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Introduction

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It was about 5 AM when I left my apartment in Chicago's South Loop neighborhood. I merged onto the Dan Ryan Expressway and pointed my car south. The summer sunrise loomed just below the horizon to the east, so the roads were still clear. The highway took me past familiar landmarks—the ominous Cook County criminal courthouse, the modern architecture of the Illinois Institute of Technology, the dark silhouette of the White Sox stadium. After a short drive, I exited the highway and pulled onto the quiet streets of Taylor Park—one of the city's struggling black neighborhoods.

A generation ago, this area would have been buzzing with activity, even at this hour. Residents clad in work attire would be making their way to the train platform and shopping district. They'd likely wrinkle their noses at the acrid clouds from awakening smokestacks. Today, those sights and smells are distant memories. Once the sun rises, the only thing that will fill the air are the white plumes of cottonwood seeds, unleashed by the overgrown trees that are reclaiming the neighborhood, one abandoned lot at a time.

I turned onto one of Taylor Park's side streets, stopping in front of a collection of dull brick apartment buildings—home to dozens of the neighborhood's poorest residents. I spotted a familiar young man sitting alone on the curb, clad in his weathered black hoodie and faded jeans. I knew I'd find Junior here. After his mother kicked him out of her home, he had been sleeping in one of the apartment stairwells. If Junior noticed me, he didn't show it. As usual, his eyes were glued to the cracked screen of his iPhone. In these early morning hours, it cast a dull blue light on his dreadlocks, framing his sharp but boyish features. A couple of dozen facial hairs curled around his chin—a hopeful attempt at growing a beard. Junior was eighteen years old but looked much closer to fifteen. Born with a serious heart condition, he was small for his age, weighing 130 pounds at most. But it would be a mistake to underestimate him on account of his size. Until recently, Junior had been one of the most feared stick-up kids in the neighborhood. What he lacked in physical presence, he made up for in his record of robberies. His arms, though thin, were covered in scratchy tattoos. Some paid tribute to his gang faction—the Corner Boys. Others memorialized the friends he'd lost to gun violence and gang warfare.

Like so many other young South Siders, Junior had recently devoted himself to a new passion—recording homemade music videos and uploading them to social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. In these uploads, Junior and his fellow Corner Boys boast of violent crimes, taunt rivals, and brag about drug profits. It's been a lucrative formula. In the previous few months, Junior's online notoriety had skyrocketed. As his content traveled the globe, he began receiving messages from viewers and fans hoping to follow his lead and build their own online fame. Some invited him to collaborate, even offering to pay him to make appearances in their music videos and Instagram photos. This, in fact, was why the two of us were up before sunrise today. A couple of weeks earlier, Junior had received a Facebook message from an adoring fan in Los Angeles, who offered to fly Junior there to meet with him. He asked Junior to help him increase his own online following and launch his own online career. If all went according to plan, they'd record music videos together and plaster their photos all over social media. To seal the deal, the fan sent Junior an eight-hundred-dollar down payment and bought him a roundtrip flight to LAX.

When Junior invited me to tag along, I immediately bought myself a ticket. I even volunteered to drive us to the airport. When we arrived at Midway, I saw a side of Junior that few others ever see. He grinned with childlike wonder as we checked in for our flight, passed through security, and boarded the plane. His stoic demeanor gave way to a wide-eyed awe. I couldn't help smiling too. It was a day of firsts: his first time in an airport, his first time on a plane, one of his first times ever stepping foot outside Chicago. As I watched him take his seat, fumble with the seatbelt, and upload a final selfie photo to Instagram, I was struck by the weight of what I was witnessing. Here was one of the most disadvantaged youth, from one of the most distressed communities, enjoying a level of celebrity that few people—regardless of background—will ever experience. By most accounts, the future looks bleak for someone like Junior. Yet, from the stairwells of a low-income apartment building, this homeless, unemployed, gang-associated young man had managed to build a global brand, bringing him new levels of income and admiration.

