

“Prosecutors charge me, police watch after me”—The intertwining of authenticity, crime, and gang life in Finnish ‘gangsta rap’ music

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Abstract

This article delves into Finnish ‘gangsta rap’, from the perspective of authenticity, a key trope in translocal hip hop culture. More specifically, we analyse four Finnish ‘gangsta rap’ videos and their lyrics by artists who received considerable attention in the Finnish media during 2021–2022. While the media argue that we are facing a new situation of commodified gang violence mediated by ‘gangsta rap’ – or, to be precise, drill-influenced music, which has been termed as ‘gangsta’ by the media – our analysis, drawing on previous research in cultural criminology and hip hop studies, suggests that both the music and the criminal activities, as well as the responses to them, are similar to those observed in earlier US and UK research. However, what makes Finland a globally interesting case study in studying gangsta rap and their assumed connection to street gangs is (i) a relatively small number of immigrants and people of colour, (ii) substantial media attention based on official discourse and high trust in the authorities, and (iii) the escalation of gang violence in the neighbouring Sweden and its anticipated trickle-down effect to Finland. We argue that, in exploring the complex interconnections between authenticity, crime and gang life, one needs a ‘placed’, street literate understanding, the lack of which may arbitrarily stigmatise certain groups of people and certain musical styles.

Keywords

authenticity, gangsta rap, drill rap, street gangs, youth crime, Finland

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Introduction

In late 2022, Finland's leading newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, published a detailed article (Nousiainen, 2022) elaborating how a 'dissing' (a case of disrespect) between two rival gang rappers escalated into a 'spiral of revenge' unprecedented in Finnish criminal history. The article described how a concert by a rapper affiliated with the group L-city (labelled by the media as a street gang) was planned to be the target of a violent attack by another group called the Kurdish Mafia (likewise, labelled as a street gang). Moreover, the article emphasised the planned nature of this attack, describing the events as a promotion of organised crime through rap music.

For years, Finland has been listed as one of the world's happiest countries (Helliwell et al., 2022). Despite this positive public image, Finland is also ranked high in less favourable statistical attributes: those related to racism and discrimination (e.g. FRA, 2018: 80; Himanen, 2021), (domestic) violence (FRA, 2014: 28) – and more recently, youth crime. The statistics show that the number of violent crimes committed by young people increased by more than 40 per cent between 2018 and 2022, while acts of violence have also become more serious (Kantola, 2022). As the example above shows, youth crime and street gangs have also made (recurrent) headlines in the Finnish media, which often tends to highlight the viewpoints of the police and other authority figures. One suggested explanation for the rise in youth violence is the popularity of drill – or, as the Finnish media have opted to call it, 'gangsta rap' (see below for a more elaborate discussion on the term) – the violent lyrics of which are used to antagonise rivals (Alexander, 2023). Rap music is currently one of the most popular genres worldwide (IFPI, 2018) and in Finland (Teosto, 2022), particularly among young adults. Despite (or because of) its enormous popularity, rap music tends to be evaluated with different norms and criteria than other music styles (e.g. Quinn, 2004) and is systematically treated as personal documentation or autobiography (Nielsen and Dennis, 2019: 114).

Recently, this particular sub-genre of rap, drill, has received an inordinate amount of media attention in Finland. We argue that the attention is partly influenced by the situation in Sweden, our neighbouring country, with an exceptionally high number of gun-homicides linked to criminal gangs in socially disadvantaged areas (Brå – Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2021). In Finland, the 'path of Sweden' has contributed to increased concern about youth violence, street safety, and the role of rap music in the promotion of violent behaviour.

Nordic, let alone Finnish, sociological or criminological research has not largely examined rap music in relation to street gangs. Explicitly exploring their association with one another is not our intention either; we will, however, provide different interpretative frameworks to gangsta rap in Finland, particularly from the perspective of authenticity, a key trope in translocal hip hop culture (e.g. Pennycook, 2007; Westinen, 2014). Doing this, we draw on earlier critical research on gangs (Fraser and Atkinson, 2014; Hallsworth and Young, 2008), gangsta rap (Kubrin, 2005; Harkness, 2014), recent European research on grime, trap and drill (Fatsis, 2019a, b; Sidoti, 2021; Ilan, 2015) and research on rap and authenticity (Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019; Dollinger, 2024).

