theory (SDT) highlights the motivation to represent one's social group and their first- and second-hand lived

experiences (Ryan and Deci 2022; Rateau et al. 2011). Autonomy needs to be understood in terms of social environments. Autonomous motivation helps to develop resilience, long-term psychological health, and more effective self-functioning. In the context of drill, it means that artists make their own decisions, have their perspectives recognised by their social context, and know why they are making these choices (Deci et al. 1994).

Competence refers to mastery and the fundamental need to feel effective (Ryan and Deci 2017). This may have a positive influence on one's self-worth and general well-being. Some artists intrinsically want to maximise their potential as a way of flourishing or growth. As some would say, they love the craft and like to develop themselves creatively. At the same time, recognition by others will encourage intrinsic motivation if it gives one confidence about one's own abilities (Deci 1975). In the philosophical sense, identity is challenged when beliefs and perspectives shift or evolve, since this can result in the individual whose beliefs have altered becoming someone else entirely (Chandler et al. 2003). In other words, new identities can change over time due to new beliefs that may come with different lifestyles, age and new life experiences.

Relatedness refers to the connection one experiences within their social groups. Especially in the case of the marginalisation that many drill artists experience, peer support is crucial for overcoming obstacles (Riessman 1990; Roberts and Rappaport 1989). Ryan and Deci (2017) characterise social environments in terms of the extent to which they are autonomy supportive, effectance supporting, and relationally supportive (Deci and Ryan 2009). They argue that social contexts that support autonomy emphasise choice over control. A social context that supports effectance gives requested behaviour a reason. Social settings that are relationally supportive recognise people's emotions regarding their actions (Deci et al. 1994).

Of course, UK drill is not 'just another' platform for expressing emotions and social relations: it is foremost an art form.¹ Creations in music and art in general appeal to the historical, psychological, social, political, and ideological background of both the sender and the receiver (Koopman and Davies 2001). Koopman and Davies (2001) distinguish between two ways in which music can hold meaning: from an individual perspective (subjective meaning) and from a collective perspective. This research focuses primarily on subjective meaning—the personal significance that music can have in someone's life. This is not just about the literal content of the lyrics, but about the role music plays in a person's everyday life, memories, emotions, and thoughts. This perspective helps to understand how UK drill can carry deep personal value for artists, regardless of how it is interpreted or judged by authorities or the media.

Making music together, creating these different meanings, can thus also strengthen interpersonal bonds (Hargreaves and North 1999). Here, it is useful to use the concept of relational autonomy. This includes both being aware of one's own needs and wants and being open to being influenced by others. Relational accountability to the other is another aspect of it (Fishbane 2001). This togetherness makes that UK drill is both a musical genre and a subculture: a smaller group of people within a larger culture who share the same language, values, norms, lifestyles, and behaviours that are distinct from the dominant culture, but still exist within it (Yinger 1960). Social representations are "systems of opinions, knowledge, and beliefs" unique to a group, a culture, or a social category world (Rateau et al. 2011, p. 478). It is organised, shared and collectively produced by the members of its social group. Representations enable people to make sense of the social world (Rateau et al. 2011).

The genre may be misinterpreted if outsiders just see the artefacts and works of UK drill music, ignoring its fundamental beliefs and ideals. Understanding UK drill as a subculture allows us to see the inter-group level at which it functions as a vehicle for social

justice. More specifically, the UK drill subculture can be considered a counterculture given its main themes that oppose dominant societal norms and values. These controversial themes include street life, systemic inequality and experiences of marginalisation. UK drill started out as a subgenre that challenges traditional norms about what is appropriate in public discourse with its raw and frequently violent content. Most importantly, UK drill is a genre that is both racialised and criminalised. In Britain, politicians and media alike have actively associated violent crime with Black youth, even singling out drill music as a supposed cause for knife crime (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). This is the well-known over-policing of Black people. Processes of racialisation, Gargi Bhattacharyya et al. (2021) teach us, are both cause and result of this criminalisation. In this article, we thus conceptualise opposition to criminalisation in relation to opposition to racialisation and racism. From this position of artists and a social group that is implicitly and explicitly connected to violence, UK drill is additionally connected to the outside world as a justice movement. Hebdige (1979) introduced the theory of cultural co-optation, showing that countercultures that were initially authentic alternatives to the mainstream are often co-opted and commercialised by the mainstream. With the help of Hebdige, we can see how UK drill artists respond to this co-optation and change in how their sub- and counterculture is perceived. The connection between counterstorytelling and Black epistemologies is invoked to emphasise that position drill artists as producers of situated knowledge.

This puts UK drill and the world in a relation of recognition and misrecognition. According to Honneth (1996), the majority of justice movements are driven by people's and groups' perceived need for recognition. People need mutual recognition in order to live freely and independently (Anderson and Honneth 2005). People seek recognition in three main areas: love and emotional support (from close relationships), legal rights and respect (being treated as equal members of society), and social esteem (being valued for one's efforts). These close relationships support self-trust, as legal respect for one's rights and dignity, help people build self-respect and belonging to a community with shared values builds self-esteem (Anderson and Honneth 2005). To put it another way, misrecognition in these three areas can negatively impact the self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem of individuals. Honneth (2007, cited in Giles 2017) has tried to demonstrate how moral injuries—a psychological distress caused by having one's intuitive ideas of justice violated—are caused by one's experiences of misrecognition. Such moral injuries can be motives for social resistance and rebellion that contribute to social change.

To analyse both the intra- and inter-group levels, we thus need to understand the layered identities and meanings that UK drill brings. *Intersectionality* provides a nuanced understanding of societal complexities. It recognises that individuals' experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting factors such as race, gender, and class, which interact in diverse and mutually influencing ways, offering a more comprehensive lens to comprehend social inequality and human experiences (Collins and Bilge 2016). In the context of UK drill music and its associated culture, intersectionality is relevant because it recognises that individuals' experiences are influenced not just by one aspect of their identity, but by multiple factors, shaped by the in- and outside world. Although the group of UK drill artists is diverse, many have specific social identities in common, such as race, class, gender and age. Many prominent UK drill artists are from working-class backgrounds in London and are often Black or of Afro-Caribbean descent (GRM Daily 2020; Debo-Aina 2021).