Junior isn't alone. In places like Taylor Park, viable options in both the formal and informal economies are steadily drying up. But in the void, young residents like the Corner Boys have developed new, creative, *online* strategies for making ends meet. Specifically, they've learned to exploit the unique affordances provided by digital social media to capitalize on a burgeoning market for urban gang violence (or, more accurately, a market for the *representation* of urban gang violence). They're doing so

through the creation and dissemination of what has become known as "drill music." Drill music—which, in slang terms, translates to "shooting music"—is an emerging genre of hyperviolent, hyperlocal, DIY-style gangsta rap that claims to document street life and violent criminality.[1] Through music videos and other social media uploads, these "drill rappers"—often referred to simply as "drillers"—compete on a global stage to prove that they're more ruthless, more delinquent, and more authentic than their competitors.[2] In a perverse system of benefits, the victors receive a range of spoils, including cash, housing, guns, sex, and, for a select few, a ticket out of poverty. The rest, however, can end up behind bars, seriously injured, or dead. Known for little else but their stigma, these young men have found an innovative way to package and sell it, all in the hope of escaping their desperate conditions.

WELCOME TO THE ONLINE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Drill's sudden appearance and spread across the internet caught most of the world by surprise. But it's only surprising if we look at it in a vacuum. When we consider it in the context of broader social, economic, and technological shifts, the production and dissemination of hyperviolent content becomes remarkably legible. Predictable even. It's what happens when the digital economy and urban poverty collide.[3]

Nowadays, it's something of a cliché to say that technology—particularly digital social media—is transforming society. In 2018, two-thirds of American adults had Facebook accounts and nearly 95 percent of young people used YouTube.[4] By the year 2027, an estimated 1 in 3 American adults will transition to online platforms to support themselves financially.[5] What was once a technological fantasy has become a major source of entertainment, socialization, and employment. Unsurprisingly, social media platforms and related services now dominate the global economy. As recently as 2006, Exxon Mobile and General Electric were the world's largest companies, sitting atop a list of traditional manufacturing, transportation, and financial firms. A decade later, tech companies had completely taken over this list. By 2017, Apple, Alphabet (Google's parent company), Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook ranked (in that order) as the five largest companies in the world.[6]

In the wake of the Great Recession, many commentators still consider the tech industry as one of the lone bright spots in an otherwise disappointing and unstable economy.[7] They applaud a range of online platforms

for appearing to offer *all* people—whether rich, poor, black, or white—a new model for attaining financial and personal success within a precarious and competitive job market. More than anything else, social media are heralded for providing the public with the tools to become more entrepreneurial and "self-made."[8] This is perhaps most pronounced in the creative industries, where social media have massively democratized the means of cultural production. Once monopolized by traditional media corporations and their gatekeepers, the power to create, disseminate, and profit from original content has been transferred into the hands of everyday people. Today, freelance journalists use Twitter to disseminate op-eds and political commentary. Aspiring fashion designers show off their latest creations on Instagram. Independent musicians use YouTube to debut original songs and videos. The list of amateur cultural producers grows by the day.

But with so many people engaging social media in this way, how does someone go about distinguishing their own self-brand from everyone else trying to do the same? How do they make their own content more visible and attractive than their competitors? Consider the difficulty of standing out on a platform like YouTube. In a single year, YouTube's 1.3 billion users—roughly one-third of the earth's internet users—uploaded 210 billion hours of video to the platform.[9] That's the equivalent of four hundred hours of content uploaded *every minute*. Although digital content is virtually endless, the time and energy necessary to consume it is finite. This asymmetry has given rise to what is loosely referred to as the "online attention economy"—a competitive field where cultural producers vie for the eyes and ears of audiences.[10] In today's social media age, attention has become a scarce, valuable, and quantifiable resource. Each social media platform offers its own metrics for keeping track of the winners and losers: Twitter and Instagram have "followers," YouTube has "views," Facebook has "friends." The higher these numbers, the more attention someone commands. The more attention they command, the greater their potential returns.

