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As rap music grows in popularity within the United States and abroad, a new form of racism rises from international acclaim. As Black youth attempt to seek fame and fortune in the rap industry, the attention of the criminal legal system is drawn towards these aspiring artists – creating a surveillance of Black artistry and creative content. This study intends to explore the relationship between young Black men and boys, specifically those embodying the Gangsta' image, and the masculine presentation displayed within their creative artwork. By understanding how masculine performances are displayed within music videos, we can better understand how certain self-performances can lead to surveillance and eventual criminalization due to their performance. This study will be using qualitative content analysis through a standardized coding instrument of Gangsta' rap music videos located on the social media site, YouTube. By deconstructing the performances seen during these videos, we should be able to better understand how this specific Black masculine performance can lead to being criminalized by agents of the criminal control system, as the Gangsta' identity is inherently against the norms and beliefs of mainstream society (Dimitriadis, 2001). Through this study, we shall be able to better understand how future research will need to focus on how the criminal legal system criminalizes certain expressions of Blackness. As Black youth attempt to break into the lucrative business of music by selling a Black Gangsta' image, these same youths are potentially setting themselves up for additional policing and control.

FROM THE STUDIO BOOTH TO THE DEFENDANT'S TABLE:
THE COSTLY AFTERMATH OF THE
COMMODIFIED GANGSTA'

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to all the students I worked with during my time at Lenoir Youth Development Center. Although our time together was short in the grand scheme of things, each of your lives profoundly impacted mine that words cannot properly convey everything.

I never forgot any of you. Not a day goes by where I don't sit and wonder where life took you, and I often cry about how brutal life was for some of you. I try to take no news as good news, but it solemnly calms me. My life's work is dedicated to preventing the upcoming generations from experiencing the trials so many of you encountered. I only want the best for each of you, and I'm so sorry that it wasn't in the cards for you to experience that.

Rest in Power Trevell Stanford and Kaleel Chestnut. You deserved better during this life.

APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
An Abridged History of Gangsta’ Rap: How We Went from N.W.A. to Chief Keef.....	6
From Street Corners to Digital Spaces: How Gangs, Social Media and Crime Coexist	10
CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	13
CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY.....	16
Methods	19
CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS – MUSIC VIDEOS.....	22
First Video: Bando’s Bean Talk	22
Second Video: Ace’s Wild World	26
Third Video: JJ3 - We Out Here.....	29
Fourth Video: Dollaz - Takin’ ‘Em Back.....	32
CHAPTER VI: RESULTS – INTERVIEW ANALYSIS.....	35
Bando’s Interview.....	37
JJ3’s Interview.....	39
Dollaz’s Interview.....	41
CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION	46
Masculine Presentation and Cool Posing through Black Digital Bodies.....	47
Tools of Masculinity	49
Situating Peer Groups, Gender, and Collective Action within Drill Music	53
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION	57
The Commodified Gangsta: The Struggle towards Freedom.....	58
Limitations and Future Studies.....	61
Final Notes	62
REFERENCES.....	64
APPENDIX A: SELECTED GANGSTA’ RAP VIDEOS CODING INSTRUMENT.....	71

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Learning to Speak Without Talking” Communication Amongst Disadvantaged Black Youth

Although I’ve been an avid Hip-Hop fan for much of my life¹, it was during my time at Lenoir Youth Development Center supervising incarcerated youth that I was able to amass a greater understanding of the artform. I can still remember walking the halls of the facility as a Youth Services Behavior Technician and hearing rap lyrics seeping through my students locked doors into the main common areas of their housing units. Sometimes I was able to recognize these lyrics from popular songs on the radio; other times I assumed the lyrics were written by the students themselves, scribbled on state-issued notepads within their locked rooms. Rap centric movies such as *Notorious* and *All Eyes on Me* would have my students consistently renewing their commitments to creating the greatest lyrics ever spoken. Although I was highly impressed by their commitment to developing stronger writing and communication skills through their rap lyrics, it was often difficult to consume the words mentioned within their music authentically as the songs they were producing contained such intensely violent content. The room often felt congested with violent imagery as rap lyrics filled the common spaces with descriptions of violence, gang-related behavior, sexually explicit, and overall behavior that seemed aggressive - I was perplexed by how these themes could feel so attractive to my students for daily consumption and production. It wasn’t until one of my students explained to me the importance

¹Throughout portions of the introduction and conclusion chapters of this thesis, the researcher relies on their personal experiences of working in a youth correctional facility to help explore the research topic of commodified black masculinity and criminalization. In fact, it was those personal experiences that helped birthed interest in this topic, which may make portions of this work feel autoethnographic in nature. These autoethnographic-inspired techniques are not primary methodology used in this research, but they help personify the population explored during this study and thus may be evident in analyzing the content explored during this study.

of these lyrics and why he strives hard every single day to become a prolific rapper. He told me, “When I rap, I’m appreciated for who I am, as I am. At this point, it’s either become a rapper or play ball so I ain’t moving weight (selling drugs) when I go home. So, I gotta use this time to practice.” In that instance, I felt my ignorance surrounding the subject shatter with a sociological curiosity rising from the broken pieces on the ground as I was now invested in seeing this topic from a new angle.

With this newfound knowledge, I made a conscious effort to see how my students utilized these lyrics to navigate their daily lives within state custody. Instead of being bogged down with how deafening their rap music could feel within the housing units, I began to notice how these students used these lyrics to communicate with one another about certain topics and issues that would be difficult to convey during normal conversation. Certain topics discussed within these lyrics included feelings of alienation from mainstream society, frustration and sadness surrounding a life lived in poverty and racialized neglect, fears of dying and losing loved ones, and anger towards feeling hopeless and helpless in a brutal life. Initially, I was not able to understand the amount of impression management my students were demonstrating through their rap performances amongst their peers, but I was intrigued by how that performance was received by their fellow peers. It was through their performance that I became aware of how rap music acted as a medium between illustrating intimate feelings and anxieties yet retaining their masculine performance amongst their watching peers. As I grew in my sociological point of view, I gained understand of how rap performances for young Black men and boys became representative of Stuart’s (2020; 2019) concept of “cool masculinity” which also embodies the well-manicured cool presenting bravado necessary to demonstrate Richard Major’s (1992) cool posing, an adopted coping mechanism to handle emotionally and psychologically vulnerable

situations. Even though the lyrics themselves came off as wildly violent, further examination of these lyrics demonstrated a more scarred narrative of life and death facing marginalized Black youth forgotten in the battlefields of the American inner-cities and rural 'hoods across the state.

As for the almost religious scribbling and critiquing of lyrics seen with our students when it came to the construction of their rap persona. The act appeared to serve two purposes: (1) to build a community of other young men to discuss the trials and tribulations of life, find common ground with one another, and even take risks of dreaming of a better future where personal agency is situated in the center, and (2) to push themselves towards becoming more proficient rappers and fine-tuning their skills.

Becoming a rapper to a lot of marginalized Black youth, especially young Black boys, is a great opportunity to rewrite their own future as they pursue legitimate work opportunities and financial stability, while also showing respect and celebration towards the past from which they originated. However, with so many other Black youths struggling for the opportunity to make it in the entertainment industry as a rapper, this causes a strain as competition now sets in to become a predominant voice in a sea of hungry and anxious newcomers. The competition to become seen and recognized by attempting to make a name for themselves, produces a need to create content that can promote the artist to rise amongst the masses of other struggling rappers and gain the attention and fandom of waiting consumers. Stuart (2020) mentions how the intense competition to be seen and recognized causes a demand to create more edgy, more violent content to attract the attention of potential fans and viewers. Violent and edgy content has always existed as an attractive pull for viewers to vacation into, especially for those who would find the environment of the Black American 'hood as exotic and fantastical (Stuart, 2020).

How rappers must present themselves to stay relevant in the faces of eager rap fans is the central focus of this thesis. Through this study, I attempt to offer an understanding of how young Black men must present and sell themselves to establish a particular rap persona to market themselves to awaiting fans, and perhaps just as important, to gain financial and social accolades for their endeavor. Stated otherwise, this study intends to illustrate how Black youth, especially Black young males, portray themselves in order to achieve the opportunity to become a Gangsta' rapper.

The genre of Gangsta' rap was chosen in particular due to Gangsta' rap being one of the most popular subgenres within the rap music category but to also explore the potential risk that may arise from attempting to merge into this very lucrative market that has many Black men navigating a newer, but everlasting form of racism (Nielson and Dennis, 2020). Much like the kids at Lenoir Youth Development Center, Black youth across the United States, through masculine performative identities, are religiously practicing and fine-tuning their crafts as emerging artists for the chance and opportunity to make millions and find community alongside other marginalized Black identities. Unfortunately, the craft of Gangsta' rapping can be characterized as deafening and profane noise that lacks any artistic complexity (Nielson & Dennis, 2020; Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Dunbar, Kubrin and Scurich, 2016). It is often simplistically heard as aggressive and explicit lyrics (Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Dunbar et al., 2016). As I hinted earlier, when I was first exposed to the genre, I had difficulty appreciating its complexity, including how personal narratives situate a mixture of fantasy and reality. When we do this, we disallow the creator to be seen and heard holistically, especially since this mixture of fantasy and reality is an essential component of Black expression and storytelling (Nielson and

Dennis, 2020; Waters, 2022) This has vital consequences when the artform is placed within the crosshairs of the criminal legal system.

Through a potential misunderstanding of Black cultural storytelling and expression, its examination at the hands of the criminal legal system can effectively circumvent and control Black creative expression. In this way, by seeking to understand how young Black men may wish to illustrate themselves within the creative artform of Gangsta' Rap, we also ask how this form of presentation can leave them open to be criminalized by agents of the criminal legal system. I submit that the best way to examine this issue is to investigate artists who are still seeking their big break into the forum. By conducting a qualitative content analysis of videos pulled from Youtube, one of the most popular sources for up-and-coming artists to share and distribute their creative products, we may gather a stronger understanding of how masculine performance originates from a very specific form of Black pain and resistance against white supremacy. Alongside traversing barriers to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Majors, 1992; White, 2011), these Black youth arguably must navigate their creative products from being criminalized and observed as declarations of violence and criminality with the courtesy of it being seen as art worthy of understanding.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

An Abridged History of Gangsta' Rap: How We Went from N.W.A. to Chief Keef

Although Hip-Hop and Rap are used interchangeably to describe a particular musical genre, these two terms represent different elements of Black culture. Hip-Hop is the appropriate moniker to describe all Black culture's musical contributions and genres (such as Soul, Funk, Rock and Roll, R&B and Jazz), while Rap is the largest popular genre within this cultural creative space (Baker, 2012; 2018). Rap music originally emerged on the Hip-Hop scene in the early to mid-1970s by poor Black and Brown youth within the United States' inner-city neighborhoods. Due to the lack of financial means to afford musical equipment, youth instead took to remixing already produced melodies to create new beats to make affordable music (Baker, 2012). This new form of affordable music production quickly became popular with the inner-city youth, especially once lyrics were laid on top of the remixed beats. This music provided easy yet innovative fun for local performers and disc jockeys (DJs) to entertain crowds (Baker, 2012; 2018).