Research shows that Black music genres, mainly hip-hop's subgenre gangsta rap or trap music, are specifically targeted as opposed to non-Black music genres because of racialised prejudice (Fried 2003; Kubrin and Nielson 2014; Fatsis 2021; Owusu-Bempah 2022; Hall et al. 2022). Violent lyrics of non-Black (pop) singers seem to be interpreted differently, for example, when pop singer Adam Levine sang "Came without a warning, so

I had to shoot him dead” in his song *Wake Up Call* (Maroon 5 2009, 1:08). Critics wonder: why are lyrics like *these* no issue? According to Frisby and Behm-Morawitz (2019), it is said that pop music has lighter and ‘sweeter’ lyrics, while hip-hop music is more critiqued due to its cultural style and history. According to Fatsis (2021), racial prejudice has a long history that dates back to colonial legacies and continues to influence how people see Black culture and race in modern times.

Additionally, early research on Black youth relations with the police underscored the inherent tensions within environments of institutional racism, discrimination, and disadvantage, revealing subsequent negative portrayals perpetuated by media, education, and welfare systems (John et al. 1972, as cited in Barn et al. 2018; Solomos 1993; Barn 2001). Particularly, Black men are frequently viewed as ‘perpetual suspects’ in the UK (Long 2018).

2. Findings

2.1. Motivation

We found that artists construct five counter-narratives to make meaning of their motivation to make this music—a dimension generally ignored by the dominant societal narrative that instead focuses on violence as a driving force. These narratives are: I represent where I am coming from; UK drill is my way of coping; I am (becoming financially) successful; I can be a role model; and I feel recognised as a creative person.

I represent where I am coming from

Artists emphasise that their drill stories give insights into what it was like to grow up. Historically, spaces like neighbourhoods, ghettos, and streets appear to be a crucial component of Hip Hop reality. Indeed, artists narrate how they represent the community they belong to. One rapper states how he wants to accurately show the social reality in which they live, being a voice for his environment:

“Sometimes you go on YouTube and you see these pages that do documentaries on certain areas or certain people and it’s completely false. Not one thing in there is true. So, hopefully from my music, one thing that they can sense of... [is] what’s real and what’s fake.”

We indeed know from research that UK drill songs often contain territorial and gang loyalty claims (Bramwell and Butterworth 2019; Sanders and Wernaart 2023; Hall et al. 2022). Members of this culture continue to have intricate ties to their city, which is an integral part of their territory and, by extension, their identity (Dumitru and Tudor 2022). As the above quote shows, drill does even more than that. As discussed in the theoretical framework, drill as a representation does not only reflect, but also tries to make sense of social reality (Rateau et al. 2011). Other respondents too depicted their art as direct products of their environments. In other words, the violent characteristics of UK drill reflect the experiences of violence artists may have experienced. One producer remarks:

“It’s more of like, illustrating what a guy is going through. [Drill rappers are not] gonna talk about trees and greenery. They don’t come from that. We came from the estates. We came from poverty. We came from struggle. We came from... ehm... Limited opportunities. So... what can we talk about?”

UK drill is my way of coping

UK drill music was, and for some artists still is, a way to express their feelings. One rapper said that making music was the only way he could express his feelings and to not

hold them inside. Expression in music can be considered as a social- and emotion-focussed coping mechanism, corresponding to the desire to seek autonomy and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2017).

Creating UK drill might be interpreted as a direct or indirect way of seeking (emotional) support from one's peers in order to reduce stress and build relatedness. As many drill artists share similar backgrounds, the UK drill scene can be seen as a platform for peer support (Riessman 1990; Roberts and Rappaport 1989). In the UK, the drill subgenre allows artists to connect with one another by exchanging personal narratives, asking for and offering advice, and offering emotional support. One artist illustrates this:

"A lot of the stuff that we're talking about is very violent and isn't very kid-friendly as we should say. [...] In an upbringing and the surroundings that we grew up around, there's no one to talk to. We got no way to express our feelings. Hence, why we end up doing X, Y, and Z that we shouldn't be doing. So, our only way, in hindsight, to talk to someone is through talking through music."

Additionally, making music with friends can positively affect one's well-being. Some of the drill artists who were interviewed were inspired to pursue music by friends who were already musicians. More than half of the respondents started making music as a hobby. One producer adds:

"Guys were freestyling to my beats on the bus. And I'm there. That was the fun of it as well, [...] that everyone from my school, from other schools, would link up, chill, uh... freestyle to beats."

In this positive reframing of negative issues, artists can rely on their *autonomy*. Humour is a potent tool here. For example, one rapper says:

"I'm a normal person. I got humour [...]. So I try to not make it [...] sound so serious. Because, at the end of the day, it is very serious. [...] Sometimes I have to laugh it off. Because if I don't laugh it off, then I'm just gonna be in a bad mood. I just be upset, because... At the end of the day, they're not things that I wanted to go through. I didn't plan for my life to go this way. So... It's kinda making the best out of the bad situation."

I am (becoming financially) successful

According to many artists, a career in UK drill music has motivated many young men who came from poverty, violence and crime to improve their lives. Several artists saw the UK drill platform as an instrument to escape a criminal lifestyle and create a more hopeful future. Based on the theory of Ryan and Deci (2022), this extrinsic motivation can be internalised into autonomous motivation. One producer, who has already worked for fourteen years as a UK drill producer, shares his experience working with other UK drill artists:

"But the majority of artists that I've worked with, and I would say, it's a good 90 percent, they've always made music because they want a way out. It's not like they make music because they want a way in, you know? They all wanna change their life for the better. They wanna make their mum proud. They wanna... do something with their life. In such a bad community, where they can actually be worth something, you know? [...] And coming out of that, nobody wants to be doing crime forever. No one even wants to be doing crime, period, you know? [...] It's the life that they live and breathe every day, so... Making music was kind of, like, a gate. It was like a key to people's lives. [...] I'm proud to be a part of a lot of artists' journeys. [...] The guys that have blown up, the

guys you see in commercials and the guys that have actually made it. . . You don't see them doing crime no more. And literally, it could've been the same for many other cases."

