## Grime, Gangs, and the perpetuation of stereotypes by sportswear brands in the United Kingdom.

**Abstract**

Sportswear, particularly Nike, has been a fundamental component of the aesthetic of Grime since the genre emerged in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s. Whilst Grime is primarily known as a genre of electronic music, it can be seen as a multi-faceted creative practice allowing marginalized communities to articulate their antipathy towards existing socio-political mores, whilst simultaneously offering alternative sources of income, skills, cohesion, and hope.

Grime’s aesthetic intersects with that of gang culture in several areas including through sportswear. As Grime has grown economically brands have noticed – resulting in various collaborations including the 2018 Nike ‘Nothing Beats a Londoner’ campaign with Grime artist Skepta. This article sets out to evaluate this advert and argues that through this collaboration Nike has perpetuated racial stereotyping via culturally appropriating Grime culture. In doing so, authentic Grime artists have been employed to give the advert greater authenticity, staged in the city that birthed Grime. This cultural appropriation has resulted in the perpetuation of dangerous Black male stereotypes, utilizing this to boost sales for the world's largest sport corporation, in stark contrast to the founding principles of Grime.

**Introduction**

Grime is a 21st century musical genre which ‘explicitly and deliberately’ narrates microcosms of British urban life and focuses on everyday issues encountered by the artists (Barron, 2013:05,16). Incorporating both rap and electronic sounds, Grime contrasts rhythms inspired by Jamaican dancehalls, with low budget production, and lyrics detailing the hardships of life in London’s government-assisted ‘social housing’ estates. Since it emerged in the early 2000s Grime has grown into a subculture in the United Kingdom (UK), which has gained popularity and momentum over the past decade, garnering international attention and recognition, much like its American predecessor Hip-Hop did in the 1980s (Kennedy-Centre.org, n.d.: npag).

Inextricably linked to Grime, is London’s ‘gang culture’. This is evident through the shared communities, typical racial composition, aesthetics, and news coverage of both subcultures purporting their criminalization (White, 2018: 02-07) (Riley, 2017: npag) (Dunbar, 2019: npag). Following the 2011 Tottenham riots, London had increasingly violent gang-related issues (de Castella, 2011: npag) (Stephenson, 2021: npag). While the UK’s Home Office doesn’t offer a definitive description of what a gang is, the following criteria for gang culture are proposed; ‘Street-based young people who see themselves as a group’, ‘engages in criminal activity and violence’, ‘lays claim over a territory’, ‘has an identifying feature’ and ‘usually in conflict with other gangs’ (Stroud, 2009:21). Critically, Black people are significantly overrepresented in gangs in the UK; London’s population is comprised of around 45% non-white ethnic people, is the densest representation in the UK (Pitts, 2020: npag). This culminates in overrepresentation of London gang affiliates of ‘African-Caribbean and Mixed Heritage young people… involved in the illicit drugs trade’ (Pitts, 2020: npag), and associated gang violence.

In 2016, Adidas used Grime star and former gang member, Stormzy, to announce football star Paul Pogba’s transfer to Manchester United Football Club. The clip gained millions of views in one day alone, making it an instant viral hit. In response to the success of the campaign, Nike recognized that its brand had lost connection with London’s youth and sought to produce an advert to ‘celebrate the city and the champion talent it produces’, by featuring a stellar line up of sporting and music stars from London. Critically, the advert had to ‘pay its dues to the youth coming through grinding their way from London’s streets towards their dreams’ (Snoad, 2020: npag).

In 2018, Nike released the ‘Nothing Beats a Londoner’ advert. It featured Grime artists and associates Skepta, Giggs, AJ Tracey, Dave, Jorja Smith and J Hus, and grime tracks by Skepta and Dizzee Rascal. The advert has a montage of various people throughout London in Nike sportswear. By combining the Grime artists and associates with people in various sporting capacities, Nike intended to showcase London’s multicultural street culture, with ON ROAD – a strategic insight agency – having translated their ‘exchanges into tangible insights for both brand and agency’ (onro.ad, 2019: npag).

The result of the advert was ‘4.6 million views in less than a week’ and it became the ‘#1 trending video on YouTube’, with ‘everyone from Drake to Sadiq Khan’ commenting on Twitter (Slatter, 2020: npag). The video was not without criticisms, such as ‘glossing over real problems in London’ (Allain, 2018: npag), failing to represent South Asians, a large part of London’s population composition (Gilliland, 2018: npag) (Bakar, 2018: npag), being so ‘London-centric’ that it ostracized other UK communities (Tenzer, 2018: npag), and after creating a well-received advert attempting to showcase diversity, the advert was pulled and nothing else in this vein was produced by Nike (Allain, 2018: npag).

Via a thematic analysis of ‘Nothing beats a Londoner’ this paper sets out to explore the relationship between Grime, gang culture, and Nike, through the dual lenses of subject and content appropriation. Whilst other studies have addressed links between sportswear and gang culture (Iqxlahi, 2018: npag) (Mares, 2001: npag); and the union between Grime, gang affiliation and increased criminal undertakings (Fatsis, 2018: 447-456) this study is the first of its kind to use thematic analysis, to prove that Grime has been appropriated and consequently stereotyped by Nike, resulting in the negative portrayal of young Black men in the UK.

