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English 1010

April 17, 2026

Beyond the Music: Violence, Performance, and Audience in Chicago Drill

Chicago drill music is often reduced to violent lyrics, guns on camera, and artists taunting rivals online. Yet, drill did not invent violence but grew out of it. Decades of racial segregation, neglect, and the mass displacement of Chicago's Black communities created conditions where violence was not a choice but a reality of daily life. Drill music has always documented that reality. However, due to the pressure of audiences, algorithms, and the attention economy, Chicago drill has transformed from the documentation of violence into performance from an audience's perspective. As audiences and digital platforms reward and profit from the spectacle of violence, Chicago drill artists have been pushed to amplify extreme content just to gain visibility, ironically reinforcing stereotypes which harm rather than help the communities the artists are representing. Dissociated audiences should dig deeper to recognize that they are complicit in supporting an artform that commoditizes violence and conflict.

Decades of racial segregation, lack of funding, and a mass displacement of residents from public housing that left entire communities on Chicago's South and West sides without stability or resources; these are the roots of Chicago drill music. Through a system of restrictive covenants backed by real estate developers and banks, Black residents were legally barred from

living in white neighborhoods and pushed into overcrowded slums on the South and West sides. As the documentary *Chicago at the Crossroad* produced by Brian Schodorf documents, the concentration of people in what became known as the Black Belt was four times that of adjacent white communities, the result of what the film calls "the Jim Crow North" (Schodorf 11:29). The city's answer to this overcrowding was the construction of high-rise public housing developments. However, the city lacked funding to maintain them. Utility conditions were extremely poor and unreliable, with one resident in the documentary describing it as "hell on earth" (Schodorf 19:54). By the late 1990s, the city began demolishing these developments and displacing tens of thousands of residents. Families were pushed into a handful of communities that were already struggling, recreating concentrated poverty in new locations. As Benjamin M. Levey documents in his research, "Music of a Place: Chicago Drill Rap", this displacement led to gang fragmentation into a hyperlocal, block-by-block form of containment for young Black men (Levy 4). The gang culture that drill music grew out of was a direct response to the physical containment that displacement and segregation had created.

This reality is not just described in research, it is heard directly in the music from the beginnings of the drill scene. Early tracks like "I Don't Like" by Chief Keef capture the hostility and territorial tension of this environment through repetitive, confrontational hooks and bass-heavy production. The song's iconic chant, "I don't like…," repeated over and over, turns personal grievances into a collective expression of anger, where enemies, rival neighborhoods, and threats are all grouped into a constant list of opposition. Similarly, Keef's anthem "Love Sosa" helped propel drill into national prominence, opening with the famous line, "these b*tches love Sosa," before dropping into a hypnotic, almost numb delivery that contrasts with the aggression of the lyrics. The track feels both detached and threatening, as if violence and chaos

have become normalized. Commentators have noted that “Love Sosa” marked a turning point in drill’s reach, as its viral spread on YouTube introduced mainstream audiences to a style rooted in real neighborhood conflict, even as many listeners consumed it without understanding its deeper context. Together, these works mark a shift from drill as a localized expression of violence and survival to a nationally recognized genre.

As drill songs gained audiences beyond Chicago’s neighborhoods, artists faced a new pressure where they not only lived the reality of the streets, but had to prove it. The term “capping” emerged in the drill scene. In his article “We [mostly] carry guns for the internet’: Visibility labour, social hacking and chasing digital clout by Black male youth in Chicago’s drill rap scene,” Jabari Evans defines capping as the pursuit to gain attention by exaggerating one’s wealth, sexual prowess, or violent nature in order to build popularity and gain followers (Evans). One artist Evans interviewed, Mr. Dollaz, explained in his own perspective: “big guns, lots of pretty chicks, money and tons of dope smoke. It doesn’t matter if it’s my gun or not, this picture lets people know I'm not to be played with. More and more clout. Who cares how you get it?” (Evans). Reputation in drill culture was not just about pride, but it was tied to respect, and ultimately survival. An artist who could not perform their street authenticity risked losing not only their fanbase but their standing in their community itself. In Forrest Stuart’s book *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*, Stuart writes that publicly humiliating a well-known driller is one of the most powerful strategies for building a reputation, sometimes entailing physical attacks (Stuart 11). The consequences caused by this pressure to perform became dangerously ingrained in drill culture. As experts at a Harvard discussion on drill noted, artists and audiences had grown so accustomed to this cycle of performed violence that many became, in the words of rapper Dee-1, “too numb and too desensitized to the literal

words being spoken in this music" (Rojas). Over time, as drill artists' documentation of their neighborhoods' pain shifted to performance, many artists became trapped in this performative cycle.