While building this form of autonomy and competence, relatedness with the social environment remains. Other artists add how they were inspired by friends with financial freedom who were already established drill artists. These friends were travelling the nation and shooting music videos abroad. Two other artists started learning the business side of music to get a bigger and more diverse audience. One artist mentions the positive impact of becoming a drill artist:

"It was amazing, to be honest. It essentially changed my life. Because . . . I don't know. If I didn't get signed, because of my drill music, I don't know where I would be. Probably be in jail, dead. So, I'm kinda grateful for it in a sense."

In addition, some rappers feel morally responsible to use their financial success to help their friends and family, again confirming the interplay between the self and social environment. In contrast to the dominant narrative of the self in Western culture, here, we can speak of relational autonomy. It is essential to not only consider UK drill artists' motivations based on their own needs and desires, but also to recognise their relation to their environment, on both the intra- and inter-group level. For example, one artist took his musical career more seriously to improve the lives of his loved ones. He said: *"Cause it's not for me. It's for everyone. That's just how I am, innit, I'm a team player."*

I can be a role model

More than half of the interviewed drill artists mention that they use UK drill as an instrument to achieve external goals, such as keeping other people away from crime and violence and promoting a better lifestyle. By presenting themselves as exemplars—illustrating both how to live and how not to—UK drill rappers can serve as sources of inspiration for others. One artist says that music is a way to keep others from crime and violence:

"Although we're not all talking about good things, we're all trying to do better for ourselves and everyone else. That's the message we're trying to get off. It's not the message we're tryna get off in our raps or in our songs, it's the bigger picture behind it. Like, look, we've done this. We've been through this. You shouldn't do this."

This quote is perhaps best understood as an exercise in relational autonomy and relational accountability towards their communities. Listeners and artists are here part of the same intra-group conversation on building a good future. Respondents say they want to give listeners hope by showing that anything is possible if one believes in oneself and works hard for it. For example, one artist was released from prison two years ago and has been actively making (drill) music since. He states:

"In my life, with music, I have progressed a lot [. . .]. If you look at when I came out [of prison] to now. [. . .] It's moving forward and kind of showing people that."

Another rapper wants to show that it is not necessary to go down a violent path to be successful in the music industry. He uses UK drill beats, but his lyrics are non-violent:

"Growing up in the area that I grew up in, I witnessed a lot of things happening. Eh. . . That I shouldn't be seeing my age, to be honest. [. . .] There's not really any hope for this generation, to be honest. I feel like, people are doing bad things and not realising

that they're bad at all. [...] I think I wanna help. Steer people away from the gang life and criminal life, and... Realise that there are more opportunities on the good side of life as well."

I feel recognised as a creative person

Getting recognised for one's competence, in this case one's creativity and hard work, is for many artists a great motivation to start and keep making UK drill music. Although the role of autonomy is again essential in motivation, in this narrative, the role of competence may play a bigger one (Ryan and Deci 2017). For UK drill artists, becoming well-known and successful is a way to feel recognised. For example, one producer borrowed his mother's laptop to experiment with making beats when he was eleven years old. Since then, he wanted to develop himself and his music by following his passion and making himself known. Now, he is an award-winning producer and engineer. He said:

"I'm [...] doing what I'm doing and enjoying the process, you know? Seeing the reactions that it gets from such a large audience. Seeing my beats getting played in shows, from them just being in the bedroom to going worldwide. [...] Drill music, pretty much, did make me go global. [...] It's a proud moment, you know? So, I do take pride in that."

The five narratives described above highlight that the motivations of UK drill artists to make this type of music are more diverse and profound than British legal authorities initially would think. We hear desires of autonomy, recognition, connection, identity forming and success. Altruistic intra-group motivations, such as feeling responsible and a desire to provide financial or motivational support to others, are also evident. On the one hand, many motivations are intrinsic: UK drill artists want to be able to represent, cope with emotions, become successful and escape bad lifestyles, be a role model, grow, and connect with their social surroundings. On the other hand, well-internalised extrinsic motivations and inter-group dimensions, such as seeking recognition for one's competence and becoming financially successful to improve one's own life and the lives of others, also played a role in making UK drill music. Most motivations were related to one's social environment and enhancing one's personal living circumstances, since poverty and violence have been factors in the lives of many artists.

2.2. Relation to the Subgenre

Artists mainly use two counter-narratives to relate to the subgenre: *I am more than 'just' a drill artist*, and *from a small, raw and authentic subgenre to mainstream, accessible and fabricated one*. By emphasising respectively well-roundedness as artists and authenticity of the subgenre, these counter-narratives oppose the stigmatisation and risk of co-optation that is central to the dominant societal narrative on drill.

I am more than 'just' a drill artist

UK drill artists do not want to limit their identity and competencies to the UK drill subgenre and the stigmatisation attached to it. This comes with three important points: (1) a natural change in identity among the artists, (2) resistance to the negative narrative about UK drill artists from outsiders, and (3) a desire to grow as an artist and explore new (sub)genres. To start with the first, one artist states that he does not want to represent the lifestyle he had when he was engaging in criminal activities, thus emphasising his identity beyond being 'just' a drill artist:

"I'm not in the streets no more. [...] I don't see it as beneficial to me in any form. [...] I'm tryna stay away from that. It's bad vibes."