**Criminal Representations: The Signifying Practices of Grime within Media Discourse**

Hip-Hop can be considered as a predecessor of Grime (Stallwood, 2018: npag). Both are forms ‘Black musical expression’ (White, 2018:03) emerging from communities that have faced socio-economic, race or class-based discrimination, ‘lack of opportunity’, ‘chronic poverty’, injustice and ‘gang problems’ (White, 2018:02-03) (Amin, 2019: npag). Grime, however, is a distinctly British genre that emerged in East London, within BIPOC communities (Riley, 2017: npag), and unlike Hip-Hop with its ‘consumerist bling bling soundtrack to upward mobility’, Grime represents ‘the *cri de couer* of the dispossessed, the narrative form of urban life’ (Barron, 2013:12) (McGrath, Chamberlain, & Benford, 2016:03) (Fatsis, 2019:02). Indeed, Grime takes an overt ‘jab… towards the British class system’ which is inherently unjust towards Britain’s ethnic communities (White, 2018:02-03). Uncompromisingly anti-conformist in lyrics and production, Grime has achieved phenomenal success, by challenging societal inequities and providing a platform for disenfranchised artists (Amin, 2019: npag) (Adegoke, 2018: npag). Since its emergence, Grime has grown from an underground ‘anti-establishment’ subculture, initially gaining popularity through pirate radio stations (McGrath, Chamberlain, & Benford, 2016:03), into part of mainstream popular culture (White, 2018:02). ‘The Business of Grime’ (White: 2018: 02-07) evidences the exponential growth of Grime within the mainstream, quoting BBC Radio 1 and Radio 1 Xtra’s Head of Music, that Grime has the potential to be the UK’s biggest cultural export (White, 2018:02).

Despite this, Grime is often perceived negatively by non-Grime fans, much like Hip-Hop. ‘Rap music...has been routinely associated with aggressiveness and criminality’. Research revealed that the public frequently associate ‘rap artists, lyrics and fans with social threat and violence’ more than other music genres (Metcalf, 2009: npag). For Grime, this could be partially resultant of form 696. Designed to grant authority to the police to prevent music events, the form 696 asked which ethnic groups were expected to attend and led to police prohibiting many Grime events. Subsequent news coverage criminalized affiliates of the genre, associating them to gangs and violence (Riley, 2017: npag). As Grime entered mainstream public consciousness, it came with the ‘tired stereotypes of guns, gangs and knives’, (White, 2018: 02-07) which echoed the perception of Hip-Hop as it grew in popularity, birthing ‘Gangsta rap’ (Moore, 2020:33), in which ‘gang subculture was celebrated and commodified’ (Dunbar, 2019: npag), drawing the attention of censors.

Similarly, to Hip-Hop and Gangsta rap, Grime has been dubbed violent and misogynistic (Bromwich, 2020:n.pag and has been blamed for deaths (music musings and such, 2019) and riots (Hancox, 2011). These presumptions toward Grime initiated censorship via Form 696. Similarly, Hip-Hop faced the introduction of ‘Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics’ labels. These labels ‘became standardized early in 1990’, and soon after, a major American retailer in 37 states declared they would no longer sell albums bearing the label (Potts, 2016: npag).

The association of Blackness and music has problematized Grime, like its American predecessors. Riley observed that Form 696 had a disproportionately negative impact on ‘Black music in a way that it’s actually removed opportunities for income and development’ (Riley, 2017: npag). It inferred criminality upon the mainly black audience (Riley, 2017: npag) (White, 2018: 02-07) (Dunbar, 2019: npag). The contention around Form 696 led to the form being discontinued in 2017 (BBC News, 2017: npag).

Riley posits the ‘term Black has negative connotations even before you get to music. There is historical challenge...whether it’s music, fashion... (2017: npag). Blazio-Licorish & Anyanwu concur that ‘we’re still experiencing the legacies of…colonization and slavery’ which inform ‘debate about appropriation’ (2020: npag). ‘Racial injustices and discrimination’ influence the ‘anger felt toward brands accused of cultural appropriation’ (2020: npag).

Both genres have been linked to gangs and gang culture, which informs this study’s focus. Regarding Hip-Hop, academic Adam Dunbar argues that rappers who ‘embody...black ghetto realness’ reap greater financial reward, hence the plethora of gang-related footage on rap videos across YouTube and social media (Dunbar, 2019: npag). Essentially this compels artists to ‘sell the image of the violent gang member’, emphasizing propensity for lethal violence. Some Grime artists have followed suit, with examples including Birmingham gang members embedding ‘coded threats’ to one another in Grime videos, lyrically and gesturally, making gun signs with their hands (Oldham, 2017: npag) (Dunbar, 2019: npag). Hyper masculine tendencies such as brandishing weapons and talking about violence helps authenticate their narrative to the audience (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018: 103-118). Notably, a number of Grime videos are recorded at night, in identified territories, both their own and rival gang’s (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018: 103-118).

Reinforcing these issues, is the way the Police record information about gang affiliation. A database called the Gang Matrix is used to store the details of anyone linked to or suspected of being affiliated to a gang. Information is gathered through the tracking of users' social media, with Grime videos among the key indicators of probable gang affiliation. Therefore, ‘People are profiled and monitored simply because of the subculture to which they belong and the people they associate with online’ (Amnesty.org.uk, 2020: npag). Resulting from this, among those listed on the Gang Matrix, 72% are black (Amnesty.org.uk, 2020: npag).