More specifically, by applying digital ethnography and especially the concept of 'place' (Pink, 2009; see also Postill and Pink, 2012), we explore four songs by Finnish rap artists – who can be considered key figures in the discussions of gang crime in the media – and the 'placed' authenticity construction in their videos and songs. We explore how, in gangsta rap, authenticity is intertwined in complex ways with audiovisual and discursive references to crime and gang life. By

analysing such 'placed' and 'street literate' (Cahill, 2000) constructions of authenticity, the article contributes to Nordic cultural criminology along with global hip hop studies and (sociolinguistic) discourse studies.

The code of the streets – crime and rap intertwined?

Violent street life has been meritoriously explored in previous sociological, ethnographic studies such as Anderson's (1999) groundbreaking *Code of the Street*. Another prime example is Kubrin's (2005: 369) extensive content analysis of 403 US rap songs on albums published between 1992 and 2000, in which she examines six 'street codes' identified in Anderson's seminal work: (1) Respect, (2) Violence, (3) Material wealth, (4) Violent retaliation, (5) Objectification of women, and (6) Nihilism, all of which contribute to (i) the creation of social identity and reputation and (ii) social control within rap music. Similar themes have been identified in research on drug dealers in Norway (Sandberg, 2008) and street culture in Copenhagen (Kalkan, 2022), suggesting that the (discursive) quest for violent reputation and respect as a street culture phenomenon has also reached the Nordic countries. Moreover, Kalkan (2022) has argued that the connection to the US ghetto and gangster culture serve as a vehicle through which young, marginalised communities navigate their local social realities: poverty, unemployment and spatial segregation.

Building up thematically on gangsta rap's heritage, the successive (sub)genres trap, grime and drill (Fatsis, 2019a, b; Ilan, 2020; Lynes et al., 2020; Stuart, 2020) draw on similar discourses of violence, crime and street life, but in terms of soundscapes, each borrows from different musical cultures. They are also situated in different times and places: trap has its roots in the rap scene of the southern US in the 1990s (Sidoti, 2021), while grime emerged specifically in London in the early 2000s (Fatsis, 2019b) and UK drill is a recent local variant of Chicago drill (Ilan, 2020). Across the globe, one can encounter localised versions of these musical styles, all with recognisable aesthetics.

Despite their popularity – or perhaps because of it – in recent years, these musical styles and their young creators have been the subject of particular police attention, official concern (Fatsis, 2019a, b) and general moral panic, also in Finland (Åberg and Tyvelä, 2023). Although previous research has not identified a direct link between rap, crime and gang involvement, public concern suggests that rap lyrics may have a wider negative impact on young people and attract them to illegal activities (e.g. Kubrin, 2005; Alexander, 2023; Dollinger, 2024; Ilan, 2020; Fatsis, 2019a, b).

By drawing attention to the so-called 'folk devils' (Cohen, 2011) or 'deviant' individuals or groups, an unprecedented social threat regarding gangsta rap and street gangs was created in the Finnish media, despite the fact that there was no common understanding of whether actual gangs even existed. However, considering previous research, this is not surprising, as similar misinterpretations have been presented already elsewhere. By interviewing a range of police authorities and young people in the UK on the different meanings of 'gangs', Fraser and Atkinson (2014) found that individuals from both 'fields' (à la Bourdieu), 'policing' and 'street', struggle for the same things: recognition, status and distinction. However, for young people, it also involves a great deal of posturing, experimentation and fluidity. In these circumstances, the attribution of 'gang membership' to young people is a delicate and charged process, with a high risk of misinterpretation and misrecognition.

Similarly, Hallsworth and Young (2008) argue that “gang talk” is based on flawed empirical, theoretical-methodological grounds and that public discourse on gangs is misleading. This may have to do with unclear empirical definition of gangs, unsuitable methodology and terminology in researching them, sensationalisation of the phenomenon in the media, gang as a highly valorised term, along with the colonisation of the political imagination, that is, seeing racialised people as criminals. They argue that society’s alert ‘gang gaze’ mystifies and identifies problems rather than helps to solve them.