The rise of technology and social media has exacerbated this concept of "capping," turning violence into public performance and global spectacle. In 2018, two-thirds of American adults had Facebook accounts and nearly 95 percent of young people used YouTube. By 2017, tech companies dominated the global economy. With so many people engaging in social media, self-branding became imperative, and technology had become a source of employment. With a platform like YouTube, where hours of content were uploaded every minute, creating original content became key to success. In the instances of the young black men in Chicago, this original content looked like violence. As Forrest Stuart explains, online spaces allow artists to convert street credibility into "digital notoriety," where acts of violence become a form of currency in the attention economy (Stuart 4). This shift means that violence is no longer confined to neighborhoods but rather broadcasted, replayed, and consumed by audiences removed from its original context.

The LSE dissertation by Farje strengthens this argument by showing how social media actively reshapes the nature of conflict. Rather than simply reflecting violence, online platforms blur the boundary between online and offline violence, allowing digital interactions to influence real-world actions. This is especially evident in the phenomenon of "internet banging," where rival groups provoke one another through posts, lyrics, and videos. Research shows that "gang rivalries…have moved to online social media platforms," where individuals "deliberately antagonize opposing street gangs" (Kleinberg and McFarlane). This digital exposure intensifies conflict by increasing both audience size and stakes. According to Robert Evans, artists engage

in “visibility labor,” meaning they must constantly produce attention-grabbing content to stay relevant (Evans). In today’s creative industries, record labels do not want to take chances on unknown or untested artists, so they wait for artists with strong enough media presence and capitalize on fan bases. This pressure pushes drill artists to escalate their portrayals of violence to maintain visibility and hopefully catch the attention of investors.

It is not just the desire for record label attention, but also the media platforms themselves like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others that reinforce this behavior. Algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, and violent or controversial posts are more likely to go viral. As a result, platforms reward those who present the most extreme narratives.

Farje’s research further emphasizes that technology does not just spread violence offline and online, but it amplifies it. Through likes, comments, reposts, and shares, technology allows for consumption of content to be more interactive. In the case of drill, online platforms allow for immediate responses, public retaliation, and continuous escalation between artists. This creates a loop between digital expression and real-world consequences where these consequences inspire the next sequence of violent acts that drive drill music. In the preface of Stuart’s book he tells the story of eighteen-year-old Joseph Coleman, an aspiring rapper known as “Lil JoJo,” who was shot and killed riding his bike on Chicago’s South Side. He had “been embroiled in an online, musical war of words” with a rival gang. He sparked hostilities when he uploaded his homemade music video to YouTube and followed it up with a second video driving through rival gang territory, taunting his enemies. The responses to the Coleman’s death later that day were shocking. The rival gang took to social media to celebrate the killing, and teens discussed who was “really” the most violent and kept “score” of which gang had buried the most bodies (Stuart).

Ultimately, social media transforms violence from a localized reality into a performance that is widely distributed. This transformation explains why conflicts escalate so rapidly and why drill music remains deeply intertwined with digital platforms.

The escalation of Chicago drill, while attributed strongly to social media, is also rooted in audience demand. Cultural production by disadvantaged groups is a concept that was studied far before social media. In “The Rules of Art”, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied Parisian novelists of the nineteenth century, and his discovery is consistent in the patterns we see today with drill. Bourdieu found that lower-class novelists had to take on alternative strategies to compete against more privileged novelists. The most effective strategy they discovered was pursuing one genre that Bourdieu refers to it as "autodestructive homages” (Bourdieu 263). This was a strategy where marginalized novelists, lacking the same economic and cultural advantages as more privileged ones, produce work that exaggerates or exoticizes stereotypes associated with their own communities in order to gain recognition and compete for success. This same strategy can be seen employed in the world of drill. For drill artists, lack of resources resulted in self-exploitation by exaggerating stereotypes that capitalized on the audience’s ability to consume violence as entertainment. Farje states that “white audiences find drill simultaneously… ‘repugnant and fascinating.’ As they blame Black men while ‘enjoying’ imagined ‘racial differences’ and ‘as black artists speak from the “here,” white audiences enjoy but dissociate with violence” (Farje 10). These novelists would produce material that exoticized their already stigmatized group and capitalize on it. For drill artists, lack of resources resulted in self-exploitation by exaggerating stereotypes that capitalized on the audience’s ability to consume violence as entertainment. Farje states that “white audiences find drill simultaneously… “repugnant and fascinating.” As they blame Black men while “enjoying” imagined “racial

differences" and "as black artists speak from the "here," white audiences enjoy but dissociate with violence (Farje 10).