Open up a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*, *People*, or any other popular magazine and you'll find detailed articles about the attention economy's latest champion. The updated version of the American bootstraps story goes like this: Some otherwise "ordinary" person followed their passion, displayed their talents on social media, and amassed enough of a following to catch the attention of investors, tastemakers, and other industry gatekeepers, who paved the way to fame and fortune. The best-known examples have occurred in the world of music. Justin Bieber, the Chain-

smokers, Carly Rae Jepsen, and Ed Sheeran—these are just a few of the chart-topping household names who built their careers on the backs of viral YouTube uploads. Like most companies operating in today's creative industries, record labels don't have the financial stability to take chances on unknown and untested artists anymore. With profit margins growing slimmer, they have to make much safer bets about what audiences want. By waiting to sign artists until they've built a sufficient online reputation, record execs capitalize on existing fan bases and brand recognition.[11]

As more industries use social media to "crowdsource" talent scouting, development, and marketing, aspiring creatives scramble to amass online popularity, or "micro-celebrity," among a large following.[12] The social media researcher Terri Senft originally coined the term to describe "a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social media networking sites to 'amp up' their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online."[13] This typically involves "viewing friends or followers as a fan base; acknowledging popularity as a goal; managing the fan base using a variety of affinitive techniques; and constructing an image of self that can be easily consumed by others."[14] Despite popular tales of overnight stardom, cultivating micro-celebrity is no simple task. It demands a significant investment of time, energy, and other resources. Although the means of cultural production are now more open than ever, some people are better equipped to exploit them than others. As the communication scholar Brooke Erin Duffy importantly reminds us, "those who have been especially successful at channeling their passion projects into lucrative social media careers come from a position of relative privilege—by virtue of economic and/or social capital."[15] The most successful micro-celebrities benefit from financial investments from family and friends, social ties to industry powerbrokers, access to the latest technology, and the economic stability to forgo paid employment to concentrate on content creation.

The persistent unevenness in this supposedly open and democratized space raises important questions: How do people with less economic and social capital build micro-celebrity? How do they create and cultivate a self-brand that is compelling enough to stand out in the attention economy?

Perhaps the most influential study of cultural production by disadvantaged groups was written long before the arrival of social media. In *The Rules of Art*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied competition between nineteenth-century Parisian novelists, not online micro-celebrities. But his

insights are still instructive.[16] Bourdieu discovered that novelists from lower-class backgrounds were forced to adopt alternative strategies to better compete against their more privileged bourgeois counterparts.[17] One of the most powerful strategies was to produce novels that exoticized their own already stigmatized group—a genre Bourdieu refers to as "autodestructive homages." Lacking the conventional resources for building profitable reputations, they peddled exaggerated stereotypes and parodies that aroused the voyeuristic desires of consumers. They effectively commodified their stigma, converting negative stereotypes—as backward, savage, and provincial people—into a new form of capital that they exchanged for financial success.

This strategy is even more seductive in the social media age. Amid the onslaught of banner ads, spam marketing, and disingenuous "click bait," consumers are increasingly on the hunt for cultural products that are both alluring and authentic.[18] As the cultural sociologist David Grazian notes, "the increased global commodification of popular culture creates an even stronger desire among many consumers for that which seems *un*commercial and therefore less affected by the strong hand of the marketplace."[19] Whether we're talking about music, food, or tourism, pursuit of the genuine article provides consumers with the opportunity to experience something that feels raw, unadulterated, and "real."[20] Today's cultural producers scramble to meet this demand by proving that they're more authentic in their online persona than their competitors are. For those with limited resources, this means finding new and innovative ways to demonstrate that they *truly* embody the negative stereotypes of their stigmatized social group.