This kind of mystification of urban violence is precisely what we explore in the Finnish context in this article. In this case, the ‘suitable enemy’ (Hallsworth & Young, 2008: 118) is a music style (gangsta rap) – alien to a large adult audience –, street gangs and specific individuals (second-generation immigrant youth), but also the ‘proximity’ of Swedish gun violence. All groups discussed above lack structural power, which helps portray them as disconnected from the normative society and, furthermore, as “bad people who make bad choices” (Hallsworth & Young, 2008: 191), who should be heavily penalised. As in the United Kingdom and United States (see for example, Camp and Heatherton, 2019; Fatsis, 2019a, b), the alleged association of the genre with real-life criminality, gang life, or violence often results to the online/offline screening of music and even using rap music videos in courtrooms as ‘bad character evidence’ (Owusu-Bempah, 2020), a testimony of the artist’s criminal activities.

The aggravated sentences of the rappers (due to alleged links with organised crime; Nousiainen, 2022) can be seen as examples of securitisation, that manifest in anti-crime and anti-terrorism laws and (illegal) immigration policies, also in the global North (Himanen, 2021: 186). Both securitisation and moral panic aptly describe how street gangs and gangsta rap are treated in the Finnish media and political discourse (for analysis of media discussion on ‘street gangs’ in Finland, see Lönnroth-Olin, 2025) and how the tendency to police rap music in general has been on the rise also in the Nordic context (Åberg and Tyvelä, 2023).

Authenticity in (Finnish) hip hop culture—Perspectives on race, class and gender

Within hip hop culture—and rap music in particular—authenticity is considered a key ingredient, with ‘keepin’ it real’ as its motto (Rose, 1994). While hip hop culture has travelled across the globe, so too has its emphasis on authenticity and staying true to oneself and one’s origins (Ogbar, 2007). Significantly, however, these characteristics have taken on new meanings in new contexts: being ‘real’ in Finland, for instance, may indeed be different than being ‘real’ in the US context (see e.g. Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019), due to different socio-historical circumstances. In his work, Dollinger (2024: 8) highlights the personified nature of authenticity in gangsta rap; stories of criminality play a central role in establishing credibility. The specific connection between authenticity and (supposed) criminality also applies to a few of its sub-genres, trap and drill, particularly because of their history and typical themes, such as the violent realities of inner-city life (Lynes et al., 2020).

Authenticity claims can roughly be divided into two sets: (1) cultural-historical: knowledge of hip-hop history/culture, connection with the (local) community, and continuity between performer and tradition, and (2) personal-experiential: personal experience, original individual

expression, artistic integrity, and truthfulness (Rantakallio, 2019; Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019). Authenticity is (re-)constructed discursively and audiovisually (Westinen, 2014; Rantakallio, 2019), using not only language(s) and discourse(s) but also audiovisual resources such as specific clothing, artefacts, and samples in meaning-making. For a rapper to appear authentic, they also need to be recognised as such by others and the audience. Indeed, the 'take-up' of the audience seems crucial here: artists would not be able to enjoy celebrity status were it not for the audience and fans who watch, listen and consume them, and promote them forward.

The recent trap- and drill-influenced rap music in Finland emulates thematically the 'original' 1980s–90s gangsta rap in the United States. While focusing on the performances of a criminal lifestyle, it also establishes its own identifiable link not only to other Nordic rap music (typically the Swedish one) but, most importantly, to the UK 'road culture' (Bakkali, 2019) via language, discourse, and cultural-visual references such as clothing and (urban) landscapes. The narrator, the streetwise 'roadman', supports himself by selling drugs and participating in other criminal entrepreneurial activities (Woods, 2022), transforming the underclass experience of poverty and social prejudice into an alternative value (Ilan, 2015).

Originally, the term 'gangsta' has first and foremost been used for *commercial* purposes (Quinn, 2004, emphasis added). According to Ebony A. Utley (2012: 4, emphasis added), 'although some hip hop gangstas were former drug dealers and others have been affiliated with gangs, a gangsta is primarily a *form of posturing*'. The term became more widely known with the single 'Gangsta, gangsta' (1988) by the African American rap group N.W.A. Gangsta rap 'profited from its immodestly vulgar and violent braggadocio' (Utley, 2012: 4), describing the harsh environment it originated in (Utley, 2012: 5). Moreover, as bell hooks (1994: 134–135) aptly noted, hip hop does not exist in a vacuum but reflects the surrounding society: 'the sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'.