Gangs are resultant of social exclusion, with ‘lyrical expression... vital for some gang members, many of whom have limited access to elements of the social structures within society, such as employment, education and training’ (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018: 103-118). Music allows for expressing their narratives, particularly as gang members frequently have access to local recording studios. The type of tracks and videos portraying this ‘Gangsta lifestyle’ are becoming increasingly popular in the UK. However, this has been capitalized on by the UK’s criminal justice system. The provocative nature of many of these Grime tracks and videos has caught the attention of the police and crown prosecution service. The authenticity associated to this output can often be traced back and used as evidence against the Grime artists in court (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018: 103-118).

‘Grime has a metonymic relationship with violence and criminality’ (Fatsis, 2018:02). Fatsis argues that police scrutiny and media coverage of Grime serves to reinforce stereotypical association between Grime and Black males, not that Grime music directly influences criminal activity among Black males. The text demonstrates that Grime was targeted by police, after a spate of knife and gun crimes at live events in the mid-2000s, cementing the ever-present association between Grime, gangs and violent crime. This problem is exacerbated by the media pushing the narratives of artists like Giggs, and Skepta having criminal histories and gang affiliation (Needham, 2021: npag) (Darbyshire, R. 2019: npag) (Wolfson, S. 2013: napg) (Dean & Griffiths, 2018: npag) (Coen, S. 2018: npag), regardless that they are now legitimate musical acts.

**Grime's tracksuit: unofficial uniform of London's streets**

Like Hip-Hop, Grime adopted streetwear as its ‘unofficial uniform’ (Iqxlahi, 2018: npag). Streetwear is defined as fashionable, casual clothes (Hypebeast, 2019: npag). Early Hip-Hop and Grime chose to rebuff luxury brands and high-end designers, preferring streetwear’s comfort and functionality. Across the 1980s and 1990s, tracksuits became increasingly popular. In America, Hip-Hop 'icons like Run-DMC' wore them, as did the urban youth stateside. To these groups, ‘tracksuits symbolized a form of subcultural status’, opposed with the ideals of the elite fashion industry (Amin, 2019: npag). Run-DMC's aesthetic style, comprised of Adidas tracksuits and trainers, accessorized with black fedora hats and thick gold neck chains became emblematic of 1980s Hip-Hop. It symbolized Hip-Hop and fashion intersecting. Run-DMC created the style which gave ‘meaning to the wishes of the people on the streets’ and subsequently represented Hip-Hop (Middlebrook, 2007:111) (Mellery-Pratt, 2014: npag) (Barbosa & Filho, 2016:04).

Tracksuits returned to prominence, congruently with the birth of Grime in the early 2000s. Grime gave elevation and exposure to tracksuits, creating similar impact in the UK, as Hip-Hop did in America decades earlier. As tracksuits have increasingly been shown ‘in the spotlight’ they have been perceived as ‘cool’, ‘coveted and sought after’ by people unfamiliar with Grime (Amin, 2019: npag). Grime pioneer Skepta has such profound influence, that when terming his male entourage, the ‘tracksuit mafia’, he instituted an identity to Grime that impressed the genre’s young artists to the point of adopting this unofficial uniform (lqxlahi, 2018: npag). Moreover, numerous tracks and videos such as ‘Gangland’ by Young T and ‘POW 2011’ by Lethal Bizzle portray the Grime artists clad in tracksuits and sportswear fleeing from police vehicles, visually signifying the tracksuit as signaling allegiance to Grime, and dangerous or gang lifestyles (Amin, 2019: npag).

The association between gangs and tracksuits is well documented (lqxlahi, 2018: npag) (Amin, 2019: npag). Tracksuits are integral to gang culture as they provide the wearer with relative anonymity. Furthermore, the UK’s Home Office reported ‘that children as young as nine are being drawn into street gangs in exchange for trainers or tracksuits’ (Watkinson, 2016: npag). This link extends beyond the boundaries of Britain and America. Sports brand Adidas, for example, was symbolic in the Soviet Union, at around the time Hip-Hop was gaining momentum in America. Worn by the ‘Gopnik’ gangs, Adidas was a symbol of non-conformity in the Soviet Union. Worn by Russian mafia members, thugs, and prison inmates, Adidas retained a similar appeal to that shared by Hip-Hop and Grime, in that it aesthetically represented the voices of those resisting oppression and marginalization (Russia Beyond, 2019: npag). Like Black people, Russia too has endured extreme ‘othering’ on an international scale, (Sharp, 1992) (Neumann, 1995).

In the UK, streetwear carries negative connotations to crime and gangs, with the perception that ‘tracksuits are only worn by dangerous gang members’ (Amin, 2019: npag). This view was highlighted in a debate about the disparity of UK Police stop-and-searches on young black people, justified with ‘what’s wrong with stopping and searching someone who looks like they may be in a gang?’ (lqxlahi, 2018: npag). Grime artist Stormzy, challenged this in his track ‘Wicked Skengman 4’, uttering the line ’everybody calm down it’s a tracksuit, what the f\*\*\* man? I ain’t gonna stab you’ (Amin, 2019: npag). Grime associate Giggs argued that these ‘forms of clothing, tracksuits and hoodies... on the bodies of young black youths as they successfully win awards and break records... are not celebrated but instead become profiled, stigmatized, correlated to negativity and not productivity’ (Iqxlahi, 2018: npag).