As rap began to spread around the nation amongst more Black youth, the genre began to differentiate, changing vastly as the music bounded around different regions of the United States. During the 1990s when rap had developed strong distinctions amongst the various Black concentrated regions of the United States, we began to see the new region-specific styles come to light - Los Angeles's west coast style of Gangsta' Rap in California in particular (Baker, 2012; Alridge and Stewart, 2005). One of the first artists to coin the term Gangsta' Rap was Ice Cube from the rap group N.W.A. (Alridge and Stewart, 2005). Ice Cube illustrated Gangsta' rap as the ability for listeners to take a first-person ride through the ganglands of LA and see the daily lives of those often forgotten by the surrounding city, almost as a quasi-hood safari (Alridge and

Stewart, 2005; Baker, 2012; 2018). These vivid yet haunting depictions of gang violence, strong sense of pride for place, as well as other 'hood related activities and places within South Central LA is the core definition of what makes a particular rap song Gangsta'. The primary purpose of Gangsta' rap during its rise in the 1990s, was to give voice and bring light to an often ignored population within American society while also standing against the structural oppression met by Black people in the inner-city ghetto across the United States (Alridge and Stewart, 2005, Stuart, 2020). From chronic unemployment, police violence and suppression, drug activity and trading, deindustrialization and destructive government policies - all of them can be found in Gangsta' rap's genesis (Alridge and Stewart, 2005). This often-provided Gangsta' rap as being somewhat of a political resistance or revolutionary soundtrack for much of the political discontent amongst the Black populace during this time period. As these stories grow to become captivating, and even appearing to be exotic, this subsection in rap grows to become its main attraction as audiences become mesmerized by the narratives of the mysterious other.

As Gangsta' rap reached new popularity within the United States, this left the genre open for commercialization and interference from the markets. Previous research on the consumption of rap music has illuminated, particularly Gangsta' rap music, the fascination with "real Blackness" and the lasting effects on Black people once the song is over. Janise Blackshear's research allowed us to explore how middle-class White youth interact with rap music.

Participants were White college students from the author's college campus who reported being avid hip-hop listeners. Blackshear chose participants who have previously purchased at least three hip-hop CDs. Participants in the study had difficulties connecting rap music directly to Black culture and Black experiences (Blackshear, 2007). White listeners of rap music as illustrated in this particular study, primarily listened to the genre for self serving and affirming

talking points towards their own existence within American society. Rap music allowed for White participants to make openly defiant stands against their parents or the contemporary social structure (Blackshear, 2007). Due to Gangsta' rap music's inherent opposition to the contemporary power structure within America - young White listeners were able to easily identify themselves with this genre, albeit momentarily. White consumers of rap music also expressed feelings of equality with the Black rapper, as participants reported feeling that they and the rapper had equal means and goals to aspire towards. Participants reported how the rapper and themselves are both striving for similar middle-class goals and aspirations with equal means and similar obstacles towards achieving these situated goals. Listeners even spoke on how the Gangster attitude was a way to demonstrate hard work needed to excel in the corporate environment (Blackshear, 2007). The most interesting piece of information pulled from this study was how White listeners of rap music are able to enjoy rap music, even the confrontational Gangsta' rap subgenre, and still harbor feelings of anti-Blackness or ignorance towards the lived realities of Black people (Blackshear, 2007). This study explores that although White listeners of rap music make up the bulk of purchasers of rap music (Author, 2014), the revolutionary and political meanings of the music is either whitewashed or completely lost. Prevailing myths of White listeners of rap music to grasp a better understanding of Black culture are illustrated to be a more complicated relationship. Instead, White listeners could be tuning in for more personal reasons associated with needs of feeling cool, rebelling against established authority figures and following in with current trends (Blackshear, 2007).

This consumption of rap music as an apolitical or non-racial platform allows for the purchasing power of the White majority to dictate what is or is not popular within the genre. As hip-hop transitioned throughout the 2000s and 2010s, rap's biggest financial backers, outside of

Black people, were White consumers (Montford, 2014). Other scholarly work showed how Gangsta rap music changed after reaching the mainstream audiences and became influenced by the purchasing power of the White manufactures. Bakari Kitwana (1995; 2005) explores the question of how White ownership and investment into rap music overall has changed the cultural product throughout time. As time progressed, marketers and investors in the genre decided to figure out what particular components of the music was most enjoyed and maximized production around what audiences liked the most (Kitwana, 1995). It was determined that songs that were dedicated to drug usage, fantastically violent misadventures, surreal 'hood life and the promises of potential unchecked riches - were what the audiences craved the most when enjoying Gangsta' rap, especially when combined with a seductive beat (Kitwana, 1995). Some of the historical origins of Gangsta rap as a platform for underrepresented poor Black life and urban living were washed out for a more hyper-violent depiction of this reality that borders on glamorizing gang-related violence and the anti-social tendencies central to gangsterism (Kitwana, 1995). This commercialization of Gangsta' rap transformed as a playground for Whites to participate in an "exotic" and potentially romanticized environment from the safety of their suburban homes. As a result of this commercialization and influence of the production of Gangsta' rap, rappers themselves began to see the genre as a lucrative avenue to project themselves into as a potential way out of the permanent "underclass" and into a life of financial stability.

As rap continues to grow as a formidable money maker with on average 40 million listeners annually and a 30 billion dollar industry (Davies, 2021), becoming a rapper has grown as a financial opportunity for young Black men as a means of escapism. In 2012, Chicago-based drill rapper (a Northeastern region specific version of Gangsta' rap, highly regarded for it's ultra-violent and gang-related lyrics), Chief Keef topped the billboards with his homemade song and

music video “I Don’t Like” (Stuart, 2020; Harkness, 2014; Viator, 2021; Green, 2016) rocketing him into a celebrity at the tender age of 16. Chief Keef did not grow into stardom because of his clever lyrics or telling of life in the ‘hoods of Chicago - he became famous for selling the image of the street-level Black criminal (Stuart, 2020; Harkness 2014). The era of Chief Keef signified a new rising rapper, someone willing to sell an image of the everyday Gangsta’ and their neighborhood to turn a profit and escape poverty.

Current literature surrounding the status of rap music often does not include contemporary rap artists (typically from 2012 onwards), so there is a stunning lapse of information about the current politics and social context of modern Gangsta’ rap. However, it cannot be denied that Gangsta’ rap has taken a drastic turn since its birth in the 1990s. Rappers today are quickly becoming cultural products themselves, selling a particular fascination with Black culture and Black existence (White, 2011), ready to be consumed by the awaiting masses while still leaving the Black body for future subjugation. Chief Keef’s rise to fame has left many other young Black boys and men craving for an ounce of the same treatment and Gangsta’ rap may be that way out.

From Street Corners to Digital Spaces: How Gangs, Social Media and Crime Coexist

In late 2021, Jacksonville, Florida rapper Julio Foolio went viral on popular social media platform, TikTok, for his viral songs “List of Dead Ops” and “Beatbox Remix/Bibby Flow”. Gaggles of Tik Tok users could be seen dancing and joking how hysterically violent the lyrics were in the song, jamming away to a list of Foolio’s supposed dead enemies. The music video produced for both songs showed young Black men flashing what appears to be gang-related hand signs and paraphernalia alongside weapons to accompany the promises to kill opposing gang members while also bragging about the ones already placed 6 feet under. As the song grew in

popularity, local law enforcement also began investigating these songs as well. Investigators and social media were able to conclude how all of the names listed in these songs actually belonged to real young Black men who had either gone missing or were brutally murdered within the past 2 years (Jawnsen, 2022). The trendy song that countless TikTok users danced alongside and laughed with actually contained a detailed report of the violence and tragedy gang-related young men face. It's rumored that this beef originally began online with a long series of partially related videos and songs openly disrespecting rival gang sets (Trap Geek, 2022). Unfortunately, the artform potentially trickled into actual displays of real life violence with very real victims of that violence.

According to sociologist Geoffrey Harkness, gangs and Gangsta' rap exist within each other in such an intricate manner that separating the two into distinctively different phenomena leaves a lot of information about gang life unknown (Harkness, 2014). With the rise of the internet and social media as a popular avenue for communication and entertainment within the United States, it is of no surprise that social media has also become a platform for gangs to represent themselves in these new digital spaces.

From the structural functioning of Gang work within our communities, to the specific identities of local gang sets, Gangsta' rap plays an important role within contemporary Gang culture as a narrative device. Criminologist Charis Kubrin (2005) examined how Gangsta' rap operates as a messenger of the codes of the street by describing the rules and expectations of street living. From how the gun is used in music videos, to negotiations of respect, and to threats of violence, how the music video is structured signifies how young Black men present themselves to protect themselves from bouts of pending violence to come (Anderson, 2000). Kurbin's (2005) study in particular found that Gangsta' rap often acts as a reinforcement to local

street-based customs and codes such as no snitching, being open to potential violence and facing down violence. With the rise of homemade Gang-related and Gangsta' rap, the artform may be able to become the vehicle for gangs to promote themselves and their active exploits.

As should be evident from the above review, there are complicated nuances to consider when investigating this topic. On one side, we have the very real issue of Gang-related music serving as a mechanism by which to illustrate Gang culture and life, which involves sharing ideals, expectations and rules for current and anticipating Gang members to aspire towards. On the other side and simultaneously, we have demands to understand and protect constitutional rights such as Freedom of Speech, especially regarding creative expression.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In Jackson Katz's *Tough Guise 2*, Katz illustrated how Black masculinity can be negotiated through the lines of "cool posing" to offset limited opportunities to conventional masculinity (Katz, 2013). Violence, sexuality, degradation and existential dread became the mechanisms used to navigate unconventional masculinity in a world seemingly absent of viable pathways (Katz, 2013). These mechanisms can have the appearance of being grandiose and often counterproductive to traditional masculinity. For example, instead of being financially responsible and strategizing for long-term investment, the counter-pathway celebrates being "fast and loose" with financial earnings, often spending large amounts of money on seemingly unnecessary expenses.

The theoretical framework that this study will be using is Richard Major's "Cool Pose" theory to describe this variant of Black masculine performance. "Cool posing is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" (Major, 1992). Cool posing is a series of coping mechanisms used by young Black men and boys to navigate the daily indignities and invisibilities of living in marginalized spaces. It is through cool posing that these young Black men and boys can achieve their own version of masculinity when traditional routes to hegemonic masculinity (such as financial stability, ownership of property, achievement of social status, traditional lucrative employment, etc.) are no viable options due to racist stereotyping and structural oppression. Since traditional pathways to masculinity are barred, the usage of emotions, body posturing, willingness to engage in violence and risqué behavior, and conspicuous consumption (the act of buying expensive goods to appear less impoverished, which a method used in someone's identity construction (Lamont and

Molnar, 2001)), cool posing becomes a helpful navigation tool to aid youth in their quest for masculinity and perfecting their masculine performance. By utilizing this concept, I can better contextualize the behavior illustrated by these rappers that promote violence, nihilism and antisocial behavior. Cool posing also allows for a more individualized approach to understanding the artform through the lens of the larger conversation of criminalizing Black art and expression.

I will also utilize Forrest Stuart's *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music and The Power of Online Infamy* as a vehicle to understand why the music feels the way it does as an artistic choice. By using Stuart's work as a guide, I will be able to better convey what makes drill music a new form of Gangsta rap music, as well as what makes it so attractive for Black and Brown youth to use as a way to express themselves despite the sometimes anti-social messaging and themes. This work will also be able to act as a guide to determine if the chosen study site within the southeastern region of the United States has an active drill rap scene, as drill rap is typically associated with Black populated northern cities (such as New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia) (Nielsen and Dennis, 2015; Stuart, 2020). The southern region of the United States is more famous for establishing trap rap, which does not capture the same levels of ultra-violence as drill. Trap rap instead focuses on criminal behavior such as making and selling drugs, which also has its own aesthetic requirements completely unique from drill (Green, 2016). It matters to understand if the chosen study site has an established drill rap scene, as having an active drill scene could be an indication for surveillance by the criminal legal system. As political entities in numerous northern cities within the United States are attempting to ban drill music from playing on radios and Youtube as well as the mere creation of drill rap music to become illegal in places such as Chicago (Kaplan, 2022; Coleman, 2018; Wilson, 2019; Campanile, 2019). Discussions surrounding if drill rap should or should not exist leads into the

issue of criminalization and policing of Black creative expression; therefore, it's important for this study to evaluate if the selected study site for this research has a potentially established drill scene.