Drillers epitomize this process. They use social media to create and disseminate morally charged caricatures of themselves as "black superpredators" in the hope of going viral, building micro-celebrity, and generating levels of financial success that would otherwise be impossible.[21] Among other things, this entails demonstrating an expertise with guns, displaying unwavering support from fellow gang members, flaunting close connections to well-known homicide victims, and challenging rivals. Having realized the age-old adage that "violence sells," drillers saturate their online content with the evidence necessary to authenticate the violent criminality that they proclaim in their music.[22] In the drill world, the young men perceived as most authentic are labeled as "real," "with the shits," or "in the field." If there is a dominant message running through virtually every drill song, video, and related content, it's an appeal to superior authenticity: I really do these violent deeds. I really use these guns. I really sell these drugs. My rivals, however, do none of this.

It's important to note that displaying violence online doesn't necessarily require engaging in offline violence; it merely requires a convincing performance. As I came to learn in my time with the Corner Boys, a good number of those perceived as the most authentically violent actually live lives that look nothing of the sort. Some of those known worldwide as homicidal drug lords reside in neighborhoods where such roles are no longer possible. At the same time, this gap between online performance and offline behavior has become the newest battleground between gang-associated youth. One of the most effective ways to build micro-celebrity is to publicly challenge the authenticity of more popular drillers. Art becomes reality when these disputes spill into the streets.

WHAT THE DRILL WORLD CAN TEACH US ABOUT POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND VIOLENCE IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

Although drillers comprise only a small portion of neighborhood residents, their actions—both online and off—increasingly set the tone for local life. Today, it's impossible to understand the conditions in urban poor communities without considering the role and influence of digital cultural production. But once we do, we start to see just how antiquated many of our taken-for-granted ideas about urban poverty, inequality, and violence have become.

In the late twentieth century, the sociologist William Julius Wilson revolutionized public thinking about urban poverty. In *The Truly Disadvantaged* and *When Work Disappears*, Wilson refuted the conservative ideology that blamed poverty on residents' cultural failings and moral deficits.[23] He pointed to Chicago's South Side, directing attention to the deindustrialization, unemployment, and "social isolation" that separated black residents from the institutions, people, and opportunities in "mainstream society."[24] Wilson's research exposed the important connection between urban poverty and the decline of American manufacturing, the offshoring of blue-collar jobs, the steady erosion of organized labor, and other structural disruptions. Wilson provided a blueprint for renewed anti-poverty programs, calling on public leaders to build new and stronger connections between poor residents and the world beyond their isolated communities.

Three decades later, the economic currents that once swept factory jobs from Chicago's South Side to the global South have returned, this time in the form of digital platforms and communication technologies, rife with

new profit models, market relations, and modes of interaction. In turn, urban poor residents are seizing the opportunity to do what web developers, entrepreneurs, and savvy business school graduates have been doing since the early years of social media—that is, to leverage their personal biographies and unique skill sets to become tomorrow's hottest internet sensation. In the process, these residents are challenging the antiquated definition of the ghetto as an unproductive, isolated place. Thanks to the proliferation of social media, these communities have become sites of intense cultural production. As a recent University of Chicago study found, black teens create more online content than any other racial group.[25] More than 10 percent of black teens upload music, videos, and other media on a daily basis, compared to a mere 5 percent of whites. As they generate and disseminate this content, they become increasingly embedded in social networks that extend well beyond their immediate neighborhood boundaries. As drillers' experiences reveal, however, poor black residents derive few, if any, of the benefits Wilson predicted. Instead, these cross-racial and cross-class interactions are often highly exploitative, and often end up exacerbating the worst conditions of urban poverty.

