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WORD ON THE (DIGITAL) STREET: EXPLORING YOUTUBE VLOGS AS REPUTATION MANAGEMENT FOR ARTISTS IN CHICAGO'S DRILL RAP

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Introduction and Background

YouTube has long been considered one of the most important social media platforms for aspiring musicians due to its low barrier to entry, speed of message distribution and vast audience base (Baym, 2018). Since 2005, over 5 billion videos a day are viewed on YouTube (Stefanone & Derek, 2009). These uploaded videos are commonly based on user generated content (UGC) based on their own lives and often filmed using smartphone cameras (Stefanone & Derek, 2009). This format tends to add realism to the content, thereby generating more interest and drawing larger audiences, with some user channels garnering tens of millions of subscribers (Lee & Watkins, 2016). YouTube enables audience members to post comments to stories reported on their website, and, to do so, one must create a user account by providing personal information (e.g., date of birth, gender, e-mail address) while entering a username that is linked to the comments that one posts.

In particular, Black youth in America have harnessed various social media platforms like YouTube as dynamic "third spaces" (Brock, 2009; 2020). Within this digital landscape, they find an avenue to assert their presence beyond the gaze of the dominant white culture, allowing for uninhibited expressions of joy, humor, passionate debates, and the dissemination of targeted messages and subjective narratives. This phenomenon is akin to Lane's concept of the "digital street" (2018), where Black youth ingeniously utilize platforms such as YouTube to replicate the diverse oral cultures found in physical spaces like barbershops, park district basketball courts, and public housing courtyards. These virtual realms, deeply interwoven with the fabric of Hip-Hop culture, serve as vibrant hubs for urban Black youth to engage in information exchange. Despite their vitality, expressiveness, and communal nature, these digital arenas often remain

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situated outside the spheres of discourse associated with the mainstream entertainment industry.
A prime example of how YouTube has galvanized the commodification of the digital street can be seen through Drill rap's emergence as a phenomenon with the music industry. Coming to nationally prominence around 2008, Drill rap became infamous for its grim, violent depictions of Chicago's South Side and its Black male youth participants (Drillers) are seen as ambassadors to gang life in these communities, often posting inside information on violence and street activity about these neighborhoods on social media platforms and promoting gang affiliation/rivalries as a central theme to their song lyrics and music videos (Moore, 2016). Though visible outside the watch of corporate record labels, Chicago's Drillers cultivated global audiences by utilizing DIY tactics in digital spaces to circulate new music, highlight press interviews and report career milestones to rap fans and gang rivals alike (Evans, 2021).

Though not always the case, YouTube allows Drillers to maintain reputations for violence without engaging in the physical violence that may have once been required to gain credibility on the streets of low-income urban communities and within gang culture (Lane & Stuart, 2022; Patton et al., 2022). In recent years, Drill Hip-Hop has morphed from being associated with gang territories in Chicago to becoming a global subgenre of mainstream rap music with artists and scenes from as far and wide as New York City, Paris, London, Toronto, and Uganda. Even so, Drill continues to be a music genre known for viral videos on YouTube because it naturally combines Hip-Hop artistic practices and social media practices of content creators with real-time reporting of ongoing street activities (Stuart, 2020).

Given this backdrop, this article uses content analysis of two prominent YouTubers in Chicago's Drill Rap scene to examine how YouTube vlogs serve as important intermediaries to not only circulate information about their music scene but provide Drillers a valuable tool for building (and re-affirming) one's street authenticity among Drill fan communities.

Overview of Findings

In my analysis of the content by Drillers DJ U and King Yella, "cross referencing," "signifying" and "calling bluffs" emerged as the primary methods Drillers used to attract audiences to their content. Cross referencing refers to the process whereby challengers scrutinize and contradict their targets' online claims of violence by calling audience attention to past online content or private information that might otherwise go unnoticed. Calling bluffs refers to the strategy in which challengers publicly call on their targets to act in accordance with their online claims of violence, particularly online threats and boasts of violent dispositions. These calls to make good on their violent words often entail daring rivals to "slide" on them—that is, to enter their territory and attempt a drive-by shooting. Finally, signifying is employed to challenge and confront rivals or detractors in a comedic and entertaining way. Signifying in videos is often used to casually dismiss accusations, question the credibility of enemies, and solidify one's current reputation within the drill community.

These practices, used together in context, served not only to shock audiences, but they allowed Drillers to play upon audience curiosities stemming from the criminalization of Black communities in mainstream news journalism, scripted television programs, films and of course, rap music. Therefore, in SME, more charismatic Drillers utilize YouTube vlogs as valued intermediaries that allow them to circulate powerful narratives from the physical communities they rap about in their songs. In essence, this content becomes central to establishing the authenticity of their lyrics and persona, publicly challenging authority of their rivals, asserting dominance in the marketplace, and communicating their credibility in having knowledge of the streets.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, though YouTube vlogs are leaving some Drillers more able to nurture financially self-sustaining careers, those depicted in this study are a small minority and not representative of the experience of independent rap musicians more generally. Even still, his study has highlighted the ways in which gang-associated youth within the Drill rap community strategically utilize YouTube as a powerful platform to build and validate their violent reputations. Through the creation of content such as vlogs and podcasts, Drillers consciously present themselves as maintaining their violent, "street" identities even in supposedly private or backstage contexts. The utilization of strategies like cross-referencing, calling bluffs, and catching lacking allows them to expose potential fabrications and cast doubt on their rivals' online displays of violence. By generating and publicizing evidence that contradicts their targets' personas, Drillers aim to validate their artist reputations for violence and demonstrate authenticity in Chicago gang culture.

Moreover, the highlighted narratives suggest that in the world of social media entertainment, Driller's ability to monetize YouTube content incentivizes them to both embellish and/or promote their past participation in gang activities. Also, the format of YouTube encouraged a comedic and conversational style of commentating for which signifying helped Drillers to reinforce a playful personality to the audience and absolve themselves from breaking the codes of the streets (e.g. providing criminal evidence or snitching on others to the police).

Contrary to prevailing research on Drill rap that seeks to predict offline violent outcomes based on disembodied social media content, this analysis emphasizes the need to understand the social meanings and contexts of Drillers' content through their aspirations in the rap music industry. It eschews the assumption that their online behaviors aren't strategic, highlighting the complexity and nuances involved in their digital labor. Moreover, this study highlights the potential of YouTube as a medium that not only enables Drillers to incite violence but also provides avenues for sustainable celebrity, entrepreneurship, and brand management. Though Drillers have inherently violent reputations from their music, their authenticity and established fan community, combined with the ability to monetize YouTube content, has created new opportunities for Drill musicians to establish themselves as influential figures in the creator economy.

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