It should also be noted how Erving Goffman's impression management, an important element of dramaturgical sociology, fits with Richard Majors and Forrest Stuart's understanding of identity and gender performance among young Black men and boys. Goffman's impression management centers around an individual's efforts to control the impression that other people have of them through well-manicured performances (Goffman, 1959). Impression management, much like dramaturgy, is like a theatrical show with a backstage and front stage to aid the actor, or the individual creating the performance, in conducting a convincing performance. The front stage consists of behaviors curated for an audience that is not familiar or "native" to the actor, while the backstage references to the presentation the actor holds while in our "native" environment (Goffman, 1959). Both Majors (1992) and Stuart (2020) illustrate how the negotiation of backstage and front stage performances are vital for young Black men and boys navigating the permanent underclass in attempts to find identity and secure their masculinity in an environment that structurally denies them access to traditional masculinity. Stuart (2020) in particular argues that due to the introduction of social media into the lives of Black youth, particularly those who are gang-associated, the front and back stages become blurred to make a more convincing performance where audience members can get a front seat ticket to see the exotic world of the urban 'hood, unfiltered and in its natural status. Majors (1992) details how cool posing is an elaborate performance constructed by young Black men and boys to display themselves to alleviate the indignities of being on the outskirts of society. Through clothing and other forms of conspicuous consumption as well as through posturing the potential to be violent

and emotionally stoic, artists use their bodies, movements, gestures, and even self-made music and videos to establish a convincing front stage impression management performance. By combining Stuart (2020) and Majors (1992) perspectives, I will be able to better synthesize how performances of Black masculinity is heavily reflected in the hip-hop subgenre of Gangsta' rap, and possibly drill, leading into a highly profitable product that simultaneously places Black artists into the sights of the criminal legal system.

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

For this study, I focus on examining music videos of Black male rappers from a mid-sized city located in the southeastern region of the United States. Hence, case selection happens at multiple levels: the city location, the rapper, and the music video. All of these selections are made purposefully. Purposive sampling is generally believed to contribute to the richness in the range of data collected and help increase the possibilities of uncovering multiple realities (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The analysis conducted also follows a case study logic. Although a case study approach poses challenges for novice researchers, this method allows researchers to select intentional, information-rich sources of data to encourage an in-depth analysis of relevant inquiry (Wan, 2019).

I selected the location purposefully due to the rich Gangsta' rap music scene within its county lines. An important facet of rap music is location. Location matters in an important way to build the social scene (Foreman, 2000; Stuart, 2020; Ilan, 2015). Stuart's (2020) work, in fact, pinpoints the significance of locality and explicitly mentions the rapper's home or location as a vital element of drill rap. The city I select for my study city has an immense racial history, ongoing economic difficulties and legacy of being a racially segregated city, which likely plays into establishing a rap's scene brimming with young Black men and boys who compete within the online attention economy. The city was also selected as the geographical location of study because websites like Youtube have dedicated Hip-Hop and Rap centric channels speaking about "Up and Coming Rappers" or "Top 10 Rappers" from this study site. Therefore, the unique mixing of racial history, city size, and promotion of a potential drill rap scene makes the selected study site a suitable location to study.

Within the selected location, I further selected 4 rappers to examine in detail. Again, my selection is purposive. Pursuant to IRB agreements, all of the rapper's chosen for this study were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and to protect the identity of the rappers. Although they may not be representative of each rapper in the selected study site or the southeastern region of the United States, the YouTube content for these selected rappers' show a range of popularity, as indicated through the number of views, likes, and comments on their respective YouTube channels. Selecting cases for this reason will allow for variation across cases and thus allow me to better assess Stuart's arguments. *Bando*, *Ace*, *JJ3*, and *Dollaz* and are the rappers I chose to investigate due to their buzz, or online popularity within location-specific Hip-Hop circles. These rappers continuously made the selected city's Hip-Hop list of "Upcoming Rappers to Look out for" lists and blog posts. *Ace*, in contrast, is a newer rapper on the rap scene of the city, but he is deemed a rising star amongst his peers.

Once the rappers were selected, I needed to locate the music video that I would analyze for this project. The song I selected for each artist displays the audio aesthetics necessary to create a drill sound, such as the music feeling aggressive, claustrophobic, intense and loud (Stuart, 2020). Beyond this, the selected music video needed to meet other criteria. Considering prior work on drill rap (e.g., Stuart 2020), the rappers selected for this study must also make gang-affiliated music, also known as Gangsta' Rap. For a song to be considered as Gangsta' rap, it generally refers to gang knowledge or behavior. I understand self-validation and declarations are not reliable indicators of gang memberships, but according to previous studies this declaration is an important part of drill rap, although it has the simultaneous issue of making it easy for the rapper to be seen as an active participant by local law enforcement (Stuart, 2020; Nielsen and Dennis, 2019; Harkness, 2013; Stuart, 2020). The videos selected for this study were

chosen because they are the most popular video on the rapper's main YouTube channel.

Validating the rapper's YouTube channel was difficult since a lot of the rapper's discography is not ascribed to a singular channel but multiple YouTube channels. Most of the community channels could be found via code names or generic descriptions that illustrate the channeling belonging to a larger entity. Also, the rapper's channel only had music videos that showed them as the primary artist, while community channels had several different artist's videos featured on their channel.

In order to gain additional information about the rapper beyond the single music video I examine, I will review an interview of each rapper posted on a community channel that interviews several rising artists. Stuart (2019) expresses how important it is to have the personal narratives of the rappers included within the study to help ground the information gathered during the analysis of their music. By removing their personal narrative from the story, we are omitting further contextualization of the music they create. While Stuart (2019) stresses the importance of speaking directly with the participants in studies of this nature, due to the researcher's background in law enforcement, speaking directly with the participants is not advisable. Therefore, in order to provide further contextualization of the music video by having the selected rapper's engagement in a semi-standardized interview, I can provide information that is instrumental to understanding the performances seen within the chosen music videos.

Methods

This study uses content analysis to evaluate 4 Gangsta' rap music videos uploaded to the website Youtube by the 4 selected artists mentioned above. Content analysis was chosen as the desired research technique due to its ability to explore and identify existing themes and concepts visually and verbally through a standardized coding instrument. This coding instrument allows

the researcher to see the videos' commonality and other empirical indicators relevant to the theoretical concepts explored within this study. The coding instrument utilized an empirical approach to digital media while allowing for further investigation of why this trend may exist within the current literature.

To make this project manageable as a master's thesis, I completed a content analysis of one video for each of the selected rappers. To be clear, then, the unit of analysis for this study will be the rappers themselves but the unit of observation will be 1 chosen music video per selected artist and a supplemental interview with the rapper.

Because I will limit my direct observations to only 1 music video and a supplemental interview for each rapper, I will have the ability to dive deep into the video and lyrical content presented by each artist. I created and used a standardized coding sheet to help focus my attention on particular images and phrasing depicted within the music videos picked for study (Crossman, 2020). Appendix 1 provides the code sheet. The code sheet helps direct my analysis by clearly identifying elements presented in Majors (1992) and Stuart's (2020) prior work; however, it also allows me to explore how these young men may create and advertise their realities within these music videos, which while providing them the possibility of status and financial success can also become active weapons in character assassinations through the criminal legal system (Nielson and Dennis, 2019). For example, the code sheet reminds me to assess Stuart's (2020) propositions as laid out in *Ballad of the Bullet*. As mentioned previously, hyperlocality, declarations of violence (both in a general context and aimed at enemies), references to the criminal legal system, displays of weapon and drugs, having a posse of young men surrounding them (as well as if that posse has women around them), and willingness to participate and initiate violence, are all indications of popular drill rap artists. In order to assess

the presence of these factors, I need to be able to carefully and methodically assess the presence and frequency by which these categories are displayed in rapper videos. The code sheet directs this strategy but it also leaves open the possibility for emergent themes that I may observe but that are not previously identified in Stuart's (2020) work.

Although only 4 songs will be systematically coded for this study, I will contextualize this data by reviewing a single interview of the artist conducted by the same interviewer and posted online for public consumption. The interview is not coded using a standardized code sheet. This supplemental data is used to attempt to provide a fuller, more comprehensive profile of who the artist is and what image they are trying to portray about themselves through their musical content.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS – MUSIC VIDEOS

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the 4 videos explored within this research to gather a greater understanding of the masculine performance conducted by Black Gangsta’ rappers within a moderately sized metropolitan city within the southeastern region of the United States. All 4 videos were coded using a coding instrument (see Appendix 1). The selected videos were watched 4 times with the coding instrument “in-hand,” which ensured as much information as possible could be gained from observing each selected video. Below, I describe the videos in detail to share the results of my analysis. The analysis provided below is not meant to apply to data outside of that used in the present research.

First Video: Bando’s Bean Talk

This video was 2 minutes and 12 seconds long. The song starts with almost an immediate beat drop that remains constant throughout the entire song. The first words mentioned are not lyrics. Instead, it’s the song producer’s unique voice tag, something common in rap songs (Hill, 2018), followed by a quick monologue by the rapper highlighting the song’s high quality. The song lyrically speaks primarily about drug consumption (especially popping “beans”, better known as pills or drugs that can come in a pill-shaped form (RapDictionary)), having sexual exploits with women (typically a self-serving sexual encounter), and keeping weapons on them (references being made to having “two-tvos” and “sticks”, common slang names for handguns (RapDictionary)). On the first few listenings of the song, it was difficult to decipher due to the words spoken feeling close together, also known as mumbling (Waugh, 2020), which assists in creating their own type of beat to run parallel to the produced beat.

One of the most noticeable features of this song is that it has three distinctive stages or scenes wherein the rapper performs and changes the aesthetic and presentation of his image. The

distinctive stages are as follows: scenes set around or in a car, scenes with the rapper presenting on a public platform, and scenes shot in a hotel room.

Across these three different staging areas, the rapper and his presentation remain central, but as the surroundings change, so does his presentation and performance. For instance, while rapping in the car scene, the rapper is always with one other person or by himself. During the car scene, the rapper is fully clothed and the camera moves from having more full-body angles to close-ups of the rapper's face. Camera shots are important techniques used to elicit emotional responses of the audience as it determines what and how much space the audience can view in any particular frame. In the car scene, the limited number of people and the types of camera angles being used draw intense attention to the rapper himself. I also note that these first-stage car scenes are the shortest in the video.

The second-stage scene involves the artist performing on a public platform, and it is a stark contrast to the car scene. First, the second-stage scene is packed with people, with both men and women in attendance. In this scene, the room has a subtle distinction between the audience and the performer. Everyone is indoors in a single room, and ultimately the performer blends into the scene among the other attendees. What was most interesting is how the performer appeared to blend in with the all-male company on the stage, while women participate in the audience as attendees of the concert (i.e., they appear as a different type of consumer of this artform). Such gendered distinction reflects Stuart's (2020) argument that these videos tend to centralize and prioritize male performance, leaving women either invisible or peripheral to the musical production. All eyes are centered on the rapper's performance and his place in the crowd. As indicated above, the location is indoors, but it's difficult to tell what type of venue this performance takes place at due to how visually congested the setting is with the spectators.