This irony suggests the need to reconsider the broader relationship between technology and inequality. In policy circles, it's increasingly common to talk of a digital divide separating Americans along race, class, and geographic lines.[26] Without access to fast and reliable internet technology, the story goes, the poor get poorer while the rich get tech jobs. Philanthropic organizations, local governments, and other techno-optimists spent the past decade or so clamoring to outfit classrooms and community centers with computers and tablets, as though the mere presence of technology would automatically improve socioeconomic outcomes. But as recent reports suggest, the digital divide may not be as wide as we once imagined. In fact, new data show that poor black youth are *more* glued to their smartphones, tablets, and social media accounts than their more privileged peers.[27] And yet, socioeconomic inequalities persist at historic levels.

Rather than think solely in terms of a digital divide, it's time to focus on what I've come to call *digital disadvantage*. If the digital divide refers to the quantitative disparities in *access* to technology, digital disadvantage refers to the qualitative differences in the *uses* and *consequences* of technology. When we study digital disadvantage, we ask how different people, with contrasting levels of privilege, fatefully engage with the same technology in their daily lives. This requires lengthy, detailed observations as they create, share, and otherwise engage with digital content. It also means paying close attention to how this engagement spills into seemingly

unrelated social spheres like work, family, and community relations. Once we start thinking in terms of digital disadvantage, we stop treating technology as a panacea. We're forced to recognize that every new gadget, app, or online platform always "touches down" in a heavily stratified society, in ways that reinforce and even intensify long-standing inequities.

Drillers provide a unique (if admittedly extreme) window into three key realms of digital disadvantage.[28] First, these young men reveal how someone's position in the broader social, economic, and moral hierarchy necessarily structures their orientation to, and engagement with, any given technology. Drillers' production practices are, at the end of the day, a creative response to extreme poverty. Unlike aspiring micro-celebrities from more privileged backgrounds, these young men are unlikely to treat digital production as a mere hobby. For them, it's one of the few viable options for upward mobility and self-worth. Second, and directly related, drillers illustrate how someone's position on the socioeconomic ladder necessarily shapes the stakes of their technological engagements. Given their precarious conditions, they feel both the positive and negative consequences of their digital production far more profoundly than their more privileged counterparts do. For young men coming of age in impoverished and violent neighborhoods, micro-celebrity yields valuable resources for daily survival. A well-crafted online reputation can spell the difference between going hungry and securing a hot meal, between homelessness and a warm bed, and between abandonment and care. Yet, these benefits come with steep costs that include prison time and elevated risk of victimization. Third, drillers show how long-standing inequalities shape the ways outside parties read and react to different users of technology. Young men on the South Side certainly aren't the only Americans uploading photos full of firearms and lethal weaponry. Amid the heated gun control debate, white residents from across the country are uploading photo after photo of themselves brandishing pistols, shotguns, and assault rifles. Some even threaten extreme violence against politicians and fellow citizens. And yet, their online activities seldom produce much alarm. Their uploads are usually brushed off as "just for show," or even celebrated as a brave defense of gun rights. Meanwhile, young black men's photos with firearms and song lyrics about violence are treated as direct, unambiguous evidence of their offline behaviors and true identities.[29] Their Facebook posts land them in gang databases. Their rap verses show up in court as proof of violent tendencies. In short, the way our broader society treats a person's online displays of violence (or displays of just about anything, for that matter) is largely determined by preexisting stereotypes and power relations.

Finally, drillers offer a much-needed opportunity to understand urban gang violence in our social media age. This was one of my initial motivations when I heard about Joseph Coleman's murder. What role do digital media play in today's gang violence? More specifically, are they making our streets more dangerous? According to the vast majority of police and city leaders, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are propelling new, even more deadly gang feuds. In 2016, amid an unexpected (though temporary) upswing in homicides, the Chicago Police Department, Mayor's Office, and Crime Commission all blamed social media.[30] "It creates instantaneous conflict," declared the Crime Commission vice president Andrew Henning.[31] "We have deaths taking place, murders taking place, instantaneous[ly] after a video is posted." Journalists and academics overwhelmingly agree with Henning's position, treating social media platforms as merely an additional high-stakes breeding ground for gang wars.[32] "Conflicts between rival crews," write the sociologists Marta-Marika Urbanik and Kevin Haggerty, "have been *supplemented* and *exacerbated* by social media. New animosities emerge quickly and take on added seriousness."[33]