Secondly, some artists resist being limited to drill because of the negative stereotypes outsiders have of the genre, its subculture and its artists. As emphasised by Koopman and Davies, meaning relies on both sender and receiver (Koopman and Davies 2001). Sender and receiver may have different ideas about what drill music means, based on their own experiences and backgrounds. According to an interviewed artist, drill artists are frequently seen by outsiders as frightening, distant and less intelligent. One artist resists this negative narrative:

“No one said it was glamorous. So, I can understand why people will get the wrong impression of drill. Thinking that we try to glamorise criminal activities and crime. But we’re not [. . .]. It’s always been an expression for most drill artists, just a way to get stuff off our chest. I can’t go and talk to my mum about, let’s say. . . what were the drugs I used to sell when I was a kid. [. . .] I think people need to understand it more as music instead of just criminals. ‘Cause that’s nine times out of ten [how] the community looks at us—just criminals. Criminals that do some music. But it’s not.”

Thirdly, although most artists started making music in the UK drill subgenre, many stated that they now wish to pursue other genres of music. UK drill artists, like many artists in other genres, can choose to focus on their present subgenre or branch out into other genres. On the one hand, some UK drill artists want to specialise within this subgenre out of a strong need for competence and mastery. They feel a deep motivation to fully understand and master a certain subgenre. One artist acknowledges the negative image the public has of UK drill, but chooses to resist this and still wants to specialise within the subgenre:

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being a drill rapper. Because it’s like. . . [. . .] How it’s portrayed. . . It makes it seem like. . . If you’re a drill rapper, you’re limited to a certain box, but. . . Not really, because. . . Central Cee and a lot of people who are drill rappers, obviously, do it in a different way where it doesn’t seem so gang-affiliated or it doesn’t seem so. . . like. . . violent, basically.”

On the other hand, other UK drill artists want to broaden their horizons. A stronger need for freedom, which comes with autonomy, than for competence can motivate individuals to generalise instead of specialise (Ryan and Deci 2017). They might desire to incorporate different influences and styles into their music in order to further develop their musical identity. Some artists were already active in other genres of music, such as metal and R&B. Some even plan to quit making drill music or to change their narratives within the subgenre. One rapper comments:

*“I got women in my **family**. I got a lil’ sister, I got a child on the way, and stuff like that. My mum, for example, she can’t listen to certain songs that I got released. [. . .] She would say: “This is violent, and this is. . . Maybe you should.” [. . .] It does kind of **limit** you as to what you can do with music when you just string onto just drill, drill, drill, do you know what I’m saying?”*

From a small, raw and authentic subgenre to mainstream, accessible and fabricated one

UK drill is a dynamic subgenre that has undergone major changes over the years in terms of reach, publicity, artist motivations, authenticity, and content. UK drill music is part of a bigger subculture—and, as discussed, a counterculture. The UK drill subgenre changed in terms of *originality* and *authenticity* since it became mainstream, according to the interviewed artists. Here, we will discuss how this upheaval impacted intra- and intergroup dynamics: after all, the art entering the mainstream changes the boundaries

of what is considered in- and outside of the genre. One artist, who was at the beginning of UK drill, intrigued by its raw elements, shared his perspective on this development on originality:

*“I think [UK drill] got worse. Because there’s so many people now. . . Everyone is kind of **copying** each other, the last generation. If you go to the early generation, [. . .] everyone has their own way of rapping. They’re all saying different things. Now, it’s all the same thing. At that point, it’s like: it’s just **boring**. I don’t even listen to that much anymore.”*

When such an authentic counterculture becomes popular, the wider society can absorb this phenomenon and adapt it to commercial interests and thereby diluting the original and authentic values. This corresponds to Hebdige’s theory on cultural co-optation (Hebdige 1979).

However, artists also highlight another, more refreshing side of this commercialisation. It made the subgenre accessible, and thus inclusive, for more diverse people. One artist concludes:

*“[The genre is] out in the open now. [. . .] And this is why you get a lot of mainstream rappers doing different things now. If you watch the industry, it’s not the same **demographic**. You got artists now doing different things and they’re **switching it up**.”*

Besides this above-described effect on originality, artists also express another consequence of commercialisation. They emphasise that the motivation of artists has shifted to the pursuit of wealth, which has opened up the subgenre to inauthentic artists (which we will identify below as ‘cappers’), and has eventually changed how artists feel that they need to prove themselves by increasing the shocking and outrageous content of their art. We will discuss artists’ reflections on each of these steps here. The criminalisation shifted the intrinsic motivation, as described earlier, to extrinsic motivation among different (new) artists. Several artists expressed their discomfort with this shift. One artist explains:

“Like, once a label got involved with one person, then it all started becoming pocket watching, and everyone is seeing, like: ‘Ah this person’s getting that. So why I ain’t getting that?’ And then, the money just corrupts everything. ‘Cause now, it’s like, everybody’s just tryna. . . do things for numbers [. . .] rather than creating actual real music, raw music that actually would resonate. Right now, it’s all about getting viral on TikTok, making sure your numbers are correct.”

This has made the subgenre vulnerable to ‘cappers,’ artists note. This raises conflicting feelings:

“I don’t like it personally, because drill music first came about as an expression for people that come from this lifestyle. Now, people are using it as like a carrying a kind of donkey just trying to get a bigger name. I don’t like it. [. . .] We always use it as a form of talking, how to get out our feelings. And people are now using it to their advantage, should we say. So, I mean, I got mixed feelings. [. . .] I do understand why people do it. Some people may just want to create music and think: ‘Ah this is the music I listen to, so this is the music I’m gonna create’. But if you look at the background of drill, that’s not what it is about. [. . .] It’s all to do with your upbringing and your backgrounds and your surroundings. Not everyone can be a drill artist.”

The people “just trying to get a bigger name” described in the above quote are often referred to as cappers (verb: to cap): inauthentic rappers who share fabricated narratives

about themselves to gain popularity, or in slang: ‘clout’. Several artists said that there are many cappers nowadays in the music scene. Although the UK drill platform has opened doors to other options and a better future for many artists, drill music can also be considered as a way *into* the lifestyle. The genre knows rappers who do not hide their faces and actively commit crimes just to prove their (initially fabricated) violent lyrics, reflecting how UK drill indeed functions in the interaction between reality and perception. One producer explained this phenomenon in his own words:

“If you’re rapping about stuff you don’t actually do, that’s also considered, like: ‘Ah you’re crap’. You know, no one’s gonna listen to you. So yeah, you tend to have to do the things you’re talking about, otherwise you’ll lose your respect in the scene [. . .]. That’s generally how it seems to be.”