The final, third-stage scene is a more intimate scene portrayed in a hotel room. Within this hotel room, we shift from the common area that has a mixed company of men and women, to a bathroom area that only has the rapper and his women partygoers. While the men in the video appear to be of equality to the rapper. In fact, the rapper seems to blend in with his fellow male partygoers. The most apparent thing distinguishing him from the other males in the scene is that he stands in the center of the camera angle. The rapper is standing almost shoulder to shoulder, being embraced and even disappearing amongst the crowd in some quick shots. However, when the rapper is partying with his female partygoers (and even when the rapper is not within a particular frame), the women are displayed in a sexualized manner, especially within the frames that take place in the bathroom. The rapper's face sometimes is not displayed but the camera shots imply that he is receiving sexually provocative movements from the women who are in the bathroom with him. IN other words, whenever the women appear in this bathroom scene, they are typically dancing in a manner that has them positioning themselves lower than the rapper. He stands above them. On average, while in the bathroom scene with women, there are approximately 2 women in the scene with the single rapper. As a matter of comparison, while in the hotel room scene, a total of 9 people, excluding the rapper, are in the scene, and 5 of those are women. In short, then, the video depicts women audience members and men audience members differently. In the more populous hotel scene, even though the women are not as directly sexualized, they remain distinct from the male party-goers. In fact, no women appear in the artist's company with him; they appear as more passive consumers of the music. As mentioned earlier, this gendered difference supports Stuart's (2022) claims about this genre of rap videos centralizing the presence of young, Black male peers. Regardless of the gendered

differences, racial homogeneity and age similarities seem apparent. The participants throughout this video appear to be Black people in their late teens to their early 20s.

The lyrics of the song take a hard focus on consuming drugs and having sexual encounters with women (and sometimes conflating these two topics together). While the song does denote the rapper having gang affiliation, this claim takes a backseat to highlighting a party vibe of using drugs and having sexual encounters with women. A few times throughout the song, the rapper prides himself on having a weapon on him, and a handgun was briefly flashed (for approximately 2 seconds) during the initial opening of the video from a passenger in the artist's car. This particular rapper uses this music video as a tool to negotiate and present a Gangsta identity, and in that way represents Majors' (1992) cool pose; however, the rapper is able to both defy and uphold conventional notions of cool posing. For instance, the rapper does not have an athletic or muscular physique as mentioned by Major as a pathway to authentic masculine performance. Recall that Majors (1992) argued the Black male body as important in demanding respect (Majors, 1992). However, this rapper is physically skinny, going so far as to be considered as lanky, and does not appear to have a tone masculine physique. Yet, the rapper uses his body in additional ways to potentially signify masculinity through several potential gang-related tattoos that can be found on major areas such as his chest and neck. Additionally, this video appears to have a D-I-Y approach to its cinematography, but it's not quite as gritty as traditional drill music videos such as Chief Keef's "I Don't Like," which is something that Stuart (2020) has argued is a crucial component on drill rap. Instead, Bando's Bean Talk video incorporates a lot of transitions and uses other graphical effects to enhance the video. As mentioned earlier, it jumps from three primary settings throughout the video. The final point worth mentioning here relates to Stuart's (2020) emphasis that drill music is distinctively local.

Interestingly, this video does not mention reference to, or even display, any information alluding to the rapper's location. All locations shown in this video could arguably be locations anywhere within the United States, which appears to contradict Stuart's (2020) argument.

Second Video: Ace's Wild World

This video was 2 minutes and 13 seconds long. While Bando's gave an immediate, almost inviting beat, this song and video does not. Ace's video feels fast, claustrophobic, and enclosed, despite taking place outdoors. The video uses cool blues and gray color saturation in the video arguably to enhance feelings of desolation or even potential hostility, even if it is depicted as laying waiting around the corner. As such, the aesthetic of this video fit Stuart's (2022) postulations that one of the prerequisites for drill music is something foreboding, intense and hostile.

Ace's video instantly cuts to several quick shots within the same location, but different elements of that location are emphasized. The video takes place in what appears to be a multi-floor car garage; however, some parts of the video takes place by the stairwell, a parked car, an open space within that garage and the grassy area right outside of it. All areas are filled with 6 people: the rapper and 5 other young Black men appearing around the age of late teens to early 20s. As was true with Bando's video, then, Stuart's description of drill music featuring a majority of young, Black men is apparent in Ace's video as well.

The lyrics of this song are intensely saturated with violence, and this is bolstered by the video's visual images. Visually, you see the group of youth use what appears to be the same firearm throughout the video. The gun is only held by one particular member, suggesting contemporary gang culture, which typically designates "shooters/shootas" to only a few people within the group. In fact, these persons are deemed to be the holders of firearms, and they use it

against any opposition, or enemies, also known as opps (Stuart, 2020). There are other youths present in the video using finger guns, or hand gestures that simulate the function of a weapon (such as pulling the trigger). Such gestures were prominent throughout the video. The rapper himself, in fact, rides in the passenger side of a moving car for good portions of the video making finger gun gestures towards the camera (audience), while discussing the pain someone's mother must feel once he "shoots them in they shit." When the actual firearm was present in the video, it was almost always featured prominently on screen. Importantly, there were scenes in the video where the person wielding the gun took either equal importance in the camera shot with the rapper, with the other men positioned towards the margins of the screen or behind the rapper and gun holder. This allowed space for the shooter to be included in a camera shot by himself with the gun typically always pointed at the camera (audience). The appearance of weapons, whether real or simulated, support Majors' notion of cool posing among young Black men in that gun-toting implies a pathway to masculine performance. Weapon shots also support Stuart's (2022) observations about the central use of weaponry apparent in drill music.

Throughout the video, I counted over 50 camera shots where the rapper or the other youth featured in the video were shirtless. Interestingly, like Bando's video, I note that none of the youth featured in this video possesses the muscular or athletic physique commonly mentioned in Richard Majors' (1992) work.

As mentioned earlier, the lyrics of the song reflect the video's embodiment of drill music (Stuart, 2020; Green, 2018). The hyper-violent lyrics are voiced, however, in a monotone voice. This presentation is common in drill music as it presents a gritty narrative of violence, that can be taken to represent that unexpected death lurks around every corner. In other words, hyper-violent words are juxtaposed with an emotionless, dull, even deadened vocal cadence. The

majority of the vocals are about gun battles with the opps, the opps being in mourning and the reassurance that Ace's side will come out victorious in any pending gun battle. The video assists in making the lyrics believable and also produce feelings of anxiety as the camera constantly shakes and bounces, making the screen appear dynamic and potentially bruising. The video also mirrors how tension rises throughout the song. Constant jolts moving from camera shot to camera shot means that the video show the violence presented in the song's lyrics. During the lyrical performance, there were portions of the song where the rapper was literally being incoherent and making long mumbling noises to help assist with the fast-paced, semi-disjointed homemade feel of the video.

The presence of drugs and drug usage was not apparent outside seeing the rapper smoking; however, the artist never distinguishes what he is smoking. In other words, drugs are not prominent in this video. Rather than using this means to display a cool pose (Majors 1992) attention is drawn towards the artist's capability to be violent and avoid death himself.

During his process of being violent, the rapper made it a point to mention being gang-affiliated. However, he never mentions what set, group, or organization of which he is a member or associated. He does mention several times, however, that he will "(throw up the six, which is a reference to various potential gang-related sets)" before possibly eliminating an opp. He also makes an explicit call out to a seemingly rival gang set during the video. Although the rapper did make it a point to diss (disrespect) a rival gang set, the rapper did not call out to a particular person, place, or event or pinpoint a specific conflict that could be used to incite eventual injuries or deaths of other persons, including gang members. This is important to note since it is common for two gang sets in conflict to use social media, including posted music videos, to call out the names of particular persons or events as a way to show (dis)respect and/or challenge a rival

gang's legitimacy (Stuart, 2020; 2019; Patton et al., 2013; Lauger and Densley; 2017; Pyrooz, Decker, Moule, 2013; Shayovitz; 2012).

Like Bando, the city the rapper resides in is never mentioned in the song, which again contradicts Stuart's (2022) claims. Instead, the lack of evident locality makes this performance appear as this could happen anywhere within the United States.

Third Video: JJ3 - We Out Here

This video was 2 minutes and 15 seconds long. The video depicts can be broken into takes place in one of four distinct scenes within the video: (1) the rapper by himself behind a brick building, possibly in a shopping center or behind a commercial store; (2) the rapper by himself on a concrete sidewalk; (3) the rapper with him hanging with other young Black men, displaying his gun; and (4) finally a strictly gray- scale scene featuring multiple young Black men riding quad bikes without the rapper present.

The video starts out with a pan focus on the rapper's Balenciaga shoes, then to him displaying his three gold chains to the camera. Next, we see other young Black men demonstrating, what could be defined as, risky behavior by driving several quad bikes through a residential neighborhood as on-lookers watch on the sidewalk. For the majority of the video, the rapper stands apart from his fellow young Black male peers, who appear in the background. An interesting contrast can be noted as the rapper wears a bright, multi-colored paisley bandana jacket, while the rest of the men in the video are largely wearing black. In some scenes where the rapper is not present, the color shots are cast in a grayscale saturation, again implying that when the main artist rapper is not on the scene, the scene is not as bright or colorful. In fact, the rapper is always in a full-colored frame. No women are present in the video, including the quad riding scene where on-lookers watch from the sidelines.

The first two scenes are where the majority of the video takes place. More specifically, the majority of the video shows the rapper standing around by himself, often casually vocalizing rapping along to the lyrics. However, there are multiple scenes where the rapper is walking around the staged area showing off his jewelry or money. Even when he is not moving his mouth to signify he is rapping, we, as the audience, know that he is the main artist because we were introduced to him earlier showing him speaking his lyrics. That the rapper spends a lot of the video time by himself is interesting in light of Stuart's work. Recall that Stuart (2020) argues that one of the key facets of the digital online gang and drill culture is the ability to be backed by a large crew of individuals or to be visually associated with a group of friends who (may or not be they be gang-oriented or not). This video contradicts Stuart's arguments in that Instead, the rapper takes considerable time to show himself alone on the screen. Unlike Bando and Ace's videos, JJ3's video can be seen as giving an impression of loneliness, which can be interpreted as boredom. Such a display may reflect some of Major's (1992) notions of the cool pose, which includes presenting an air of aloofness to the conventional norm. Reflecting the earlier arguments of Major and Stuart, however, is that during the time that the artist appears on screen alone, he is showing off his material gear- from his expensive sneakers to a fistful of money, his iPhone, his gun, and multiple pieces of jewelry.

When the rapper is in scenes involving the artist alongside other young Black men, he's typically holding a handgun that has an extended clip with a red dot sight attached to the top of the weapon. Only the rapper is seen holding a gun in the video, and it appears to be the same gun for the duration of the video. It is during these particular shots in the video, that we see the rapper is smiling and/or seemingly engaging. Like the Ace video, this video only contains young Black men. As mentioned previously, no women are present. All of the men also appear to be in

their late teens to early 20s. It seems important to note that in the scene where the rapper is in the company of other men, he's distinctively far from them, not interacting with them as he takes the majority of the camera shot. In this way, it could be interpreted as a show of status, that is, the other men are there in support of the rapper's presentation, but the rapper is not directly interacting with them, suggesting that the rapper remains in a leadership role. This is highlighted since in the scenes where the rapper appears alone, he is shown with various items representing financial and material wealth, including shoes, jewelry, and cash. I discuss this aspect more below.

In regard to the display of drugs and drug use, in scenes involving multiple persons, almost everyone is smoking an unknown substance, although the song lyrics never specify what the rapper is smoking or prefers to smoke. In addition, all participants in this video are fully clothed, and none of them present the physically muscular build speculated as significant to Richard Majors (1992).