This narrative is as seductive as it is common. Unfortunately, it suffers from two major flaws. First, it's not based on much empirical evidence, if any. Systematic and reliable data on the causal relationship between social media and violent crime simply don't exist.[34] The Chicago Police Department—the agency responsible for collecting details on every violent crime in the city—isn't able to identify the suspect in a staggering 95 percent of shootings.[35] If they don't even know *who* pulled the trigger, how can they claim to know *why* they did it? How can they possibly assume the offender was responding to something posted online, and not acting on some other motive? Second, the popular narrative withers in the light of broader crime patterns. Even a cursory look at U.S. crime statistics shows that violence actually *decreased* to historic lows during the exact period when gang-associated youth *increased* their social media use.[36] In fact, over the past four decades, America experienced the greatest crime *reduction* in history.[37] Violent crime fell by half, from its peak rate of 758 per 100,000 in the 1990s to 369 per 100,000 in 2018.[38]

Don't get me wrong. I'm not denying the troubling relationship between social media and gang violence. As the Corner Boys taught me, however, the link between the two is far more complex, and far less inevitable, than most people imagine. It's certainly true that more gang violence is related to social media today than two decades ago. But this may only be due to the fact that social media didn't exist two decades ago. What's more, when

gang-associated youth started picking up smartphones and posting antagonistic content, they did so in a particular historical moment, in response to very specific changes underway in urban poor communities.

The first thing to understand is that the gang conflicts supposedly amplified by social media simply don't occur in the number and intensity that they once did. In the 1980s and 1990s, street corners were the sites of deadly turf wars between large, heavily armed "corporate" gangs that fought for control over the crack market. When these markets eroded in the late 1990s, it caused these organizations to fracture and break apart. They simultaneously lost their customer base, shed their core economic purpose, and fell under the hammer of new police and prison policies.[39] "The open-air drug markets that were responsible for some of the most visible violence in the 1980s were forcibly shut down," writes the sociologist Patrick Sharkey.[40] "Street corners all over the country were no longer the sites of lethal gun battles to capture or retain prime real estate for the drug trade." The rapid disintegration of the crack economy and corporate gangs means that today's youth possess fewer of the *reasons* and *resources* that once drove violence. There are fewer gang hierarchies to climb. Fewer drug markets to fight over. Fewer guns available to do the fighting.[41] In short, and contrary to the popular imagination, the violent conflicts endemic to yesterday's street wars haven't been transposed to digital platforms.

Rather, the introduction of social media altered the very *meanings* and *functions* of gang violence. In the past, violence was primarily a tool for ensuring the success of the gangs' chief commodity—crack cocaine. As the means of cultural production digitize and democratize, gang violence has become a premier commodity in and of itself. Rather than use violence to control drug corners, today's gang-associated youth use online *displays* of violence to attract views, clicks, and online attention. But it's not long after a young man starts posturing on social media that rivals, and sometimes even strangers, start pressing him to prove his authenticity. Publicly humiliating a well-known driller is one of the most powerful strategies for building a reputation. Sometimes this entails physical attacks. More often, in the vast majority of cases, it unfolds via taunts and insults that stay confined to social media. In either case, the young man's public persona is put to the test. Is he really the hardest man on the block? Does he really use those guns in his photos? He faces a choice—either find a way to affirmatively answer these questions or risk being labeled an imposter. It's here that we find the mechanism linking social media and physical violence. The likelihood of future violence is primarily a function of the amount and depth of counterevidence required to refute a given challenge.

Offline confrontations are far more likely if these rebuttals bring feuding parties into shared physical space, or if the dispute damages (or threatens to damage) important social ties.