**‘Nothing beats a Londoner’: Coolhunting, and subject appropriation**

‘Coolhunting’ is a form of market research (Deneke, 2017: npag) adopted by major brands like Nike, for more than two decades (Baer, 2014: npag). The ‘methodology’ focuses on identifying shifting trends and predicting directional changes in society, when ‘influenced by social, cultural, economical, environmental, or political elements’ (Deneke, 2017: npag). To achieve this, Nike’s coolhunting for ‘Nothing Beats a Londoner’ was undertaken through the ethnographic research that ON ROAD (onro.ad, 2019: npag) (Snoad, 2020: npag) were commissioned for. Nike has ‘branded itself with the hero archetype’, and usually their adverts ‘propagate the message of fighting against yourself in order to achieve constant growth’ (Deneke, 2017: npag), which aligns precisely to the message they tried to convey with the advert, inferring Londoners can achieve anything when they put their minds to it.

Notably, Nike have been capitalizing on the ‘cool’ perception attached to Blackness for decades. In her text *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Factions* (2013:159) Treitler argues that, ‘Coolhunting simply means black hunting’ evidencing how Nike spend significant sums on commissioning companies to ‘understand how to make their brand cool with trendsetting black youth’ (2013:159). The Black-centric nature of the strategy is reinforced by the fact that ‘Nothing Beats a Londoner’ failed to include any South Asians, despite the marginalized group’s wide presence in London and the UK (Gilliland, 2018: npag) (Bakar, 2018: npag).

The use of music celebrities is an example of the rampant misappropriation in fashion promotion, whereby brands borrow symbolic elements of art and music, from cultures in their ads, while abandoning the identity politics that gave rise to such cultural expression in the first place. This is what O' Young describes as 'content and subject appropriation’ (2008:09).

According to O’ Young ‘Subject appropriation occurs when someone from one culture represents members or aspects of another culture’ (O’ Young, 2009). Subject appropriation can be described as using ‘stories or characters from an external culture, to represent that culture by another’ (Lalonde, 2019:07). O’ Young exemplifies the representation of a ‘religious ceremony which insiders wish to remain unknown to anyone but insiders’ (2008:09). To then represent this, O’ Young contends, is appropriation. It was unintended for representation outside of the culture. Lenard & Balint challenge subject appropriation as a form of cultural appropriation. They argue that it is a ‘category of cultural misrepresentation’ (2019:07). They cite that O’ Young’s ‘expansive understanding of actions that count as cultural appropriation seem over inclusive’ (2019:07), positing that the wrongs are related to ‘stereotyping and presenting caricatured versions’ in representations. However, O’ Young defends his proposed subject appropriation, acknowledging that it isn’t something ‘obviously taken’ from another culture e.g., something specifically created by artists, who, he contends, can represent their culture.

Subject appropriation creates an increased likelihood of ‘outsiders’ misrepresenting ‘insiders’ of the culture being appropriated (O’ Young, 2008:24). This commonly creates stereotypes. Subject appropriation risks ‘creating representations ‘[which] are bound to be, at best, flawed because incomplete. At worst, they will be misleading distortions’. This is because the outsiders have ‘a less complete knowledge of these cultures than insiders’ possess’ (O’ Young, 2008:56). The lack of lived experience of ‘white’ oppression, suggests that ‘white’ people cannot accurately represent minority cultures, invariably distorting them in portrayals (O’ Young, 2008:56) (O’ Young, 2009:274-275). O’ Young observes ‘the predicaments of these characters are typical, their reactions are typical, the ways that they speak, dress, and do their hair are typical’ (2008:57). In the same way, the presentation of the Grime artists is typified within the advert, through the continued alignment with Black and UK gang stereotypes. For example, positioning Giggs and Skepta as dangerous and violent threats to society (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) (Hall, 1997: 225-279.) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224), is synonymized with gangs (Pitts, 2020) (Whittaker et al, 2017: 4-82).

Nike’s decision to engage ethnographic research for the advert reflects this. Although the researchers spent considerable time within the community, gaining insights and stories, it doesn’t translate as it would if the person lived within that community and culture, understanding all the nuance behind each anecdote, and being able to convey a greater level of accuracy, than third party information.