The lyrical elements of this song discuss violent themes, and it is done over a simple 808-enhanced track that becomes repetitious. Like the prior videos discussed, JJ3 does not speak of the city he is filmed in. Instead, he paints a generic picture that could take any place within the United States. The violence mentioned in this song is also generic, as the rapper doesn't identify any type of gang or personal target. There is only one brief mention at the beginning of the song about his "opps." For the remainder of the video, the rapper mentions being violent and his ability to be a proficient shooter. Also mentioned throughout the lyrics is his relationship with women, which typically emphasizes a sexual manner. In fact, the rapper makes a point to talk about his ability to use women to lure someone, assumedly a man, into a trap. Therefore, although no women appear present in the video images, the lyrics point to the subordination and

exploitation of women, something that Majors (1992) and Stuart (2022) both acknowledge as common in their work. The lyrics are also used to indicate how the rapper and his gun are inseparable, even when having sexual escapades with various women, as he needs to always be ready for a potentially violent encounter, painting himself as a shooter. The rapper does not mention any drug use within the song.

As reviewed above, although some elements of the cool pose and drill music are apparent in this video, there are also elements of this video that contradict prior scholarship.

Fourth Video: Dollaz - Takin' 'Em Back

This video is 2 minutes and 2 seconds long. The music starts with a famous police procedure's theme song as the introduction, and then it reverbs to a constant beat throughout the song. Unlike television shows of police officers attempting to solve crimes, this video, both in images and song lyrics, highlights that the rapper is proficient in his [criminal] craft and that no evidence will ever be found against him. The video continues to mimic the opening of police procedure showing lasting scenes going back and forth from portraying singular shots of the rapper to group shots of the rapper with a large group of people standing around him. Interested in these scenes are still black and white photographs of the rapper coupled with several shots saturated with flashing red and blue lights, mimicking a police car's light bar. The video makes a point to keep the camera moving as it consistently transitions from scene to scene, establishing a jarring presentation of the rapper and his entourage.

The video starts with the rapper immersed in a large group of other black young men, with one of the youth being a Brown-skinned man emulating the same mannerisms as his Black peers. For the majority of the video, the rapper is well-intertwined with the group of others, suggesting that these are his peers. Across scenes, the rapper can be seen standing shoulder-to-

shoulder with others, although there are also some scenes where the group crowds around the artist as he raps to the camera (audience). There are a few instances where the rapper is standing in front of the crowd, only to be later embraced by the crowd within the camera shot.

Interestingly, the video featured scenes of other men without the rapper present, or the rapper appeared behind other men in the video. Throughout the video, 10 young men (9 Black youths and 1 Brown youth) participate in this video. All of the people in the video appear to be in their early to late twenties. There were no women featured in the video nor were any mentioned throughout the song.

Visually, the song constantly displays a large number of people on screen. Unlike the JJ3 video, there are no shots where the rapper is featured by himself, or where he stands out from the crowd for any lengthy duration. The video appears to take place in one location outside. Most of the camera shots are filmed with the men standing around in a group or around an SUV, sitting inside or on top of the vehicle. The video makes a pronounced effort to demonstrate a focus on the young men participating in the video.

The rapper never appears in the song shirtless, and unlike the other videos reviewed here, the rapper and the participants have a diversity of body types. From skinny to muscular, the participants arguably demonstrate power acquisition, not through their bodies, but rather the number of participants within the group. Weapons are also a prominent feature in the video. This video has by far the most guns than any other video I review herein. In fact, a total of 4 guns appear on the screen. All guns are different handguns, with two guns having modifications attached to them (one had an extended magazine, while the other had a flashlight/red sight attached). Also unique is that the guns are not always held by the same individuals, as all participating young men in the video display themselves holding a handgun. Throughout the

video, most shots display one of the youths holding a firearm and aiming it at the camera or dancing with the gun. Towards the midway point of this video, there is a long compilation of photographs featuring the rapper and this group of his peers. The shots that remain the longest on-screen are always the ones demonstrating someone in the group managing a weapon - almost always pointed at the camera or posing with the gun.

The overall aesthetics of the video are D-I-Y in style. The camera is constantly jostling around with the shots jerking between various shots, which provides an oddly cohesive but disorienting feeling. In this way, the video embodies one of Stuart's (2020) qualities of drill rap.

Lyrically, the song concentrates on "opp hunting," and proposes their proficiency in staying outside of the gaze of the police, at least in regard to the police not finding evidence to link the group with the crimes in question. Violence is mentioned several times throughout the song, but the target of violence is unclear outside of alleged opps. Drug usage was mentioned in the song, as the rapper spoke on using drugs for their ability to negate his anxieties towards opp hunting. No references to the city are mentioned nor are there any images of the city clearly located within the video. Instead, both the video and the song could reference anywhere within the United States. This is something that all videos share, which contracts the hyper-locality of drill rap (Stuart 2020).

CHAPTER VI: RESULTS – INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

In order to give a more well-rounded perspective on the selected rappers and their presentation, I incorporate additional information surrounding each of the selected rappers. This information comes from interviews of the rappers posed on youtube. They provide more insight and help contextualize the music videos explored in the previous chapter, so they help give a more nuanced understanding of how the rappers see themselves in relation to their work. The interviews examined in this chapter were not submitted to a content analysis coding sheet as the music videos were. They are included here to supplement my analysis with important information to gain a deeper understanding of the rapper and his presentation. Stuart (2020; 2019) notes the importance of understanding the rapper’s personal point of view about the creative content they’re creating while also exploring why they present themselves in the way they do. Traditional research that only codes the videos is unable to include the rapper’s understanding of themselves in relation to the content they create; therefore, allowing for too much assumptive guessing about the intention of divisive content as seen in the videos explored for this study.

Youtube serves as an important site for rising rappers to share their content with their awaiting fans. Youtube is a free video streaming platform where users can upload their own videos to their personal “channels” where views can be ranked for how often they are viewed (Stuart, 2020). Throughout this study, each studied rapper held their own Youtube channel containing only music videos. While each rapper had the most popular, or most viewed, video from their channel used for this study, it should be noted that oftentimes the most popular song accredited to one of the studied rappers were rarely on their personal Youtube channel. Instead, their most popular video can be found on bigger Youtube channels that share various rising

artists. Stuart (2020) reports how important it is for rising rappers to use these “community” Youtube channels since these channels can wield a larger audience, which can be estimated by the respective channel’s number of subscribers. For instance, WorldStarHipHip has approximately 26.6 million subscribers. The most famous rapper selected for this study, Dollaz, currently has approximately 21.5 thousand subscribers on his personal youtube channel. WorldStarHipHop’s ability to yield a higher subscriber base allows for a wider range of audience members, attracting more views which could contribute to the rapper’s overall popularity in the larger Hip-Hop/Rap music genre.

In order to provide further insight into the masculine presentation each of the studied rappers demonstrated in their respective music videos, interviews were found on YouTube to assist in establishing a voice. The selected videos came from the same community YouTube channel where each of the selected rappers (except Ace) was featured for an in-depth interview. By using the same community YouTube channel, consistency could be found throughout each of the rapper’s interviews as the interviewer asked each of the visiting rappers similar questions that explored their personal background, motivations for getting into rap music, inspirations, and ultimate goals they hope to achieve while rapping. These interviews are typically found on community Hip-Hop/Rap that focuses on bringing the news of various aspiring or smaller artists to the fans in order to provide and give additional insight into the artist outside of their social media content. These interviews are excellent examples of Erving Goffman’s backstage performance of impression management, as these interviews are supposed to feel informal and casual - as if we’re engaging with the artist as peers. Ultimately, these channels are dedicated to bringing consumers the most up-to-date information about the budding hip-hop scene (Stuart, 2020). These channels allow for the audience and listening fanbase to interact and learn with

their favorite aspiring rappers more as they typically recount what attracted them to creating rap music and their current projects/collaborations. It's through these interviews that we can gather a more personal insight into the rapper. However, due to these interviews directly interacting with their brand as musicians and demonstrators of authentic Black 'hood masculinity, these interviews could also become a stage to further compose their street authenticity and construct their masculine presentation.

All interviews were pulled from the same hip-hop news reporter's Youtube channel. This allows for a degree of consistency since the interviewer's questions typically remain the same across his interviews with various rappers. Questions generally ask the artists to discuss life in the city that they reside in, how they became interested in starting a rap career, who influenced their style, and where they see themselves going in the future. Unfortunately, Ace does not have any interviews uploaded to Youtube at the time of this study; however, he was featured as a guest appearance in Dollaz's interview.

Bando's Interview

Bando begins the interview by discussing when he initially "hopped off the porch" (became involved with a criminal lifestyle), and how living in the selected city established his identity to pursue rap as a career. Bando states that he originally hopped off the porch at a young age, around the time he was 12, and began moving back and forth between detention centers and youth development centers. He also mentioned being charged with murder, although the charge was eventually dropped. Inspired by the success of Chicago drillers, such as Chief Keef and Lil Durk, Bando felt that if these young Black men from similar situations could get elevated from poverty through rap, he should be able to achieve the same accomplishment. Bando further discusses that he and a close childhood friend began making the necessary plans to begin

uploading videos and crafting songs to help grab attention with the hopes of breaking onto the music scene and start making money. Bando explains how his ascend into popularity has finally allowed him to start making money through his craft. Rap music provided him the opportunity to achieve financial success, ending with him encouraging other young people to follow in his footsteps if they desire to take this path. What's most interesting is how Bando described rap music as a form of hustle and a new pathway to secure money and get recognized.

Next, Bando describes his rise to fame and how that shifted his perspective of himself in relation to other people. Bando reports that once he was able to rise in popularity, he had the ability to be seen and desired by strangers. After recounting an experience he encountered after gaining popularity, Bando illustrated a world where even far away from home he found recognition as people would talk to him about his music, take photos, and ask for autographs. For the first time, Bando reports feeling seen and appreciated as who he is rather than being judged for his criminal history and participation in illicit activities.

As the interview progresses, Bando makes it a point to speak about his hometown and how much he and this city feels intertwined. Although his selected song for this study never mentioned the study site, throughout the interview Bando takes tremendous pride in originating from that city, going so far as to state, "When you speak on my city, you're speaking about me". This is an important factor for Forrest Stuart's (2020) hyper-locality that's incredibly important to establishing drill music. Bando states that the rap scene in his hometown is intensely competitive since there are a lot of people trying to break out into the industry to receive fame and the money that awaits who can make it next on the youtube algorithms. Stuart (2020) reports that various aspiring rappers must figure out creative and innovative ways to get their music videos into potential viewers' "recommendation" sections to heighten their viewership potential.

Beating the YouTube algorithms could be as simple as enlisting the help of community YouTube channels to upload their videos, having a video connected to a more popular rapper (also known as features). Features occur when the primary artist has another artist make a guest appearance in their song. Through features, the smaller artist gets to enjoy the potential viewership of the bigger named artist since they're more recognizable (Stuart 2020), to constantly repost older videos so they can register as new uploads (this "refreshes" older videos into a viewer's recommendation section). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the rappers are keenly aware of the effort needed to beat the YouTube algorithm in order to make themselves a more attractive commodity for fans (both new and old) to engage with their content.

Lastly, Bando's interview ends with what he calls the lessons and blessings of choosing rap music as his pathway toward financial elevation. From financial highs, Bando illustrates how a couple of super popular songs were able to present him with money he's never seen or held before. Through his financial gains, he seeks to make more money and grow his rap career so he can yield a larger profit. He sees himself coming across this large sum of money as a victory. As a child of poverty, he was never supposed to make it out, but having a legitimate pathway out that doesn't dismiss who he is, or where he came from, but celebrates it - as he stated, "he won".