Unfortunately, it's impossible to calculate the exact percentage of total violence that's rooted in these online challenges. Again, the data simply don't exist yet. What I *can* say, however, is that participation in drill and its related digital practices greatly increases a young man's risk of exposure to violence. The bigger his name in the drill world, the larger the target on his back. The more he and his peers perform toughness on social media, the more they're expected to validate their authenticity. The larger their micro-celebrity, the steeper the costs if they refuse or fail to respond.[42] At the same time, we shouldn't treat violence as an automatic, predetermined outcome. Young men are as creative in avoiding physical showdowns as they are in displaying virtual toughness. Online, they deflect and de-escalate through witty ripostes and well-timed counters. Offline, they surround themselves with loyal defenders, constrict their mobility, and restructure their days to reduce the odds of assault. Of course, these efforts never reduce those odds to zero. And some of these strategies produce their own negative consequences, inhibiting success in other social spheres like work and education. It's hard for a young man to get to his job or school when the bus travels through neighborhoods full of people hoping to catch him while he's at his most vulnerable.

Taken together, these insights about digital production, social stratification, and gang violence suggest that it's time to start paying far more attention to *culture* when we talk about urban poverty and violence.[43] By culture, I mean art, music, and other symbolic modes of expression. For too long, we've focused narrowly on the material factors driving urban disadvantage. Whether it's social isolation amid the deindustrializing job market, a digital divide in the technology market, or gang disputes over the crack market, we've placed economic concerns at the very center of our thinking.[44] But seemingly "immaterial" objects like online videos and social media uploads matter, too. Sometimes even more so. Drillers' pursuit of online infamy shapes a host of outcomes that stretch well beyond their own lives and peer networks. As they traffic in sensational images of the ghetto, they actively reify the symbolic boundaries—the stereotypes and stigmas—that separate their communities from so-called normal, morally upstanding ones. When they're pressed to defend their online reputations in the streets, they end up reproducing the objective conditions—the shootings, arrests, and homicides—that set their communities apart and fuel the stereotypes they'll traffic in tomorrow.[45]

WHAT COMES NEXT?

In the pages that follow, I draw on my time alongside the Corner Boys to explain why, how, and with what consequences young people in disadvantaged neighborhoods are using digital social media to commodify violence and urban poverty. Chapter 1 puts the rise of drill, drillers, and their digital production practices into much-needed historical context. Chicago's South Side has undergone pronounced changes over the past couple of decades. With the erosion of the once-booming crack market and the fracturing of the associated gang structure, young men have come to feel alienated from previous modes of economic survival. After watching a handful of neighbors and classmates gain fame and fortune on the back of violent social media content, young men like the Corner Boys are making the transition from the drug economy to the online attention economy.

Chapter 2 details how drillers create, upload, and disseminate their digital products. Running counter to talk of a digital divide, these young men exhibit serious ingenuity in bending social media to their needs. Over time, they've learned to manipulate search engine algorithms and exploit big data analytics to attract ever more clicks and views. Given their limited resources, however, they're often forced to rely on the assistance of "support personnel," who are often located across the city, across the country, and across the globe. As it turns out, some of those people most responsible for producing popular images of Chicago's deadly streets have spent little, if any, time there. By exploring digital production practices, we begin to see that distant, non-gang-associated, and ostensibly "upstanding" citizens not only benefit from the commodification of ghetto stigma but are also implicated in its negative consequences.

Chapter 3 moves even deeper into drillers' production practices and daily lives, examining how they use social media platforms to validate their authenticity and build micro-celebrity. Leveraging the unique affordances of Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, drillers upload hyperbolic displays of violence to corroborate the violent claims they make in their music videos. Once again, they depend on outside help in creating and disseminating this content. This often consists of bloggers and citizen journalists who host drill content on monetized websites and YouTube channels. Drillers also rely on friends and fellow gang members. In fact, the quest for micro-celebrity has become so central to neighborhood life that it has become one of the most powerful engines of group cohesion and discipline among gang-associated peers.