Congruently, Grime began as an ‘insider’ practice, a platform for Black British people to lyricize their pain and frustration at generational societal inequity. Grime’s exponential growth in popularity marked the advent of a burgeoning white, middle-class audience adopting the sentiment of Grime (Katsha, 2017: npag) . This catalyzed other artists such as Grime pioneer Wiley contesting the selling-out of their subculture, calling out other artists for ‘selling out for commercial success’ as they could have been ‘commercially successful without selling out’ (Balls, 2009: npag) ‘When acts become too commercial, it changes how music is seen in the streets’ (Kiefer, 2018: npag). In fact, recently even American rapper Drake was decried for appropriating Grime (Cummings-Grady, 2019: npag). In *Nothing Comes from Nowhere* (2008)*,* O’ Young reinforces his defense of subject appropriation, noting that ‘one could conclude that artists create objects and do not represent anything real. Such a line of argument would be disingenuous’ (O’ Young, 2008:269). This supports this paper’s proposal of subject appropriation of the Grime subculture for the advert. For example, Adidas ‘Line’ featuring Grime artist Stormzy was designed to look like an authentic Grime track and video. It was released online, on the platforms Stormzy (and other Grime artists) would typically release content (Abiade, 2017: npag) to authenticate it, maximize its impact. Similarly, Nike’s insertion of Skepta et al, and the use of imagery of MCs on a social housing estate at night was interspersed into the video to make it simply appear organically a part of the film, as would a Grime video (Pinkney & Robinson, 2018: 103-118), and therefore less obvious that Nike were using the association between Grime and streetwear to authenticate the advert to fans. Nike opted to film the video using ‘16mm instead of digital’ to add to the sense of realism that Grime videos are renowned for (Gilliland, 2018). Building on this authenticity, the ‘real-life stories of 258 young Londoners’ were used to shape the advert’s narrative. These stories were ‘discovered through hundreds of interviews’ by ON ROAD (onro.ad, 2019) who ‘explored estates, nosed around bedrooms, spent time in youth clubs and hung out on street corners to get the truest sense of people and place’ (Snoad, 2020). This is fundamental in establishing both the advert’s authenticity, and the subject appropriation involved; the ethnographic coolhunting led to the actual stories being shared by 258 young people. However, the fact that the Grime is ‘from the streets, for the streets’ (Amin, 2019: npag) and performed by artists wearing the ‘unofficial uniform of the street’ (Iqxlahi, 2018: npag) , the fact that the brand deployed research to the street to ascertain these stories for their own use is clearly defined as subject appropriation (O’ Young, 2008:09). Nike has subject appropriated Grime through inserting Grime pioneer Skepta into the advert, alongside several others associated to Grime. In doing so, appropriating aspects of their stories; for example, ‘What's wrong with Peckham’ is spoken by Giggs while standing in Morley’s chicken shop. Peckham is crime-ridden and linked to severe gang violence including murders (Darbyshire, R. 2019: npag), and this scene infers both danger and gang affiliation to Black men. Giggs is from Peckham, a former member of the Peckham Boys, a nefarious gang, connected to several murders, and he has been incarcerated for firearms offences (Wolfson, 2013: npag). Morley’s chicken shop is infamous, having been linked to murders in and around the shop (Whittaker, et al, 2017: npag). The gang affiliate representation in Morley’s chicken shop is further compounded through recent reports that chicken shops serve as a prime recruiting hotspot for gangs, who buy children food, before coercing them into joining the gang (Hurst, 2019: npag); the issue around chicken shops and gang crime has been so problematic that UK Home Office have worked with chicken shops like Morley’s to generate takeaway boxes bearing #knifefree on the lid and printing stories of reformed drug dealers and knife carriers inside the box (White, 2019: npag).



Figure 1: Giggs wears Nikelab Black Parka. Riff Raff Films (dir.) ’*Nothing beats a Londoner’* UK, 2018 © Nike

The fact that they are even showing the stories of the emergence of grime, through MCs in a social housing estate, surrounded by high rise tower blocks, playing alongside a municipal playing field (Slatter, 2020: npag), aligns to the beginning of grime in East London social housing estates (Katsha, 2017: npag) and further supports that subject appropriation has occurred. This subject appropriation results in connotative stereotype representation of Black men, particularly Giggs, as being a threat to society (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) drawn toward ‘inter and intraracial’ crimes to counteract ‘economic, social, and cultural depravation’, embracing the ‘code of street ethics’ which support participation in ‘criminal and violent subcultures’ (Cureton, 2018:531). The proposition of Black males as a danger toward society has been a line of scholarly enquiry for decades (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) (Hall, 1997: 225-279) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224). The advert isn’t the first time Nike have commodified the concept of Black men being ‘dangerous’ gang members. In 2018, it was reported that Nike were forced to remove a balaclava from sale, which, modelled by a Black man, was replete with holsters hanging from it, suggestive of possible weaponization. The backlash of this led to critics arguing ‘that the design perpetuated violence with “menacing” stereotypes of black youth’ with Nike ‘profiting from gang culture’ (Siegel, 2018: npag).

Alongside subject appropriation, content appropriation ‘occurs when outsiders use elements of a specific culture as their own, irrespective of whether they claim ownership over them or not.’ (Murphy, 2021:02). Content appropriation is 'the taking of a valuable, yet reusable or non-exhaustible aspect, of another individual’s culture (usually a symbol or a practice), for one’s own use’ while ‘the taker knows[sic] what she[sic] is doing (or reasonably should know)’ (Lenard & Balint, 2019:338). O’ Young elaborates that many have argued it an ‘act of theft’ (2008:20), quoting that ‘cultural I ndustry is stealing – unconsciously, perhaps, but with the same devastating results’ (2008:20). That several Grime artists challenged the selling out of their subculture, corroborates this; as does white teenagers adopting both the unofficial uniform of the street (lqxlahi, 2018: npag), and traditionally Black urban slang (Katsha, 2017: npag).