JJ3's Interview

JJ3's interview starts off with him introducing himself and his most famous song at the time of the interview. Unlike Bando, who is alone on-screen during his video, JJ3 has a crowd of other young men with him, all appearing to be in their late teens and early twenties. All Black youth in the back row can be found wearing jackets with their hoods and ski masks on. In total there are young Black men featured in the scene, including JJ3. As JJ3 introduces the other men featured with him in the interview, it becomes clear that Dollaz, another artist selected for this

research and whose video is analyzed in the previous chapter, becomes apparent. As they are introduced, the young men begin to flash several hand gestures as well as make finger guns toward the camera. JJ3 is in front of two other individuals, and the four other rappers, including Dollaz, all sit behind him.

After JJ3 introduces everyone on the set with him, the interviewer asks him about his time spent in the city selected for this study. JJ3 initially responds that he runs the city's local rap scene and identifies that out of the 6 other young Black men, all appear to be around their late teens to early twenties. JJ3 makes it a point to inform the interviewer that only he and Dollaz are rappers out of the group. Outside of Dollaz greeting the interviewer, and the audience, Dollaz remains silent for the duration of the video as only JJ3 will be responding to questions and engaging with the interview. This demonstration is another show of how peers are used to negotiating masculinity, as well as street credibility, by having a crowd of men surround him for this interview. Stuart (2020) mentions the importance for aspiring rappers to have to keep an ensemble of other young men with them to further increase their authenticity and potential for violence. These interviews act as a reminder that the rapper is cool posing, utilizing his tools of masculinity to accentuate the realities he paints within his music videos. This also plays into Majors (1992) of using other men to assist young men in legitimizing their claims to masculinity, as they are surrounded by peers, through sheer presence, authenticate their claims. For the remainder of the video, the other men seen sitting with JJ3 do not speak but occasionally make various hand gestures and signs while smoking an unknown substance as JJ3 speaks to the interviewer.

JJ3 recalls to the interviewer that he went through several career aspiration phases, such as playing basketball, before adopting rap music as a lifepath, reporting that he saw a trend

happen and decided to participate. Throughout the interview, JJ3 constantly repeats that he's from the trenches of his hometown and that leaving his hometown is a difficult challenge and causes him anxiety when traveling to far-away neighborhoods. Throughout the interview, JJ3 makes it a point that he does not like to work with other rappers or associate with other rap crews throughout the city. This statement stands as peculiar due to JJ3 literally having Dollaz on set during his interview, and as seen in Dollaz's personal interview, he'll be in an environment featuring several other rappers. Stuart (2020) illustrates how certain rappers will not, and sometimes cannot, collaborate with different rappers as this could jeopardize their presentation with their audiences. Gangsta' rappers and drillers must remain vigilant about who associate and work with as other rappers could be a part of rival gang sets, or simply does not enhance the image they are already attempting to establish (Stuart 2020). Just as it's important to have a peer to help one establish and authentic their masculine performance and street representation, having the right people to associate with could be the difference between making strong, profitable connections to being seen as "wack" and losing their significance in their respective rapping space. Ultimately, JJ3 reports that once he could make enough money, he eventually decided to move out of the researched city. JJ3's reason for wanting to leave his respective city was not explored during the interview, but one could speculate that being able to leave is a symbol of achievement and status. It is no secret that for individuals trapped in the 'hood, the ability to amass enough resources so one can have the option to leave is a sign of status attainment that should not be taken lightly (Anderson, 1991).

Dollaz's Interview

Like JJ3, Dollaz interview takes place around a relatively large assembly of 8 young, Black men. The interview starts off with an introduction of each of these men, including the

rapper. All appear to be in their late teens to mid-20s. Interestingly, 2 of the selected rappers from this study can be spotted in the interview: JJ3 and Ace. It is worth noting that the participants on the interview set with Dollaz are also rappers from the selected study site. Interestingly, during this interview, Dollaz is seen as a more prominent rapper originating from the same state as the selected study site. This would be a prime example of Stuart's (2020) notion of features and how they bring more attention to someone's content since they have a more recognizable name and brand. Dollaz's interview has the most views compared to the other two interviews explored during this study, and it would not be difficult to estimate that much of the video's views came due to the more famous rapper being featured.

Occasionally throughout the interview, Dollaz and his guests smoke an unknown substance. The interview transitions to Dollaz discussing his rise to fame and how he was always making music videos, but it wasn't until he was able to travel that his music began to take off. Dollaz even mentions that it wasn't until the larger-name rapper featured with him during this interview was able to introduce him to bigger-named rappers as a way to "share clout". Stuart (2020) mentions the importance of being featured with larger named rappers as a way to build clout or online popularity for rising rap artists seeking a way to break the Youtube algorithm and place them into consumers' recommendation sections (2020). The larger-named rapper even mentions that he seeks out certain aspiring rappers to assist them in their climb to fame and fortune. This rapper makes it a clear point that he seeks individuals who display themselves as coming from a challenging past and overcoming several obstacles to make this rap career happen.

Dollaz then expands upon what made his childhood challenging. Going from an academically inclined elementary student to a high school dropout, Dollaz paints the narrative of

someone always involved with a street-oriented lifestyle. Elijah Anderson (1992) defines a street-oriented lifestyle as someone who may be involved with the criminal legal system or embraces crime as normative and a way of life rather than demonstrating pride in aligning themselves with more middle-class values upheld by contemporary society. During this portion of the interview, Dollaz recounts how he lived on the edges of society, selling drugs and holding weapons to participate in the underground economy. He defines himself as having both book and street smarts; however, navigating his future in the streets took precedence. This segment of the interview finishes with Dollaz reporting that at 14 years old, he became the “man of the house”, or the male family member who takes on the majority of the traditionally masculine responsibilities in a family residence.

The next segment of Dollaz’s interview recounts his experiences with violence and being the victim of violence. Although he recounts numerous incidents where he was either shot at by audience members at concerts or gang-related altercations, Dollaz’s mannerisms appear calm, collected, and dismissive of having faced such dangerous situations. When the interviewer questions him about being shot in the face and surviving such a traumatic injury, Dollaz laughs, continues to smoke, and dismisses the situation as serious because he is still alive. Dollaz then admits that he was involved in a criminal case where he was arrested for first-degree murder; however, he clarifies that the case was eventually dismissed. He concludes this segment by reassuring the audience that he stays in the streets of the selected study site as he is really “about”, or telling the truth, on the topics discussed throughout his discography.

This discussion regarding how he dodges and potentially participates in violence and drug dealing/possession relates to Cool Posing, as Dollaz demonstrates a clear disregard for the seriousness of these events - but instead, laughs off the trauma of being shot in the head by a

firearm and negotiating between being a victim and participating in criminal acts (1992). By laughing and dismissing the seriousness of these events, he continues to present himself as cool, calm, and collected even in the most intense of situations where it would not be absurd by mainstream standards to feel horrified of such an event occurring. What was most interesting during this section is how Dollaz makes a public service announcement to the audience that no one should be arrested upon being shot because of that “police” behavior, as someone who’s real would never tell even if they know he committed the act. Dollaz states that he knows the majority of the time who harmed him, but would rather fall back on personalized violence to help address the situation.

Throughout the interview, Dollaz makes it a point to tell how he prioritizes “being out in the streets”, or potentially engaging in illicit activities, rather than working on his craft as a rapper in the studio. Dollaz recounts several moments in his life when music took a backseat to enrich his career selling drugs and other illicit activities. Dollaz states that (he began taking rapping seriously after seeing how lucrative music was, as rap music granted him access to newer opportunities. Dollaz refers to making music as his hustle to achieve social status. For example, he implies popularity status when he discusses receiving requests for autographs from strangers. He also mentions his ability to make money through creating music. Yet, he makes sure to stress how he only took music as his hustle because it is more profitable than a living selling drugs.

Multiple times throughout the interview, Dollaz makes it incredibly clear that he’s from his hometown, and his hometown is him. In this way, much like Bando, he claims his identity as tied to his residential location. Stuart (2020) illustrates throughout his book the importance of location or hyperlocality, as being central for a driller to establish themselves in the digital

world. From the music produced to any pictures posted, being able to track the potential driller back to their respective neighborhood is a powerful way to build credibility and appear authentic to the fans watching from afar. Dollaz reports that he has tremendous pride and respect for where he came from and how his experience growing up in the city selected for this study influenced everything about him. Unlike the anxiety expressed by JJ3, Dollaz reports that he's excited to go to new places and that although he no longer lives in his hometown city, his home will always be there, so to disrespect that city would be taken as personal disrespect towards him.

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION

While it is no surprise that gang members and those associated with a gang-related lifestyle are using digital platforms and social media sites (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2012; Pyrooz, Decker and Moule, 2015; Van Hellemont, 2012; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Patton, Brunton, Dixon, Miller, Leonard and Hackman, 2017), how gang members and gang associated youth use social media is still a difficult process to decipher with further research needed within this topic. This study was able to explore the presentation of masculinity through Richard Major's cool posing and Forrest Stuart's exploration of the culture of drill music.

Cool posing is described by Richard Major as a form of coping mechanism used by various Black men trapped in the permanent underclass to assist themselves in navigating the daily indignities of racism, structural oppression, and routine denials of hegemonic masculinity (Majors, 1992). Each video was coded according to the coding instrument I created (see Appendix 1), which detailed important elements identified in prior research like that of Richard Majors and Forest Stuart. This study was able to combine Majors (1992) and Stuart (2020) arguments to explore how Black youth are utilizing Black masculine coping mechanisms to make themselves profitable for an awaiting audience.

Chapter 5 reports on common themes identified throughout the selected videos and select interviews with the artist are explored in Chapter 6 to provide additional context. My analysis indicates an emerging trend that develops Major's cool posing further and, in some ways supports and in some ways contradicts Stuart's work on online drill music. In this way, this study contributes to the literature on young Black males within the age of social media and gangbanger' online culture. Through this study, we should be able to understand how the internet

influences Black youth's ability to communicate and present themselves through digital platforms. Black youth are the leading producers of content on social media (Stuart, 2020; Mastantuono, 2023). For many Black youth, cultural play becomes profit as youth uses their cultural traditions, norms and experiences to create social media content which can become profitable with enough attention being bestowed onto the video (Ilan, 2020). Unfortunately, cultural play, especially those that agitate contemporary society's attitudes and values, can allow additional means by which Black youth can be surveilled and potentially criminalized by agents of the criminal control system (Stuart, 2020; Nielsen and Dennis, 2020; Ilan, 2020). Below, I discuss the implications of this research more thoroughly and raise questions that future research should consider.

Masculine Presentation and Cool Posing through Black Digital Bodies

All 4 videos and 3 interviews examined during this study indicate that cool posing plays an important role to assist these young Black males in portraying themselves as Gangsta.' Their masculine performances were saturated with concepts of violence, toughness, and access to sexuality through a well-crafted portrayal ready to be consumed by an awaiting audience. Although this research does not seek to answer questions about who the audience is or maybe this performance is designed to be consumed as an authentic portrayal of Black Gangsta'. While this study did not code explicitly for gang-related activities and behavior due to their subjectivity, each of these songs was laced with potential gang identifiers, such as the artist openly identifying himself as gang-affiliated or an active member of established gang organizations or sets, potential gang-related hand gestures, and/or classic gang-related paraphernalia, such as bandanas. Throughout both the videos and interviews analyzed, cool posing played an important part in enhancing the artists' street authenticity.

From the lyrics in the song to the visuals in the video as well as the self-made declarations during the interviews, the rapper uses these cool posing coping mechanisms to situate himself as “really about that,” or an authentic presentation of self that Elijah Anderson (1999) would call “street-oriented.” Each of the rappers studied displays an allure of coolness, partially through engaging with the violent and sexual themes explored during his respective song. Coolness was often displayed through the rappers by their ability to discuss violence and their alleged willingness to participate in violent behavior, such as “shooting at opps” and making their enemies mourn their friends and loved ones. This calm and aloofness towards violence embody one of the core features of cool posing’s coping mechanism (Major, 1992) as this aloofness accentuates a desire and necessity to emotionally express themselves through anger to navigate stressful emotional situations and environments. Through their expression of anger, individuals may be able to negotiate domination and submission between peers and potential enemies. Numerous times throughout each of the selected songs, the rapper’s ability to present themselves as emotionally expressive could be felt throughout each lyric that references their ability to be violent and avoid becoming a victim of violence. Even in Dollaz’s song, he referenced his ability to recover quickly from being injured via several gunshot wounds and quickly return to the street to retaliate against his opps.