Gangsta rap's depiction of oppression by White society, Black resistance to this oppression, and the representation of Black masculinity through trained bodies, weapons, and sexist language has also resonated widely with young White audiences in Scandinavia since the early 2000s (Sernhede, 2000: 306). In and through rap, resources that are predominantly disadvantageous in larger society, such as ethnic minority status, poor childhood or particular neighbourhood, can be 'cashed in' (Anderson, 1999, 194). Similarly, Geoff Harkness (2014), who has studied gangsta rap and gangs in Chicago, notes that one of the key social divisions emphasising what he calls 'situational authenticity' (Harkness, 2014: 75–79) is social class, the influence of which is reflected, for example, in the credibility of the rapper. While poverty, social exclusion and stigmatised neighbourhoods are not convertible into capital in society at large, within the world of rap, they can serve as indications of authenticity or what Sandberg (2008) calls 'street capital'.

Compared to the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, where income inequality between different societal groups is known to be considerable, Finland has a relatively comprehensive social security system and less social segregation. (OECD, 2024). Yet, even in Finland, certain neighbourhoods are categorised as more disadvantaged, and hence, in the context of the Finnish hip hop scene, as more 'authentic' (Westinen, 2014), especially by white rappers (Kelekay, 2022). Along the same vein, instead of internalising the territorial stigma, these place-related stereotypes can be challenged in hip hop by creating counter-narratives where the media-created

image of the place as home to immigrants and low-income residents is celebrated as part of a collective identity, freedom and belonging (Kelekay, 2022).

Ethnography, 'place' and rap music videos

For ethnographers investigating digital environments, Caliandro (2018) underscores two valuable strategies: understanding the context and capturing the perspectives of the users (often referred to as the 'natives'). To achieve this, methodological understandings of 'ethnographic holism' (Hine, 2008: 48) and 'ethnographic place' (Pink, 2009) are employed, enabling an exploration of the interplay among senses, groups, and processes on digital platforms, and opening up novel opportunities for ethnographic fieldwork, adaptive practices, and critical insights (Postill and Pink, 2012). What our ethnography entails is observing the scene closely for a number of years and identifying key incidents, elements and interconnections, both on- and offline; following from this close observation, these artists – and consequently their topical songs – have been selected as data based on their (social) media attention. As part of the analysis, we listened, watched, compared notes and made detailed interpretations on how authenticity is constructed in them, and, overall, how this relates to previous research on drill / gangsta rap and their assumed gang affiliation.

Shifting the methodological focus to routines, mobility, and social identities underscores how ethnographic place transcends online/offline contexts (e.g. Stæhr, 2014). Considering this, we view music videos as an 'ethnographic place', necessitating a holistic grasp of context and the 'natives' – the rappers, consumers and discussants of the musical style –, all the while maintaining a broader ethnographic perspective of mediated rap conventions, social media performances, and audience reactions to avoid stigmatising readings. In our view, ethnographic insights into these performances should be cautious of not renewing negative assessments linked to this music genre – or, by extension, its performers (Hine, 2000: 49).

Analysis: Finnish 'gangsta rap' in focus

In our analysis, we explore how authenticity is constructed in Finnish 'gangsta rap' music, more specifically in four music videos and their lyrics by artists who received considerable attention in the Finnish media discourse during 2021 and 2022. The songs in question also exemplify their discographies in terms of musical style and lyrical content, in general. The artists, lyrics, and videos we focus on are: Cavallini feat. BML: *En kommentoi* (No comments) (2021), Milan Jaff: *Helsinki City* (2021), YB026: *6 deep* (2022) and Kerza: *First day out* (2022). For lack of space, we use only our translations from the original Finnish to English. This choice does not explicitly convey the mixed nature of the lyrics, that is, resources drawn on from the local Helsinki slang, spoken Finnish, English, Arabic and Somali.