Although the advert features ‘insiders’, it was created by and for non-black owned companies. While the artists were paid for these adverts, ‘even if insiders of the culture create or engage with the creation of misrepresentations, it is equally as harmful as when done by outsiders’ (O’ Young, 2008:107). It can be more harmful, as audiences would be more inclined to believe it a ‘representative expression of their culture’ (O’ Young, 2008:112). ‘This phenomenon now mainly refers to the exploitation of marginalized cultures’ (Blazio-Licorish & Anyanwu, 2020: npag); in this instance Grime; by ‘more dominant, mainstream cultures’ – in this instance Nike.

Nike have content appropriated Grime through using the tracks shutdown by Skepta in the intro, and How Love Begins by Dizzee Rascal during the outro; filming the advert aesthetically similarly to Grime videos, e.g., local shops, social housing estates; the fashion of Grime’s unofficial uniform e.g. streetwear; love of football; the sentiment of Grime – frustration or anger at circumstance; and interspersing imagery representative of Grime’s emergence, such as live MC’ing in a social housing estate. The frustration of circumstance is tangible in Skepta’s scenes, whereby Skepta’s introduction at the start of the video, in the corner shop, while talking on his mobile phone. Skepta entering the shop at night is symbolic. As noted earlier, most gang-related Grime videos are filmed at night (Pinkney & Robinson, 2018: 103-118). The location is pertinent, as shops are frequently known for being used to facilitate drug deals, providing a discreet location for drug dealers (Kilraine, 2021: npag) (Moore & Kleiman, 1989:05). Due to the spike in gang violence and drug-related offending in London, going to the ‘corner shop has become a daunting ordeal’, with reports of stabbings, many fatal, occurring inside and around shops in areas densely populated by London’s BIPOC communities (Townsend, 2021: npag). As previously mentioned, there is a significant overrepresentation of Black people in gangs in the UK; London’s population is comprised of around 45% non-white ethnic people, the densest representation in the UK (Pitts, 2020: npag). This culminates in overrepresentation of London gang affiliates of ‘African-Caribbean and Mixed Heritage young people… involved in the illicit drugs trade’ (Pitts, 2020: npag). The discussion resembles arranging a drug deal. Skepta says ‘I’ve had the longest day, man, you said you were gonna come to me, now you’re telling me to come to you, I’m not getting on a cycle’. He reappears at the end of the video, in streetwear, on a hire cycle, with an aggressive expression, and punches a football. The presence of a hire cycle following the earlier telephone conversation infers a drug deal. Drug dealers in the UK have increasingly utilised a home delivery service over recent years, (Evans, 2018: npag) (Fagan, 2020: npag) (Winter, 2018) with mobile phones now linked to virtually all drug deals (Søgaard et al, 2019: npag). UK Gangland documentarian David Matthews recanted, ‘once upon a time, punters, users, abusers, junkies…had to venture out of their homes … in search of a little dope’, progressing to drug dealers now running ‘phone operations’ like businesses’, in a ‘reliable, consistent and relatively risk-free service’ (2021: npag). Hire cycles have also been linked to gangs, and numerous violent crimes (among others); of all the violent crimes reported, ‘gang-flagged violence tends to be the most serious’ (Pitts, 2020: npag). Cumulatively this scene creates the stereotypical image of a criminalized, drug dealing, gang affiliated, and ‘Dangerous’ (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) (Hall, 1997: 225-279.) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224) Black man, represented by a Grime star. Black men have been ‘idolized for their… prowess… in theater and music’ while synchronously stereotyped as ‘deviant, criminal, rebellious or violent’ (Monell, 2018:519). As noted earlier in the paper, this imagery reinforces the media signifying Grime in conjunction with criminality (Riley, 2017: npag) (White, 2018: 02-07) (Cureton, 2018:531), therefore once again portraying the Black Grime star as a dangerous criminal.

A person in a hat talking on a cell phone



Figure 2: Skepta wears Nikelab Tiger Camo Parka and Black ACG hat. Riff Raff Films (dir.) ’*Nothing beats a Londoner’* UK, 2018 © Nike

Other sports brands have also used these tactics, such as Adidas’ ‘Line’ promotional video, using the aesthetics of a Grime video e.g., bicycles, streets etc. and used Grime track, ‘Line’ by Stormzy; depicting activities symbolic of Grime culture such as congregating young black males; styled it in Grime fashion with characters wearing the street uniform; and representing & styling a leading Grime artist in the video (Vimeo, 2019).

In the same way that Grime represents a platform for Black British people to articulate socio-economic frustrations, Black barbershops have a long-established history of providing a safe-space for Black men to frankly discuss the frustrations and issues they face while maintaining their aesthetic identity (Berner, 2016) (Bernard, 2017). The Black barbershop scene in the advert, featuring several famous Black stars including Grime associates J Hus, AJ Tracey and Dave, reduces this space to a situation of mockery of a Black man, comedian Michael Dapaah, who under the disdainful gaze of the audience, bursts into tears. The symbolism of this sacred space within marginalized communities is thereby stripped of cultural significance (Pipson, 2017: npag) using humour to ridicule the validity of the character and the environment (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224).