A calm coolness can be seen more prominently during each of the rapper’s individual interviews. Each rapper makes it a strong point to discuss their ability to overcome turbulent and challenging childhood experiences and situations with a sense of “it is what it is” as they move through multiple life experiences. Various times throughout each of the rapper’s interviews, the rapper was able to convey a stoic and sometimes apathetic tone toward misfortune. The only time this stoic coolness was broken was when one rapper discussed positive events in life, such

as “going viral” for the first time. Even during these excitable moments, however, the rapper maintains his body posture and controls clear positive facial expressions, including smiling. He would then quickly return to his original stoic, straight-face position. During the music videos, the rappers only broke their stoic disposition while holding weapons or presenting large wads of cash to the camera. Otherwise, this stoic, calm, and cool presentation was consistent throughout the videos and interviews in ways that Major details.

Another manifestation of cool posing often seen during the video and the interviews was drug usage. Drug usage and its potential abuse are important to negotiate coolness while relieving themselves of anxiety (Majors, 1992). Throughout the majority of the videos and two of the interviews, the rapper and their peers can be seen smoking, although the substance is unidentifiable and the rapper never mentions exactly what they are consuming. A prime example is Bando’s video. The majority of Bando’s song is a dedicated tribute to drug usage. Throughout this particular song, Bando makes numerous references to using “Beans,” slang used to typically define pharmaceuticals or pill-shaped drugs. Bando does not give any concrete reason for why he felt the need to consume a bean or how taking a bean made him feel afterward - only that he takes them often. During various segments of his music video, Bando even references how drugs influence his interactions with women, describing his ability to either engage in sexually explicit behavior or hit women if she interrupts his ability to consume drugs.

Tools of Masculinity

As indicated above and in the preceding chapters, cool posing remains an apparent facet of contemporary Gangsta’ rap, but this research points at additional developments. While coding each of these videos, I noticed a common tendency of the rapper to display valuable items to the camera, such as shiny jewelry and weapons (both incidents of holding multiple guns such as

Dollaz or using the same gun but showing it off from various different angles such as JJ3 to provide the illusion that it's a different gun at each angle) alongside large amounts of cash and expensive clothing (which was more prominent during the interviews). This type of presentation appears to be an evolution of the Black Gangsta' identity, which should be taken into consideration when further research is done on this population.

Historically, the Black Gangsta' identity was negotiated through the usage of body and being able to use one's body to assist in negotiating space, protection, and value when conventional opportunities for hegemonic masculinity are restricted through structural oppression (Hill-Collins, 2004; Majors, 1992). Black men, young and old, were able to use their bodies to retain agency and identity to usurp attempts by structural racism to diminish one's sense of self (Hill-Collins, 2004; hooks, 2003; Majors, 1992; Stuart, 2020). By having a well-established muscular body (a body with defining muscular features), a Black man could imply his sexual prowess² coupled with the ability to physically take space within the room and be seen by others within it as a way to negotiate future violence and conflict (Majors 1992). This usage of the body was critical in the establishment of building a Gangsta' persona that was recognized, respected, and potentially feared (Hill-Collins, 2004; hooks, 2003). The art of being able to utilize one body was essential for establishing a cool pose to navigate life's harsh realities. However, my data indicate that in the newer generation of young Black men who are stepping

² As reviewed in earlier chapters, women are also used to represent status; however, I am cautious to identify them as mere objects even if that is how they are displayed in the videos and lyrics examined. It bears repeating, however, that deep gender dynamics are presented during the music videos and during the interviews. As a whole, the data illustrate how plantation patriarchy plays an important role in asserting young Black men's claim to status, and potential power. bell hooks (2017) defined plantation patriarchy as a means for Black men who are the descendants of slaves to embrace an alternative pathway to hegemonic masculinity at the expense of Black women's efforts for agency and equality (hooks, 2017). Throughout each of the videos examined for this study, Black women were reduced to sexual objects used at the expense of the rappers' quest for an authentic masculine presentation.

into the role of the Gangsta' within social media, the image appears to be changing. The body and its ability to manifest cool posing, while still present, look different.

Instead of utilizing a muscular, athletic physical body as Majors (1992) emphasizes, the rappers selected for this study make an impressive display of external markers for masculinity and masculine achievement. Demonstrating sexual exploits with various women, showing off their shiny jewelry and flashing wads of cash all serve as representations of how these young men mark their masculine success. During each of the examined videos, there was a strong, repeated effort to draw the audience's attention toward these external validators to enhance the rapper's identity as a strong, powerful, capable, and authoritative male. Even during the interviews, especially JJ3 and Dollaz interviews, they show themselves wearing expensive clothing brands (such as Gucci, Burberry, and BAPE). In fact, each of the young men in attendance presented themselves as branded by expensive wear. JJ3 even had various expensive clothing brands tattooed onto his body. These external markers perform as an extension towards one's quest to negotiate access and reclamation of masculinity. Through these external tools of masculinity, we can see a shift in masculine performance and portrayal. The body no longer needs to exist only through its physicality and physique, it can have other means of masculine access. The body and its available surroundings are all *performing*.

This performance relates back to Erving Goffman's impression management, which I discussed briefly in Chapter 3. Goffman (1959) argued that we all play many roles and wear masks to convey a convincing performance for our anticipated audiences (Goffman, 1959). This impression management is an important part of having mastery over cool posing. Cool posing allows for a carefully crafted persona to exist as a method to aid Black men in navigating the many faces needed to survive a life placed on the outskirts of mainstream society (Majors, 1992).

This persona allows for the implementer to exert control over their lives, a feat that is incredibly important when one is already feeling how much of the options, opportunities, and pathways of life is limited or otherwise designated before even being given the chance to independently establish themselves (Majors, 1992). The rappers examined herein appear to build and maintain a persona to illustrate themselves as successful, competent, and in control of themselves and the futures they create.

As indicated above, tools of masculinity are demonstrated throughout the selected videos as an important means to convey one's impression management with cool posing. The displays of financial success attainment through the constant flashes and displays of cash money, showing oneself in expensive clothing, and with easy access to vehicles as well as holding weapons that while also serving as a status symbol of wealth due to their expense also symbolize the commitment to goal attainment given the tedious nature of obtaining a firearm, especially through illegitimate means (Stuart, 2020), externalized tools to achieve that hypermasculine composure are evident in the data examined herein. Given the commodification of these external objects, these items make excellent fodder for the consuming masses. Even the posse or crowd is an important reflector of achieving a certain status of masculinity and Gangsta' facade (Stuart, 2020). Although historically the Gangsta' physique was an important stepping-stone towards displaying oneself as an authentic Black masculine figure that should not be messed with (Shakur, 1993; Williams, 2007), the rappers examined in this study do not possess this type of physical build. So, while most of the rappers' lyrics reference violence or violent behavior, none of them embody someone who uses their literal bodies to negotiate violence and fight (Majors, 1992). The change in body type for the Black gangsta' could be equated to the importance of gunplay within contemporary street violence and how wielding the gun negates any personal

responsibility to wield the capabilities of being violent themselves (Canada, 2010). Being able to use these external tools to assist someone in accentuating their masculine presentation to awaiting masses could be seen as a luxury, something that can be bought, and therefore reinforces how masculinity and masculine presentation may change over time, especially within digital spaces that (1) can be commodified and (2) does not require face-to-face confrontation.

Situating Peer Groups, Gender, and Collective Action within Drill Music

What is the difference between a group of individuals and people who are considered to be in or associated with a gang? Their proximity to crime and criminal behavior is traditionally the clear distinction (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-2508.). Drill music is ordinarily seen as a hyper-violent music genre that often discusses violent opposition towards potential rival gangs and other, more general opps towards the gang (Stuart 2020; Green, 2017). Through drill music's rise in popularity, there has been an increasing interest in the correlation and causation between this particular genre of hyper-violent, ultra-aggressive music, and real-world violence and crime (Stuart, 2020; Nelson and Dennis, 2019; Patton et al., 2013; Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2020). What makes drill most interesting compared to other subgenres of rap music, and even more mainstream gangster rap, is how it is used to illustrate the amount of [potential] danger to a particular community (Stuart, 2020). Hyperlocality is an important feature to help legitimize a drill rapper's claim to street authenticity, and it is best displayed in the lyrics and music video that very precisely describe where the music and its respective video come from (Stuart, 2020). This precision can be seen by the rapper and their crew shouting out their respective gang name, and what turf their gang may occupy, displaying the location of the video, including street signs and sights that should have traceability to an actual location.

Interestingly, the music videos explored within this study had no sense of locality. While hyperlocality focuses on a particular space and place, the videos coded for this study lacked any clear locale distinction. All videos appear as if they could occur anywhere within the United States. From hotels to parking garages to outdoor shootings with a crowd, none of these locations gave a distinctive sense to any particular place. However, the rapper's interviews depicted a strong contrast to these videos, as the rapper was very proud of not only the city he came from but the exact neighborhood he was raised in. At this time, it is rather difficult to speculate why this contrast exists. However, it does make it difficult to classify this particular music as a drill since hyperlocality is practically non-existent within any of the videos studied.

The classification of drill music, as a specific type of Gangsta' rap, is important to clarify because there are numerous past instances where political leaders and legal decision makers have sought to characterize the individuals creating this content, and to great consequence. For example, various northern United States cities took politicalized public stances on whether drill music should be acceptable coming from their resident citizens, and political leaders expressed weariness about whether drill music's existence within their cities could be contributing to crime rates (Pyrooz et al., 2013; Ilan, 2020; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Nielson and Dennis, 2020). Having one's music listed as drill implies things about the type of lyrics, imagery, and presentation considered native to this form of music. This is important because it means that this genre of music becomes ripe for exhaustive inspection from agents of the criminal legal system who attempt to investigate the iconography of this genre and the people who make it for potential prosecution and criminal conviction.

One of the more salient themes that public figures emphasize about their concern with drill music outside of the violent lyrical content is the impact of the rapper's peers. Although the

rapper may speak from the first-person perspective the majority of the time, the inclusion of terms such as “we” or “us” is interpreted as threatening, and thus becomes an important part of the fear expressed by political and legal organizations and agents. Erving Goffman (1959) and Stuart (2020) discuss how peers play an important role in one’s impression management. From assisting in someone’s backstage performance to helping legitimize the front - having peers are vital tools in showing someone’s legitimacy to the role they are performing. For Black youth attempting to situate themselves as realistically gang-affiliated, having a strong peer group proves to be imperative to be seen as authentic. All of the selected rappers for this study can be seen surrounded by several other young Black men mimicking the behavior of the rapper. Since gangs can be identified as a group of people who participate in criminal behavior and the lyrical content and videos of drill rap often feature content that symbolizes or directly portrays crime and violence, it would not be difficult to classify the rapper and all who participate in the video as gang-related or gang activity.