A side effect is that originally authentic rappers are more likely to be put under a magnifying glass and get punished for that. Some artists even said they can tell rappers are not real because they have extremely incriminating lyrics, yet have never been arrested.

The vulnerability of drill to cappers has thus led to increasingly intense and violent marketing of UK drill to prove authenticity. Shock advertising is being used by marketers to stand out from the competition (Dahl et al. 2003; Urwin and Venter 2014). Two artists mentioned the shocking element in many UK drill songs from new generation artists. One said: *“the more outrageous you rap, the more exposure you get”*. Another artist explained: *“Shock factor always [. . .] wins. In terms of just blowing up, but like, maintaining something. . . [. . .] You’re gonna lose [the audience] on the long run.”*

Through the analysis of these two main counter-narratives, it is evident that the meaning given to the subgenre varies amongst artists, influenced by both intra- and inter-group dynamics. The above two narratives show a desire for autonomy and recognition for their creativity. Artists are aware of the negative narrative of the subgenre but resist this by distinguishing themselves or changing course. Especially after increasing commercialisation, some dissociated from drill after it was taken over by cappers, record labels, and marketing.

2.3. Criminalisation of UK Drill

Here, we examine how artists attach meanings to the criminalisation of UK drill by focussing on five identified counter-narratives: *UK drill reflects London’s violent reality; I feel framed as a criminal, rather than an artist; the authentic rappers lose, the cappers win; my music is a non-violent way of resisting; and I can be a key figure*. These narratives all directly counter criminalisation as arguably the strongest master narrative in British society on drill.

UK drill reflects London’s violent reality

Although many young drill artists recognise the violent origin and characteristics of the subgenre, many stress that the subgenre is rather a reflection and symptom of the violent realities they were brought up in, in everyday life, than an instigator of violence. One artist comments:

“I understand there’s a big stigma on drill music. A lot of people say that, ehm, it’s the reason for [. . .] violence increasing in the streets of London. Which [. . .] I don’t agree with. I think there will still be crimes happening, if drill music was to stop.”

This corresponds to research that claims that UK drill does not cause violence, despite its negative and causal portrayal in mainstream media (Schwarze and Fatsis 2022; Kleinberg

and McFarlane 2020; Lee 2022). These studies indicate a correlational connection rather than a causal one between drill rap and crime.

This is not to say we should totally abandon this relation. According to two other respondents, indeed, it is important to at least allow for the potential that drill functions as a communication tool to talk about violence. Even though there may not be a direct causal connection, they seem to say, drill is at its core a platform for communication within these violent contexts. Here, it is important to distinguish between intra- and intergroup perceptions and reality. While the outside may perceive UK drill as inherently violent, from the inside, the social justice dimension becomes clear. Drill as platform can serve for indirect communication with broader society, and opponents, or in slang: ‘opps’, which may provoke responses from them. One producer explains: “Cause it’s called drill for a reason. You’re drilling on your opps, right? You’re going. . . the whole point is going back and forth.” One rapper said that, although drill music can be a way of expressing yourself and doing better for artists, both listeners and artists can get motivated to do bad things, intentionally and unintentionally:

“[Violence and crime] do happen, do you know what I mean? These things aren’t being said for no reason. [. . .] It’s not coming out of thin air. [. . .] So when people are saying drill makes people go out and do bad things and they’re stabbing. . . They’re talking about stabbings and shootings from last week, they’re talking about things that have actually taken place, it is a bad thing. But without that, drill wouldn’t be drill.”

I feel framed as a criminal, rather than an artist

Almost all interviewed artists have first- or second-hand experiences of having their content removed by authorities, being monitored on social media, being prohibited from shooting music videos in specific areas, or having their shows cancelled, because they make music in the UK drill subgenre. According to Honneth’s (1996) theory, UK drill artists are being denied social esteem because it feels their creative work is not respected or valued but criminalised. When talking about these violations, artists express that they feel (1) misrecognised in the creative process in UK drill, (2) misrecognised in the meaning of their music, (3) discriminated against in contrast to other music genres, and (4) discriminated against even within the UK drill subgenre.

First, some artists express their frustration of putting a lot of effort into their music, only to have it removed later. Additionally, their legal rights might be violated because their creative work is being taken down, which means they do not have the right of freedom of expression in their music. One says:

“Studio time is not easy. Paying for beats ain’t easy. Paying for music videos ain’t easy. It’s all a grind. That’s what people gotta understand that it’s actually deeper than you think it is. Music as a whole. It’s actually a grind. You get me? And the police are just taking it down. They just don’t understand what is put into this whole concept of creating music. The marketing as well.”

Some respond to these kinds of setbacks by stopping making music. Misrecognition reinforces the sense of exclusion and can negatively impact one’s self-esteem and self-respect, and thus further marginalise them. Some artists have lost interest in creating music altogether, as they see no use in it if it is constantly being removed or leaked. One respondent comments: “You can’t really expect nothing else. They just go back to what they know.”

Secondly, the Drill Music Translation Cadre tends to interpret lyrics without knowing the meaning of the music to its original creator. This is another example of how UK drill’s

products—including the artist's meanings—are misrecognised. In a psychological sense, this can impact one's social esteem because the artist's efforts in making this type of music are not being valued. One rapper illustrates how it impacted him legally:

"I was on a case and they decided to get a drill expert to explain my lyrics. Which no makes sense, because only I will understand what my lyrics mean. But they got a drill expert what wasn't a drill expert. She just listens to drill to explain what I am saying which is completely wrong. And that put me in jail."