White people appropriating Black music, style, performance and other forms of expression isn’t a new construct. ‘From Air Jordan’s to gold teeth and huge diamonds’, white people see that ‘Black Cool is something to buy, put on, acquire. They don’t understand that it’s something they possess internally’ (Pipson, 2017: npag). Increasing white interest in Grime coincided with financial reward for Grime artists increasing exponentially. Like Grime, Hip-Hop before it, was long appropriated, for its style and sound, thus reducing the ‘depth and hardships of minority cultures to simply aesthetic trends, reversing the original intent of authenticity’ of Hip-Hop (D’Anjou, 2018: npag). This began after Adidas’ endorsement of Run-DMC, who birthed the Hip-Hop aesthetic famed throughout the 80s and beyond, branding Hip-Hop on a never previously seen scale (Middlebrook 2007:111), and created synonymy between Adidas, Hip-Hop and Run DMC. ‘Since…My Adidas…nothing in inner-city branding has been left to chance’. Nike are so focused on borrowing style, attitude and imagery from Black urban youth, that the company has its own word for the practice - ‘Bro-ing’ (Treitler, 2013:159).

‘While the industry appeared to diversify by acknowledging… hip-hop culture, it truly didn’t’(Sola-Santiago, 2017). Hip-Hop politics and Black culture were omitted from the conversation, while most ‘high fashion brands…capitalized on streetwear— a style of clothing born out of hip-hop culture in marginalized neighborhoods’ without recognizing the ‘historical, cultural, and political heritage that made streetwear a worldwide phenomenon, symbolizing power and cool’ (Sola-Santiago,2017: npag). Commodifying Black cool has had three significant effects on Black culture, which are reducing ‘Black history and lifestyle down to an aesthetic’, stripping ‘cultural artifacts of their context’ and reinforcing ‘negative stereotypes of Black culture’ (Pipson, 2017: npag).

Grime’s embrace of streetwear reflects the exclusion of ‘marginalized subcultures from the fashion industry, ‘but when a style or trend they display is ultimately embraced by the mainstream, the subculture’s contribution is often disregarded’ (Blazio-Licorish & Anyanwu, 2020: npag). ‘The fashion industry has a history of appropriation that obliterates the identity politics embedded in this style and calls into question the industry’s ability to embrace and understand Black culture’ (Sola-Santiago, 2017: npag).

Much like Hip-Hop and streetwear, Punk too was appropriated (Santos & Avery, 2016: npag) (CP, 2016: npag). Stylistically, Grime and Punk developed unique aesthetics, reflecting a belief of no ‘acceptable, foreseeable future’. Punk too, saw its musical philosophy appropriated by the middle-classes, by disregarding otherness for both groups. (Katsha, 2017: npag) . Importantly, in both instances, the white middle-class did not want join the demographic of the appropriated, rather assimilating the ‘cool’ elements into their own identities, as is presently occurring with Grime (Katsha, 2017: npag).

O’ Young asserts that content appropriation creates incorrect impressions of the originating culture (2008:106). This is potentially harmful, leading to the creation or perpetuation of stereotypes (2008:273) Pozzo posits that ‘Fashion may also become offensive when items reproduce stereotyped representations of a culture, race or gender’ (2020:06). This is apt, as the advert fails to convey the reality of Grime as a politicized articulation of socio-economic inequities, inherent injustice, underprivilege and a fight for equality (Barron, 2013:12) (McGrath, Chamberlain, & Benford, 2016:03) (Fatsis, 2019:02) (Riley, 2017: npag) instead reducing it to an aesthetic (Pipson, 2017: npag).

Barbara Pozzo’s *Fashion between Inspiration and Appropriation* (2020: 06) reviews the potential harm caused through appropriation in a fashion context; harming the ‘community where the appropriated item finds its origin... as in cases in which the... cultural symbols of other ethnic groups are borrowed for commercial purposes, disregarding the values they express’ (2020: 06). The commercialization of Grime stands in contrast with the founding principles of shunning excess and remaining true to the message and experience articulated visually and lyrically. The ‘lack of agency and resources that characterize marginalized communities’ echoes that ‘stereotyping that may stem from the enactment of cultural appropriation is a stark reminder of the past exploitation and commodification of marginalized cultures in general’ (2020:02). That is congruent with the analysis of the advert using Grime artists, and elements of Grime to authenticate the advert.

The representation of the Grime artists within the video aligns to O’ Young and Pozzo’s assertions of misrepresentations resulting in harmful stereotypes. Examples of this were evidenced through Skepta entering the corner shop at night at the beginning of the advert, having a dialogue resembling a drug deal; Giggs standing in the doorway of Morley’s chicken shop, a known murder hotspot, signifying a local gang member with a violent history; and Skepta ending the advert on a hire cycle, correlating with both the spike in crime in London, and, positioned as though delivering drugs to a customer. These representations of Grime stars are not a reflection of Grime, but rather a reflection of criminal and gang lifestyles, serving to ‘reinforce negative Black stereotypes’ (Pipson, 2017: npag) (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) (Hall, 1997: 225-279.) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224). As White noted, when Grime arrived, it came with the ‘tired stereotypes of guns, gangs and knives (White, 2018: 02-07), which appears to be the case again in the Nike advert.