Chapter 4 explores the range of rewards drillers reap from building micro-celebrity, or "clout," as it's known on the streets of Chicago. Whereas most accounts dismiss micro-celebrity as providing few "real-world" returns, for those at the bottom of the social, economic, and moral hierarchy, it translates into significant benefits. What more privileged social media users might marginalize as "hope labor," drillers celebrate as one of the most practicable, stable, and dignifying options available. They typically refuse to give up these rewards without a fight.

Chapter 5 reveals the negative, sometimes lethal, costs of micro-celebrity. The shooting death of a Taylor Park teen provides a window into the various ways violent online content follows young people into offline spaces and contaminates social interactions. Drillers face a tragic irony: The more attention their social media uploads attract, the harder it is to avoid street violence, gang life, and the criminal justice system. On one side, they face competitors hoping to "steal" their clout. On the other side, they face police, prosecutors, and judges who rely on online content to arrest, convict, and sentence them.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus to drillers' audiences. I present some of the Corner Boys' ongoing relationships with wealthy, white, and noncriminal consumers who live outside of Taylor Park. I report on the Corner Boys' relationships with a well-to-do Beverly Hills man looking for street cred, a white law school student in search of transgressive sexual encounters, and a black pastor hoping to attract more young people into his aging congregation. Thanks to social media, individuals like these can now experience the ghetto with the simple click of a mouse. As with other forms of digital consumption, they can even have the ghetto (or, more accurately, the stereotypical ghetto denizen) delivered right to their doorstep, enjoying customized thrills from the comfort of home. As they do, they encourage these young men to continue their micro-celebrity practices while undermining the positive influence of mainstream social ties.

Chapter 7 brings the story full circle, examining the consumption practices of local South Side teens. For these youngsters, drillers and their content play a highly contradictory role. On the one hand, drill music makes life precarious. Merely listening to music videos, or clicking on social media uploads, exposes local teens to new dangers. On the other hand, drill music provides them with new and unexpected resources for socializing with peers, sidestepping street violence, and even charting positive courses of action.

The conclusion reflects on the broader lessons I learned during my time with the Corner Boys. I offer a number of interventions (both big and small)

for addressing digital disadvantage in the lives of marginalized groups. Through compassionate programs and policies, digital technologies provide new opportunities to harness creativity and channel it for good.

Before continuing, I need to offer a few final caveats, along with a plea for readers' patience. First, I've organized these chapters thematically, not chronologically. I've chosen to anchor focus on the successive stages of digital production and consumption rather than my own serendipitous path of discovery. Traveling back and forth on the timeline means offering enough background for the discussion at hand, and returning at various points to fill in necessary details. I've interspersed mention of my own position and role across these moments. Readers interested in a more systematic discussion of these topics may wish to read the author's note before proceeding.

Second, when I offer evidence for my claims, I privilege the richness of interactions and episodes over reductionist, bite-sized quotations. If we're serious about understanding these young people, we need to acknowledge a fuller range of dilemmas and decisions they face in their daily lives. It means writing about them as complex individuals who occupy a number of simultaneous and competing social roles. At times, the narrative will appear to veer far from the world of tweets and status messages, taking us into living rooms and high school hallways. But we'll emerge with a far more accurate account of how social life flows online and off, across seemingly unrelated moments and identities.

Third, like the highly gendered nature of the drill world itself, this book focuses primarily on the lives and perspectives of young men. During my time on the South Side, I didn't meet a single woman engaged in this form of digital production. Although there were several young women in Taylor Park who were "down" with the Corner Boys, none were considered official members. As I read through early versions of the book, I realized that many of the interactions I discussed between young men and women—particularly those surrounding drill's sexualized rewards—were antagonistic and exploitative. This certainly doesn't reflect the spectrum of the relationships I witnessed. Where possible, I've devoted additional space to capture this complexity, toeing the difficult line between parsimony and fullness.

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