In analysing these four music videos, we draw on from the extensive work on 'street codes' (Kubrin, 2005) and authenticity construction (e.g. Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019) in rap lyrics. In this analysis, we ask: How is gangsta rap authenticity constructed thematically in the titles, lyrics and audiovisual content of these music videos? We use these four topical examples to show and explore the discursive and audiovisual interconnections between rap, authenticity, crime and gang life. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to earlier research on drill and gangsta rap,

authenticity, and crime, along with media representation on 'gangs' (e.g. Fatsis, 2019a; Hallsworth & Young, 2008). Our analysis proceeds song by song, in the publication order.

En kommentoi

The music video *En kommentoi* by Cavallini featuring BML (on YouTube: 226 k views; 2.4 k likes, 374 comments; 29 November 2024) builds on general drill aesthetics, visually describing inner-city life: tall, concrete buildings, sky-high drone shots of the local area, lavish vehicles (a Jaguar and a helicopter), expensive clothing and branded accessories indexing 'street life' (such as Gucci bags, Trapstar puffer jacket, OT (Out Trappin') clothes), gun-imitative gestures and other hand signs. The video shows not only Cavallini and BML but also their 'gang', that is, a group of Black and Brown young men, wearing tracksuits and masks. The song begins with the line 'Baby, this is our lingo', with the helicopter circling above the two protagonists.

In terms of language and discourse, the lyrics—and the title of the song—can be interpreted as a message to the police that the protagonist will divulge nothing (i.e. 'snitch') if summoned to a police station or court hearing. Moreover, it implies knowing one's rights and being familiar with criminal law: A person suspected of a crime has the right not to contribute to the investigation of the crime of which they are suspected (Chapter 4 § 3 of the Pretrial Investigation Act). The chorus of the song is as follows:

I don't comment, I'm not like them
I only answer to my name, otherwise I don't comment
I don't know them, I haven't heard from them
Believe me, I've never even seen them
I don't comment, I don't comment
Don't ask me anything, I don't comment
Post a photo, fans comment
Sorry constable, I don't comment

In addition to constructing authenticity by familiarity with the criminal law and claiming loyalty to one's own posse and friends, the first verse after the chorus can be seen as referring to the 'G-code' (gangsta code). Cavallini elaborates: 'Rule number one, don't get caught. If you do, keep your mouth shut. I don't shake hands with snitches'. Further, alongside the general (UK) drill aesthetics, the discursive reference to their own place of residence, P-Block, that is, Pikku Huopalahti¹, can be interpreted as loyalty to one's immediate locale, 'hoods', and as their primary local identification (Forman, 2002). The line 'Post a picture, fans comment' refers to having fans or followers on social media who comment on the online 'beefs' (disputes) between him and his rap colleagues – and sometimes also aim to, if not initiate, at least voyeuristically consume the ambiguous content rappers produce (Alexander, 2023; Schwarze and Fatsis, 2022).

The theme of loyalty continues in the second verse, where BML emphasises his masculine superiority by declaring himself a 'Master chef', who refrains from the emasculating chores of doing the dishes. Being a big name in the neighbourhood also makes him 'whip' ('drive an expensive car'), prompting Bad B's ('bad bitch') flirtatious behaviour. In doing this, he localises key UK drill vocabulary ('whip', 'broski'). The 'bad b', or perhaps women in general, are defined as groupies further in the song, 'gold-diggers' seeking to take advantage of high-status rappers. Such action should not, however, break the brotherly bond between these young men. While the cornerstones of gangsta rap music, hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia, have been extensively researched, strong non-sexual social bonds between men (i.e. homosociality) have received only little attention thus far (Owara, 2011). Although this type of 'bros before hoes' discourse does not seem particularly compassionate towards women, putting friend(ship)s first can nevertheless be seen as loyalty towards other men.

Master chef when I cook, I never do the dishes (Me)

Bad B started flirting when she saw how I whip (Whip)

Mercedes or Pyrex (Pyrex)

Bandos, me and my pirates

I don't know why my broski loves violence too much for some reason (Ching, ching, ching)

Movie (movie), that bitch is a groupie (Haa)

It's based on skills, this isn't luck (Ha)

Big name in OT, I always work hard here (Well-known)

Everyone always wants to shine (ye), but nobody's ready to grind

I don't like to talk and they like to ask, I'm not saying anything

Here, the negative-turned-positive in-group term 'my pirates' – that, assumedly, refers to the Somalis (cf. Denis, 2021) – is used to emphasise authenticity by virtue of belonging to this ethnic group. The line 'I don't know why my broski loves violence too much for some reason' can either be seen as an attempt to break away from (the cycle of) violence and its glorification or as an act of 'crazyness' (in connection with the line 'ching, ching, ching' referring to the 'sound' of stabbing someone), something that Kubrin (2005) characterises as an important social identity-builder in gangsta rap lyrics.