In Stuart's book, he refers to the digital disadvantage. This disadvantage refers to differences in uses and consequences of technology in different people with contrasting levels of privilege (Stuart 8). Part of understanding digital disadvantage is seeing how outside parties react to different users of technology and social media. For example, many Americans post images with firearms on social media or incorporate gun culture into their public identities. However, the meanings attached to those images often differ. When firearms intersect with white identity, they are frequently associated with ideas of self-defense, patriotism, or Second Amendment rights. In contrast, when young Black men display firearms in music videos or reference violence in lyrics, those same images are more often interpreted as evidence of criminality, aggression, or danger (Oliver 13). This unequal perception reflects the broader digital disadvantage Stuart describes. This digital disadvantage has led drill artists to use social media to create and distribute images of themselves as "black superpredators" in hopes of going viral, building a micro-celebrity status and achieving success that otherwise would not have been possible (Stuart, 6).

Ultimately, this audience demand and digital disadvantage have created a system in which views translate directly into clout, money, and opportunity, incentivizing drill artists to keep on producing increasingly extreme content. Before drill expanded through social media and digital platforms, much of the music and conflict remained localized within the communities experiencing it firsthand. The audience was smaller and more directly connected to the realities behind the violence being portrayed. However, much of this audience now exists outside of the communities being depicted and often lacks an understanding of the real-life consequences behind the content. What may be consumed as entertainment or "drama" is, in reality, tied to

ongoing violence and loss. In this way, audiences are not passive. They actively participate in a cycle where violence is rewarded with attention, transforming lived experiences into consumable content. While unfortunate, this cycle has reinforced the dynamics that sustain drill culture. As rapper Dee-1 noted at the Harvard discussion on drill, “as a consumer, you have the choice to literally support whatever it is that you would like to see more of” (Rojas). This is a responsibility that too many listeners overlook. While drill music is a product of real and deeply rooted social conditions, the cycle that sustains its violence is not maintained by artists alone. Consumers should more critically examine their own role in this system and ask what they are rewarding with their attention. It is also important to recognize that social media platforms and algorithms actively sustain the attention economy by promoting extreme content to maximize engagement and profit. In this way, violence is not only consumed but systematically amplified, transformed into a commodity where trauma, death, and conflict become profitable forms of entertainment.

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Our Reflections

Julie:

Our biggest strengths in working on this research paper as a group was having consistent communication and division of responsibilities. We were very organized with both our outline and research notes documents. In our outline document, we planned out each paragraph's topic and evidence that we would use. Ultimately, we each took ownership of specific sections/paragraphs. Throughout the project timeline, we used our group chat to exchange ideas and check in on each other's progress. While we each wrote independently, we read and gave feedback on each other's work to make sure the paper flowed. I would say that the labor was distributed evenly at every stage. We both put in effort in class to work on our research and writing, and outside of class, we used our shared documents and text messages to continue working together. The biggest thing I learned from this collaboration is the importance of establishing a clear plan early. When everyone knows exactly what they are responsible for, the process runs much more smoothly. In future group projects, I would make sure to continue having an accessible platform for communication and a clear structure.

Sarah:

Working on this project was amazing. First off, Julie and I communicated incredibly well. We divided up the work evenly and helped each other when we thought we found a good piece of information for our respective sections. I also appreciated that she shared just as much interest in this topic as I did. The constant exchange of information we found fascinating was incredible. Secondly, the content I learned from this project itself was mind-blowing. I sincerely enjoyed learning about the meaning and reason behind a specific genre of music. Moreover, I was fascinated learning about the other factors that impact the production and consumption of drill music. Understanding the critically of the digital disadvantage and that perception of consumers alone honestly drives this industry is fascinating. Our lack of humanity and ability to enjoy the struggles of underprivileged communities is disheartening. But then knowing that it is this reaction that pushes drillers to become more violent and causing deaths and other losses because of a feedback loop changes my perception on the music industry completely. It really is the fanbase that drives artists to be who they are and produce the music that they do. Overall, this project was eye-opening and being able to do it with a partner who was just as interested in it as me was a wonderful experience.