Murphy cites that frequently, when companies use cultural elements, they don’t pay for them, and typically when they do, given the limited legislation around this, the payment will be significantly lower to the appropriated than the benefits reaped by the appropriator (2021:02)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Nothing beats a Londoner has appropriated Grime culture, despite having engaged ‘insiders’ i.e., Skepta, et al. Nike have used both subject and content appropriation (O’ Young, 2008:09). The subject appropriation has taken place using actual stories attached to Grime, particularly the backstory of Giggs, a former member of the Peckham Boys, a gang linked to multiple murders (Darbyshire, 2019: npag), having served time for firearms offences (Wolfson, 2013: npag). The content appropriation has occurred using symbols, practices, dress, and physical presentation (Lenard & Balint, 2019:338) in relation to Skepta’s role in the advert. The use of a Skepta track at the beginning establishes a Grime theme to the advert; while the use of the Dizzee Rascal track during the outro as Skepta is pictured on a hire cycle looking angry completes the appropriation.

Both the subject and content appropriation have resulted in stereotypical representations of both Skepta and Giggs, as well as many of the other Black characters within the advert, who have not been the focus of this analysis. It should also be noted that humor has been used throughout the advert. Humour, is noted as a way of masking, or reducing the danger, attached to stereotypical representations (Alavarado, 1987: 195-224) and therefore, has been omitted from the focus of this study.

Giggs is portrayed, not as the successful music star he now is, but rather aligned to a dangerous Black male stereotype (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018) (Hall, 1997: 225-279.) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224). By placing him within the infamous Morley’s chicken shop (Whittaker, et al, 2017) (Hurst, 2019), asking ‘what’s wrong with Peckham?’, Giggs now presents a character aligned to a murderous gang, located in a murder hotspot, responding to a challenge of his area by laying claim to his territory, adorned in streetwear, which is aligned to the Centre for Social Justice’s criteria for gang culture (Stroud, 2009:21). Lenard and Balint’s study support the hypothesized stereotyping by noting the relevance of subject appropriation to ‘stereotyping and presenting caricatured versions’ (2019:07).

Skepta, portrayed in streetwear, and perceptibly negotiating a drug deal on his phone while in a corner shop at night, serves to reinforce the media signifying Grime in conjunction with criminality (Riley, 2017: npag) (White, 2018: 02-07) (Cureton, 2018:531); further to this, the ending featuring Skepta on a hire cycle, looking angry and punching a football compounds the dangerous Black male stereotype representation (Henry, 2020: npag) (Waqatevuya, 2018: npag) (Hall, 1997: 225-279.) (Bogle, 2016:16) (Alvarado, 1987: 195-224), but also aligns to elements of gang culture, with regards the connotations of the hire cycle, which suggest involvement in criminal and/or violent activity, while his presentation in streetwear aligns to the identifying feature of gang culture. As O’ Young posited, the use of ‘insiders’ in the advert increases audience inclination to believe it a ‘representative expression of their culture’ (O’ Young, 2008:112), which offers explanation as to why audiences saw the advert as a diverse, inclusive and well-rounded promotion.

Importantly, both dangerous Black male stereotypes and UK gang stereotypes are not mutually exclusive, and intersect at several points, showing considerable overlap.

Although not the focus of this paper, the other characters featured in the advert highlighted disparity between representations. Typically, the characters from ethnic groups were pictured in darker environments such as nighttime, and presented stereotypically, such as a black skateboarder being wrestled to the ground by security, a young Black male announcing he has to fight just to use his multipurpose and a young woman of color announcing she has to fight her whole family before she even walks in a room. All this affixed danger to the Black characters and inferred poorer outcomes for London’s minority groups. In contrast, the white characters are pictured in more affluent areas during the day, with aspirational activities such as the Oxford-Cambridge boatrace, and even position Gareth Southgate, a white man and the current England football manager, as God.

As Blazio-Licorish & Anyanwu described, cultural appropriation is typically the ‘exploitation of marginalized cultures by more dominant, mainstream cultures’ (2020). Grime is a marginalized culture, censored by police, prohibited airtime, and only recently entering the mainstream consciousness. Grime is an insider practice, an articulation of frustration at inherent injustices faced by minority groups. Nike are the world leading sportswear brands, worth tens of billions of dollars, and has a track record of low percentages of Black staff, particularly at a senior level (DiversityInc Staff, 2018: npag).

To make the advert, Nike employed anthropological research. Anthropology is a field born out of imperialism and colonial hegemony (Pels, 2008: npag), designed to study the colonized. That a white-owned corporation have utilized this tool in their desire to ‘make their brand cool with trendsetting black youth’ (Treitler, 2013:159), and subsequently culturally appropriated an insider practice (O’ Young, 2008) resulting in negative racial stereotypes (Pipson, 2017: npag) demonstrates the limitations of anthropology, in the collation of biased and distorted information. Cumulatively, the information gathered has led to Nike stripping the cultural artifacts associated to Grime of their context (Pipson, 2013: npag), and misrepresenting the lead Grime stars in the advert, alongside the other Black characters. In support of the argument that cultural appropriation that has taken place, is the fact that the advert bore significantly more benefit for Nike, than it did Grime. Other than the featured artists’ remuneration for appearance, the YouTube views, and goodwill across social media was directed toward Nike, while the Grime culture saw no discernible benefits. Therefore, Nike have perpetuated Black & UK gang stereotypes through the appropriation of Grime.

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