Thirdly, artists feel that the products and people in the UK drill subculture are treated differently from those in other (non-Black) genres. Some artists say that the UK drill subgenre is specifically targeted because the subculture mainly consists of people from the Black communities, intersecting with systemic racism, discrimination, disadvantage, and thus misrecognition. One artist said:

"They see a group of Black people with hoodies and coats, [...] say, for instance rapping. And then they'll see a bunch of White people on horses with cowboy hats. . . say, talking about the exact same thing. They're more likely to stop the group of Black people then they are to stop a group of White people. Just due down to racial slurs."

When approached through an intersectional lens, it is clear that UK drill artists are disproportionately constructed as perpetual suspects due to the intersecting effects of race, gender, class, and age, especially when compared to musicians from other genres.

Fourthly, UK drill artists criticise the stereotypical image that outsiders have of the upcoming artists within the subgenre. These artists are painted with the same brush, meaning that the individual differences between these artists are often not recognised. However, more successful and mainstream artists seem to be treated with more privilege and less censorship. The public's opinion that upcoming UK drill musicians are more likely to be labelled criminals than more successful artists within the subgenre may be influenced by the intersection of gender, class, age, and race. One artist explained:

"They see that as money. They see that as profit for them because they're running from streams and [...] radio play. Whereas in, I'm just trying to earn a little bit of money on the side."

The authentic rappers lose, the cappers win

The criminalisation of UK drill gives so-called cappers, as introduced previously, free rein because their fictional lyrics cannot be linked to real crimes, while authentic rappers—who use their music as an outlet and a form of coping—are punished for their honesty. This dynamic exposes the genre to opportunists and undermines its very essence. The decisions drill artists make regarding authenticity are shaped by this criminalisation. Ironically, prison has become a marker of realness within the genre. While cappers go unpunished because their lyrics cannot be connected to real-life crimes, authentic rappers are put under intense scrutiny. One artist mocked cappers who have not endured the legal repercussions tied to their lyrical content: *"If [cappers] went through all [of] them court cases, [they] wouldn't be allowed to say what [they]'re saying right now."* In other words, rappers may face incarceration due to their extremely incriminating lyrics. Thus, if a rapper uses highly violent lyrics and has not been prosecuted, it increases the likelihood that he is a capper. As another artist stated:

"[Fans] love the big drill rappers, and they're the ones that actually be doing the most. [...] Some of the biggest drill rappers are the ones that have got life in jail."

To understand these dynamics of authenticity and performance, it is crucial to consider broader socio-economic and legal shifts. While incarceration once signified authenticity, the mainstreaming of UK drill has turned it into a commercially viable genre, attracting artists motivated by profit. Some artists seek to substantiate their realness through real-life acts, while others—the cappers—imitate authenticity without incurring legal risks. For new listeners, this distinction is often unclear. In this context, capping becomes a strategic choice on the intra-group level to exit a marginalised position: it allows artists to gain both legal recognition (as they avoid prosecution) and social esteem (as their music avoids censorship and is still celebrated). The meaning of this criminalisation is constantly evolving. It both restricts the creative freedom and puts authenticity at risk, and, at the same time, it gives rise to new countercultural groups and trends.

My music is a non-violent way of resisting

Despite this criminalisation, some artists respond through their music in a way and narrative that is explicitly non-violent. They use their creativity to counter this marginalisation. *“The whole UK underground, urban, London [. . .] culture has always been attacked from the earlies. So. . . I feel like it’s nothing new,”* one artist reflects, testifying to historical awareness and the own positioning and framing by external actors. This kind of misrecognition can serve as a motivation of rebellion. He said, *“If they’re gonna remove one of our beats, we’re gonna make three more.”*

I can be a key figure

Drill artists often position themselves as more than entertainers—they see themselves as community figures bearing social responsibility. As some respondents indicate, this includes offering financial support, but also actively working to de-escalate the criminalisation of UK drill and to support vulnerable youth. Their responses reflect a broader effort to humanise the subgenre and reclaim agency in the public discourse. Initiatives such as producing documentaries or initiating dialogue with politicians at the Houses of Parliament illustrate artists’ attempts to foster understanding and counter reductive narratives.

Several artists voiced frustration with the lack of meaningful engagement from authorities, highlighting the absence of dialogue. As one artist put it: *“There was never a conversation.”* Instead of banning the whole subgenre, one artist advocates for cooperation, suggesting that partnerships between musicians and institutions may yield more constructive outcomes. In this spirit, some artists extend their role beyond music—visiting schools to speak about knife crime, drug use, mental health, and the importance of social ties. These interventions reflect a broader commitment to presenting alternative paths and to reshape the way UK drill—and its artists—are perceived. As one artist stated, *“Instead of just being against it, maybe try and collaborate with that. [. . .] Think about the children. The new generation.”*

These five narratives reflect a broader pattern of misrecognition in relation to criminalisation, where artists are denied social esteem, misunderstood by institutions, and disproportionately policed due to racial and cultural bias. While drill serves as a form of expression, resistance, and coping, its meaning cannot be separated from the social conditions in which it is produced. As a reflection of poverty, marginalisation, and urban violence, UK drill is a symptom of structural inequality. Focussing solely on the music and lyrics obscures these deeper issues. Understanding the genre requires situating it within broader socio-economic contexts, including its mainstreaming and criminalisation. Moving beyond moral panic means engaging with artists through dialogue, recognition, and a commitment to cultural and social justice.

3. Discussion

This paper has set out to take drill music seriously as an art form. In this way, it wanted to shed new light on the often taken-for-granted relation between UK drill and criminalisation. It has done so by centring the artists themselves through interviews and subsequent narrative analysis. Twelve narratives were identified in this study, in three categories (motivation; relation to the subgenre; criminalisation):

I represent where I am coming from
 UK drill is my way of coping
 I am (becoming financially) successful
 I can be a role model
 I am a creative person and recognised for that
 I am more than 'just' a drill artist
 From a small, raw and authentic subgenre to a mainstream, accessible and fabricated one
 UK drill reflects London's violent reality
 I feel framed as a criminal, rather than an artist
 The authentic rappers lose, the cappers win
 My music is a non-violent way of resisting
 I can be a key figure

In this study, we conceptualised the artists' accounts as narratives because they articulate the meanings through which they understand their own practices, identities, and social environments. Yet narratives do not simply describe experiences; they also organise them. A narrative perspective assumes that individuals make sense of their lives by selecting, sequencing, and framing events in ways that reflect both personal agency and broader cultural discourses. This methodological orientation guided our decision to reconstruct participants' statements in the first person. We thereby foregrounded their narrative agency and resisted the objectification that often characterises public and institutional representations of drill artists.