As mentioned prior, having access to a crew or peers willing to participate in the video is part of acquiring and displaying the tools necessary for achieving a solid masculine presentation. Sometimes drill rap uses “we”, “I” and “us” interchangeably. It is through this interchangeability that one could argue how potential criminal behavior, especially gang-related behavior, could exist within this creative content. Herein lies a troubling issue – the coping mechanisms of cool posing are being used in multiple and varied ways by different groups of people. On the one hand, cool posing demonstrates a particular form of masculine presentation that can be exploited to attract the awaiting masses seeking this particular type of music, and on the other hand, this form of cool posing provides an easy avenue for agents of the criminal control system to designate particular behavior as being criminal due to its adjacency to crime. This dilemma

presents a rather peculiar problem: how do agents within the criminal control system differentiate between legitimate declarations of violence and gang activity and artful displays of violence and gang activities? It could be argued that both or neither are demonstrated within this genre of music. In other words, is drill music and its videos created solely to express oneself creatively as a means to attempt to enter a highly competitive financial market that has limited access for Black men? Or is drill music a representation of criminal activity? This is a difficult question to answer and deserves pointed attention in sociological and legal realms.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

It's been a few years since I left Lenoir Youth Development Center, but the students I supervised during this short tenure never left my consciousness. I often wondered what roads life eventually took many of them down. Unfortunately, I rarely received any good news and I often take the absence of any news as positive. For many, within two years of their departure from our facility, an unsettling number of my students were either dead or in jail. Most of them never got the chance to experience life past 21 years old. From pending first-degree murder charges to uncannily suspicious deaths, the discovery of this news often has me retreating into my memories of those rap sessions in our housing units. I can still remember how intense some of those sessions could be as they would pour so much of their efforts into creating "the" perfect song that could embody so much of themselves. During my time away from the facility, I've been able to better deconstruct how the music they created reflected the goals, ambitions, and their ultimate fate that awaited them upon their inevitable release from custody.

While Gangsta' rap often gets criticized for its violent lyrics and disregard for human life, it's not quite as common to investigate the causality of its anti-social themes. Rap music in its entirety, is a beautiful outlet for Black creative expression. Unfortunately, the potential of possible criminalization by agents of the criminal control system ignores the cultural importance rap music has served to not only Black Americans, but the entire Black diaspora (Kubrin, 2005). Gangsta' rap has served a unique place within rap as historically being revolutionary music, identifying the systems of oppression and deplorable conditions Blacks within the United States must endure under white supremacy (Kubrin, 2005; Hill-Collins, 2006; Rose, 1994; White, 2011; Stuart, 2020). As Gangsta' rap progressed, the external struggle against the oppressive system became an inward dread towards the absurdist reality of Black existence in a hypocritical society

fixated on the subjugation of marginalized people. Nihilism within rap music is most popular in the Gangsta' rap subgenre, with subsections such as drill being no exception (Kubrin, 2005). How nihilism operates within Gangsta' rap can manifest as cool posing, as that crude cool disposition towards grotesque violence and depravity as a way to leverage themselves against constant reminders of indignation and obscurity. It is through cool posing, which may appear as nihilistic behavior, that aspiring rappers can find meaning and purpose in their existence, as seen with the rappers and videos examined for this study.

The Commodified Gangsta: The Struggle towards Freedom

Rap music has increasingly become an option for Black youth trapped in the permanent underclass seeking to liberate themselves. As rap music grows in popularity, not only with a steady audience within the United States but a growing international audience included, the genre has become a highly lucrative field for those wrestling with invisibility and poverty to elevate into - especially since subgenres such as Gangsta' rap prizes individuals from criminalized and troubled background (Stuart, 2020). Cool posing has always existed as a means for young Black men and boys to navigate the social and political environment of the 'hood, but with Gangsta rap's rise to fame - the anxious negotiation of identity and performance can now serve a more lucrative purpose through "ghettotainment".

Forrest Stuart (2020) defines ghettotainment as the marketing of cultural elements of impoverished communities to wealthier consumers seeking to experience seemingly uncharted worlds due to how exotic and unfamiliar it is to their own. Through Gangsta' rap's rise in popularity, both domestically and abroad, the performance of these young drillers and all others who embody a similar performance could easily be seen as ghettotainment. Even though rap music is a cultural byproduct of the Black diaspora, White people are the biggest purchasers and

marketers of rap (Stuart, 2020; Kitwana, 2005 ;Jefferies, 2011); therefore, leveraging the influence and political base of the genre in the hands of White buying power. Although it is not currently known if the White consumer base of rap music is purposely supporting Gangsta' rappers and drillers because of ghetttainment, it should be noted that White people are interested in ghetttainment and their approximation to poor Black people's life experiences (Stuart 2020; Blackshear, 2007; Kitwana, 2005; Kitwana, 1995). Janis Blackshear was able to uncover in their study how White youth interacted with rap music, especially Afrocentric Gangsta' rap. Blackshear discovered that White youth could be just as avid fans of rap as their Black counterparts, but their engagement with the media was not the same. Instead, White youth enjoyed consuming rap as an escapism from their own middle-class expectations and anxieties and often viewed their plight and the rapper's plight as the same, as they were both overcoming adverse obstacles. However, the revolutionary themes and acknowledgment of how these obstacles were created and maintained through structural oppression and racism were often overlooked or dismissed. Rap stood as a mechanism for White youth to rebel against the status quo while simultaneously developing their own identities (Blackshear, 2007). Blackshear's study laid the groundwork to help us explore how middle-class Whites may be using the experiences of poor Black people as a reflection pool for their own anxieties and concerns, thus ghetttainment appearing as a viable avenue to participate in.

Throughout this study, a lot of the masculine performances conducted by the selected young Black male rappers embodied a lot of cool posing behavior - from the tools of masculinity as seen with the wads of cash, guns, and jewelry to the violent lyrics and posturing with other young Black men - these videos highly reflected an exposure to Black life trapped in the absurdist nightmare of the 'hood. This research, unfortunately, could not make a connection

between how these videos became the most popular video for their respective artist as that was not the intent of this research, but all videos presented themselves as a snapshot of navigating life and death within the 'hood.

Unfortunately, while these young rappers might be seeking a means to liberate themselves from potentially endemic poverty due to the nature of these videos and the content they hold, an unexpected listener now threatens the rappers' attempt to escape. As this genre grows in popularity, police departments and prosecutors across the country (as well as the United Kingdom) can be seen listening to this art form as not creative work, but instead declarations of potential violence and perceived gang membership. Various studies on this topic have also been interested in understanding the link between Gangsta' rap music videos, especially drill rap, as its correlation and causation relationship with crimes in communities (Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Nielson and Dennis, 2020; Stuart, 2020). The ethics of using rap lyrics as evidence in criminal cases or as character references against rappers (and even sometimes the listeners of particular songs/rappers (Nielson and Dennis, 2019) is a passionately debated topic between scholars and agents of the criminal legal system, as musical content such as this genre is being examined a creative outlet regardless of it's vulgar content to outright expressions to either future or previously committed crimes (Stuart, 2020; Stuart 2019; Nielson and Dennis, 2019; Lauger and Densley, 2017). While this particular study was unable to pinpoint if agents of the criminal legal system should be able to charge, indict and punish people (who are astonishingly Black and Brown (Nielson and Dennis, 2019; Kubrin, 2015)), this study was able to illustrate how Black youth may be relying on their own navigation of a racist society through cool posing to market themselves within ghettotainment.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study was conducted as a content analysis using a standardized coding instrument that I created based on previous scholarship in this area. This study emulates similar studies conducted on this topic within this field, but it has limitations. Unfortunately, this study was unable to determine if the selected study site for this research has an established drill rap culture due to the limited number of rappers and videos chosen for examination. A more in-depth examination of multiple rising rappers may be able to cast a wider understanding of how drill culture is established and maintained in certain locales. Future studies on this topic should also consider being inclusive of a well-rounded approach that uses interviews or ethnographic data from the content creators, the consuming audience, and law enforcement agents using the media for investigation. By giving all the participants involved in this topic a voice, future researchers could better estimate how they perceive themselves as well as being perceived by others in the adjacent group. According to Forrest Stuart (2019; 2020), by engaging in more research that includes the studied population, we can better understand how this genre operates for the rapper and the community they held from while also engaging in nuanced conversations that better examine what do listeners expect when indulging in this genre. Without their voices, we are unable to draw tight conclusions that are situated in their reality, but instead, produce speculations about how crime, community, and drill rap exist and influence each other.

Due to the time constraints of a master's thesis study, I was limited in the scope of this project. Future researchers could benefit from understanding from these rappers how to use all social media platforms and sites to market themselves and their creative content. While previous studies have explored the digital divide or marginalized communities' access to technology (Andrejevic, 2002), future studies should explore digital disadvantage and qualitative

understandings to how marginalized communities interact with technology and how this technology mediates human-to-human interactions in disadvantaged communities (Stuart, 2019; 2020). Black youth are more connected than ever digitally (Stuart, 2020), which means that gang members and gang-associated youth are also using the internet (Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Patton et al., 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2017; Hellemont, 2012; Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2020). With the internet's introduction to society, future studies will need to investigate how the internet has both interrupted and shaped gang-related individuals' interactions with not only themselves but the larger society. Gangsta' rap and gang-related rap videos do play a role in contemporary gang culture, but also its influences on mainstream culture. Future studies will need to be conducted to further examine how this relationship exists and how immense is the internet's role in that.

Final Notes

One of my students told me that they chose to perfect their craft as an emerging rapper as “it was either rap or trap”. Through this study, I was able to explore how cool posing can be found within Gangsta' rap as a potentially profitable venture into legitimate work. Reflecting on those lyrics mentioned, it's extremely disturbing how many of those lyrics did become reality for my student's post-incarceration. It's unknowable how much of their musical content played a role in their ultimate fates, but what is true – their music did attempt to capture a portion of them. Their aspirations, fears, anxieties, and the cool poses they present were all written in a way to not only express themselves, but to potentially sell themselves to an eager audience waiting to consume Black bodies and existence with little regard for the totality of what was expressed. By understanding how masculinity, Gangsta' rap, and commercialization coincide, we can better understand how much someone is willing to sell themselves to potentially capture a sliver of

fame, value and worthiness to exist in a world that routinely denies them that dignity. In the quest to live a life out of obscurity, one may potentially find themselves evading the clutches of the criminal legal system misinterpretation of survival as declarations of violence and mutual destruction.

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APPENDIX A: SELECTED GANGSTA' RAP VIDEOS CODING INSTRUMENT

Quantitative
How Many People are in the video?
How old do the participants look?
How many guns were in the video?
How many other weapons are in the video?
Are there drugs shown?
Are the drugs Consumed?
Does the video suggest selling drugs?
Is Durham signs or symbols mentioned in the video
Is Durham mentioned in the lyrics?
How many times is Durham mentioned or shown in the video?
Are there women in the video?
How many women are in the video?
Is Violence mentioned within the song?
How many times is violence mentioned in the song?
Is violence shown or directly depicted in the video?
How many times is violence shown or directly depicted in the video?
How many times is the rapper shirtless in the video?
Qualitative
How does the song open lyrically?
How does the song open audio-wise (compared to other drill rap)?
How does the song open visually?
How does the rapper describe Durham, if Durham is mentioned within the song?
Does the rapper use stereotypical notions of drill rap as described by Stuart?
? Who is violence being directed towards?
Is anyone harmed during the video?
Does the rapper possess an athletic or masculine physique in relation to Richard Major's Cool Pose?
If women are represented in the video, are they doing the same thing men in the video are doing?
If women and men are shown differently in the video, how are they portrayed different?
If weaponry is displayed in the video, what types of weapons are shown?
If weaponry is displayed in the video, what are being done with them?
If drugs are shown in the video, is the main artist consuming them?
Does the main artist stand out from others in the video?
Does the main artist appear to be a part of the others (peer) in the video?

How is violence mentioned in the song?
Does the rapper's video appear to made D-I-Y style?
Does the video take place outside (such as in the streets/neighborhood) or does it take place within the house?