

Analysing gang-related music linked to serious violence

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Practice note: Decoding online music and glorification of gang-related serious violence

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Since 2019, I have been working on Project Alpha – a proof of concept by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), Home Office and Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) – which relates to the manipulation of online content by gang-affected youth. As the lead on Online Harm Referrals, I'm responsible for finding and assessing content that is uploaded across the online space (which includes social media, music sharing and gaming platforms). We are looking for anything that breaches the community guidelines or user agreements, glorifies gang mentality and is linked to a specific crime (including inciting, goading, bullying and revelling in the serious injury, death or murder of another).

A key element of my role is the development of an MPS catalogue of gang-related music (Operation Domain). This is commonly referred to as drill, though a distinction needs to be made here. Drill is unapologetically raw and descriptively violent, but gang-related drill music personalises lyrics and may also use symbolism, which can be linked to offences and could fuel violent gang-related animosity. The catalogue documents lyrics, such as those below, which are linked to serious violence offences.

*You can talk on the net [internet], I don't mind it
Should have been dead but you pulled through fighting*

*Blue tape [police crime scene], it was done by me
I put A [the late Ahmad Torfi] in the A and E
It's not that deep [serious]
'Cause all he wanted was some mac and cheese
Had to school these fucking neeks [weak nerds]
Drip or drown [bleed or seriously bleed]*

On sight, it's fucking peak [a negative situation]

I don't know why they talk on me [badmouth me]

Lyrics about a knife attack in New Cross, London, which resulted in a grievous bodily harm with intent conviction.

When we test the waps [firearms]

We test dem at paigons' drums [rivals' homes]

Home invasions, son

Lyrics used as evidence in a trial of a break-in and attempted murder in Enfield, London.

Using analysis of music content, I have examined how policing can use online platforms as a tool to assess tension indicators between two rival youths or gangs. I have proactively responded to an increase of tit-for-tat acts of serious violence, by using intelligence to secure dedicated resources for the nights when I identified that a rival gang incursion was highly likely. On numerous occasions, these interventions have prevented serious injury.

Having decoded the hyper-local context of the lyrics, hand gestures and symbolism of the visual content used by aspiring rappers, we have identified threats and proactively intervened to prevent escalation of violence. For example, in 2016, by acting on this intelligence-led policing and using CCTV for live monitoring, I was alerted to three individuals making their way to a youth club armed with a variety of edged weapons. My colleagues on the ground intercepted them, resulting in one arrest and the recovery of a knife. The arrestee was an aspiring rapper from a rival area who had released numerous music videos that taunted the area he was subsequently arrested in.

Our work also involves making easily digestible and informative referrals to contacts across all the major social media platforms, national radio stations and music companies, requesting removal of material linked to serious violence. Last year, this resulted in over 600 pieces of online material being referred and removed. In addition, I have been called to court as an expert witness specialising in urban street gangs, including gang recruitment, exploitation, affiliation, motivation for specific crimes and interpretation of key evidence.

Critical to the success of this project is raising awareness of these issues with the parents and guardians of those identified in music videos and social media posts. Parents are often unaware of

the risk that their children are putting themselves in. Young people can be naive to the fact that their appearance in gang-related music and social media posts can identify them as 'legitimate targets' in the eyes of the rival gang.

Taking a holistic approach, we all have responsibility for developing our understanding of this niche youth sub-culture. Education is a two-way street and can only be achieved using honest dialogue. I strive to reach as many young people as I can and speak openly about the risks of creating, sharing and consuming such music and social media, as well as the importance of discussing its impact on serious violence. The best places to engage with young people are the settings in which they are most comfortable. We need to explain the true risks of involvement in gang-affiliated music and videos, so that young people can make well-informed and conscious decisions.

- This article was peer reviewed by PC Gareth Evans, West Midlands Police.

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