Building on Lindemann's definition of counter-narratives as stories that challenge master narratives which support the marginalisation of a social group, we understand the narratives which were identified in this study as acts of epistemic and cultural resistance. However, counter-narratives are not monolithic oppositions. They function as situated meaning-making practices through which marginalised actors negotiate the terms of recognition imposed upon them. With this in mind, the counter-narratives we discussed should be read as heterogeneous modes of sense-making that collectively destabilise dominant associations between drill, deviance and criminality, and address the complexity of artists' self-understandings. Consistent with the work of Solórzano and Yosso (2002) and Lindemann (2001, 2020), we view counter-narratives as situated practices through which marginalised actors negotiate recognition and challenge dominant storylines, rather than as uniform oppositional accounts.

Through these narratives, it appears that artists use drill as an art form to give meaning to their lived experiences. This also goes for criminalisation and violence in specific terms: as the narrative *UK drill reflects London's violent realities* says, drill is a social product, deeply embedded in structural inequality. Thereby, its meaning-making cannot be separated from the conditions in which it is created.

All of the above narratives thus, by foregrounding artists' voices, show that UK drill is not purely individual. It is formed within a collective counterculture that shares values, norms, and experiences. For many artists, participation in drill represents not only a form of creative expression but also a way to maintain meaningful social ties and support their immediate environment. This is evident in their efforts to provide

financial assistance to family and peers, to inspire others through personal reflection, and to foster solidarity through collaborative music-making. Such dynamics reveal a complex network of interdependence, where individual identities are shaped through collective experience and mutual obligation. Artists are not isolated agents, but participants in a shared cultural language.

Yet the genre is often collectively punished, despite the diversity within it. Treating all artists as equally culpable obscures the complexity of individual and subcultural experiences. The ongoing stigmatisation and criminalisation of drill are experienced by these artists as a form of exclusion, reducing complex narratives to mere incitement of violence (see: *I feel framed as a criminal, rather than an artist*). Many UK drill artists may suffer moral injury as a result of their socioeconomic standing. In the first place, as previously said, storytelling in their music may be a means of intra- and inter-group expression and meaning-making. This moral harm may worsen if the subgenre is criminalised, which would mean that such a community and platform are lost. As explored under the narrative, *my music is a non-violent way of resisting*, drill has become a space of resistance—against stereotyping, co-option, institutional censorship, and cultural marginalisation. This resistance happens both on an intra-group and inter-group level: in relation to peers and the self; and to exit a certain marginalised position in society, by reclaiming their agency, and to challenge the structural conditions that foster such violence. Sometimes these counter-narratives took the explicit form of resisting, thus functioning as ‘big stories’ in themselves (Phoenix 2013). But more often these counter-narratives are part of the more daily, ‘small stories’ that respondents construct in negotiation with the social-cultural context (Phoenix 2013). These more daily stories of resistance, we argue, can be as impactful.

An examination of the findings reveals a set of productive tensions between the narratives, which further illuminate the social and cultural dynamics of drill. For instance, artists frame drill simultaneously as a deeply personal mode of self-expression and as a cultural manifestation which is shaped by poverty, racism, policing, and exclusion. They speak of autonomy and creative agency while also describing profound structural constraints, such as censorship, surveillance, and misrecognition, which shape what kind of art is produced and circulated. Similarly, their narratives of authenticity coexist with concerns about commercialisation, ‘capping,’ and the pressures to intensify violent lyrical content in response to market incentives. We understand these tensions not as contradictions which need to be resolved, but as central features of drill’s narrative landscape: they illuminate how artists negotiate, resist, and sometimes reproduce the cultural logics which surround the genre.

Attending to these tensions clarifies the mechanisms through which the narratives operate as counter-narratives. Their counter-hegemonic force does not lie solely in offering alternative content to dominant stories about drill, but also in exposing the instability of the dominant narratives themselves. By articulating drill as both forms of art as well as coping, as both community and industry, and as both authenticity and performance, the artists unsettle reductive portrayals that cast them as one-dimensional social threats. This multiplicity strengthens their capacity to challenge criminalising master narratives and to reclaim interpretive authority over their own creative labour.

The narratives which we discussed in this study challenge dominant narratives in several ways: firstly, by reframing drill as a site of emotional expression and support; secondly, by highlighting its role in enabling social mobility and relational responsibility; and thirdly, by foregrounding the structural inequalities that underpin the conditions from which drill emerges. We believe that these counter-narratives destabilise the widespread assumption that drill is inherently criminal, and instead present it as a cultural practice through which young people articulate resistance, hope, community and identity. In this

sense, the narratives not only counter misrecognition at the level of representation but also highlight the moral and political claims which they embed in drill as a cultural form.

At the same time, our ability to explore the full range of narrative tensions is shaped by the composition of our sample. All participants were young men from similar racialised and economically marginalised backgrounds, which limited the extent to which we could investigate how intersections of gender, sexuality, migration background, region, or artistic status shape divergent narrative trajectories within drill. While our intersectional framework sheds light on how race, class, and age co-produce experiences of criminalisation and marginalisation, we recognise that it does not capture the fuller internal diversity of the drill scene. Future research should therefore extend this work by including women, non-binary artists, LGBTQ+ artists, established mainstream performers, the regional scene, and self-identified ‘cappers,’ whose perspectives remain largely absent from scholarly accounts, including our own research. Such an expanded methodological horizon would allow for a more comprehensive mapping of how different groups within drill construct, contest, and mobilise their own narratives in ways that further deepen our understanding of counter-narration in culturally contested fields. With the knowledge of the current study, we also recommend further research to analyse the products of this subgenre from the Contour Theory (CT) (Benenti and Meini 2018). Lyrics and dimensions in the music can be studied to gain a deeper understanding of this subgenre.

What this study has achieved is to shine a spotlight on drill artists’ narratives. Together, these narratives serve to humanise and contextualise the lived experiences associated with UK drill music. Our approach aimed to maximise artists’ involvement in co-constructing the analysis by jointly identifying narratives with respondents and allowing them opportunities to revise these accounts. Reflecting on this process, we suggest that future research would benefit from involving participants at an even earlier stage, particularly in co-developing research questions and objectives. By attempting to co-create this study together with the respondents, we hope to highlight the agency of artists, a perspective often overlooked in literature focussing on their criminalisation rather than their meaning-making and their art. Therefore, UK drill operates not merely as a musical subgenre but as a complex and significant practice of cultural resistance and community validation.

4. Method

This study has been designed as a qualitative empirical study. It looks into the motivations and meanings UK drill artists attribute on the intra- and inter-group level to their music, the drill subculture, and its ongoing criminalisation. These meanings are studied as narratives. These are generated by collecting empirical data through in-depth interviews with performing artists and producers within this genre and subculture. Our interview-based approach centres artists’ sociocultural interpretations rather than analysing musical form.

Aspirant participants were contacted between September 2023 and February 2024. This study focuses on males only, between the ages of 20 and 28 years old. Ten respondents were interviewed through video or audio calls (Zoom, Google Meet, FaceTime, and Microsoft Teams). The results of the interviews were analysed by inductive coding and categorising *counter-narratives* in Atlas.ti.

For the analysis of these counter-narratives, we used the understanding of Lindemann: a story that has the power to undermined and dismantle ‘master narratives’ or other popular that fuel the oppression of a social group (Lindemann 2020). Counter-narratives or counterstorytelling can thus, following Dutta, Azad, and Hussain, become “a form of epistemic justice” (Dutta et al. 2022, p. 60). In this article we see UK drill through the lens of this potential for counterstorytelling to “[tell] the stories of people whose experiences

are erased from or dehumanized by dominant stories and modes of storytelling,” which thus can “reveal, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories and how they maintain particular configurations of oppression and privilege” (Dutta et al. 2022, p. 61). While counter-narratives can thus be highly impactful, we look for them in this research both as ‘big’ and as ‘small stories’ (Phoenix 2013). So instead of only looking for the established stories and key narratives, we follow Ann Phoenix in including more daily stories and seek “how social-cultural issues and dilemmas are evident in talk” (Phoenix 2013, p. 66). It is in these ‘small’ stories too that respondents may negotiate master narratives and their resistance to stigmatisation and marginalisation, hence creating counter-narratives. For the categorisation of these narratives, we relied on the above-presented theoretical framework. Indeed, this article itself can also be seen as a form of a counter-narrative. By trying to foreground artists’ agency, this article aims to legitimise types of knowledge that are often excluded from academic research and speak against the dominant narrative that silences, racialises, and criminalises these voices (Dutta et al. 2022, p. 62).

For the analysis, we formulated the narratives in first person-perspective in line with our commitment to foregrounding artists’ agency. Nearly all respondents were consulted after the categorisation process to inquire whether the identified narratives resonated with them to enhance artists’ ownership and to guarantee the validity of the study. Six out of ten participants agreed with the counter-narratives or made appropriate modifications when asked whether they resonated with them. The other four artists did not reply or were not reachable.

5. Conclusions

Since UK drill became mainstream, it can be said that a third dimension has been added to drill, next to the intra-group and inter-group dimensions identified at the start of this paper. This third dimension is now an integral part of the subgenre: drill as a means to *individual* financial success. This third dimension, we argue, is at least partially a response to the criminalisation of UK drill as an art form. The assumed correlation between the music and criminality has led to conflicting claims on authenticity, prompting some artists to re-invent the genre by reframing it as a means to individual success. This third dimension can also be said to add to criminalisation. Now, drill has become a lucrative business, it has turned more mainstream, generating more attention in the media, which in turn leads to criminalisation.

This third dimension looks highly isolated from the other two, but we argue here that it, too, uses drill as both an intra- and inter-group platform for expression. Also as a means to individual financial success, the genre serves as an intra-group medium through which artists construct identity, assert autonomy, and support their own communities. Rooted in the socio-economic realities of marginalised urban youth (see: *I represent where I am coming from*), drill as a means to financial success furthermore allows artists to create their own subculture. Here, they can articulate their lived experiences creatively on the inter-group level, claiming visibility in a society where they often face systemic misrecognition, as conceptualised by Axel Honneth (see: *I am a creative person and recognised for that*).

In this sense, this third dimension only underlines the dynamic relation between UK drill and wider society: rather than an isolated niche, UK drill forms a subculture that responds to as much as shapes wider socio-economic, political, and cultural realities. For example, UK drill offers pathways to financial success and personal growth (see: *I am (becoming financially) successful*), motivating artists to harness their creativity not only as a form of survival but also as a strategy for social mobility. Through their music, they do not only produce counter-narratives to challenge dominant perceptions, but they also generate a sense of solidarity and reclaim agency.

In conclusion, we refer back to the quote from KRS-One earlier: “If you don’t know about the collective consciousness of Hip-hop, it will reflect in your product. If you don’t know the culture of Hip Hop, it will reflect” (Lss Tlk 2015, 1:05:13). We hope to have contributed to the public knowledge about the collective consciousness and culture of UK drill, allowing its products to be better understood and put into context. This not only applies to UK drill music, but also other subgenres and subcultures that are stigmatised based on their art productions.

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Note

- ¹ For further research on the dimensions of music and how it is used to express emotions, we refer to the Contour Theory (CT) of Benenti and Meini (2018).

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