In this case, the concept of 'place' (Pink, 2009), or the 'cultural ecosystem' (Schwarze and Fatsis, 2022) are particularly useful in contextualising the aesthetics of their music. For example, in this verse, the themes and vocabulary from earlier trap and drill songs are directly 'translated' into Finnish – and hence used for constructing hip hop authenticity via cultural and historical factors (Rantakallio, 2019). The reference to cooking, 'bando' and 'pyrex', that is, abandoned houses and crack-cocaine, contribute to the rap aesthetics directly borrowed from the US and UK. Moreover, artists wearing tracksuits and lyrics referring to OT ('Out Trapping') follows a well-established translocal drill narrative, where authenticity is constructed via an image of hard (illegal)

work in the hard-fashioned 'trap house' suburb – something which Pikku Huopalahti, with its pastel-colored medium-rise buildings, or in fact any local Finnish suburb, is not. Interestingly enough, although the lyrics emphasize the P block – because of its reputation as 'street credible' – the video is actually shot in Itä-Pasila, a grey, urban area with high-rise buildings, something which better compares with the global drill aesthetics.

The threat of physical violence is used to create a reputation of toughness, but also a masculine identity; a performance in which violence is not feared or it is even seen as an obligatory part of street life. The references to guns and violence, as well as the turning of negative stereotypes into glory, can also be seen as part of social control: demanding respect and resisting victimisation. According to Kubrin (2005), social control is most visible in anti-snitching discourse, which is a central theme already at the title level. However, rather than serving as a warning for others against snitching, the piece is a testament to one's loyalty.

In this example, authenticity is thus constructed through various (audio)visual and discursive resources (Westinen, 2018), drawing on from local and translocal contexts, which contribute both to the cultural-historical aspect of authenticity – a particular local neighbourhood and ethnic group, one's knowledge of and location within the historical continuum of rap music, and particularly UK drill (Rantakallio, 2019; see also Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019) –, and the personal-experiential aspect of authenticity (Rantakallio, 2019) – the autobiographical title and the local events referred to in the lyrics (for instance, '20 [people] at the [police] station'), which, presumably, tell a story of the rapper being questioned at a police station (for his involvement in gang confrontations earlier that year).

Helsinki city

'Helsinki city'² by Milan Jaff (1.4 million views, 9.6 k likes, 4.8 k comments; 29 November 2024) was the most viewed and commented video in our data at the time of the study, most likely due to Jaff being a key figure in news coverage on Finnish 'gangsta rap' and its (alleged) associations with gang life and organised crime. Despite its high (media) visibility, the uptake i.e. the comments are not very positive or encouraging, but mostly mock the artist for his poor rapping skills and discuss strict immigration politics and deportation laws. Indeed, based on our ethnographic observations, Milan Jaff appears not as an esteemed rapper but first and foremost as a social media content producer, 'gangfluencer' (a neologism, consisting of 'gang member' and 'influencer'), who showcases criminal lifestyle and incorporates rap music into his portfolio as (only) one means for accumulating 'street capital'.

The video starts with the protagonist, Milan Jaff, getting a haircut in a barbershop. Following this, he meets two Black men, 'bros', wearing ski masks, instructing them that 'a dude' needs to be 'taken care of [killed] today'. The scenes following this interaction, before the actual song begins, show a supposed kidnapping and, ultimately, the shooting of a young man. This is one of the rare instances in our data visually referencing violence, and even death. In this example, using Black 'assistants' (and the barbershop reference) can be seen as creating ethnic hierarchies, while simultaneously aiming for proximity with Blackness through the 'stickiness' of race (Bobo, 2014), whereby the protagonist also becomes 'authentic'.

The video is set in a local urban context, mainly at the Puhos mall in Eastern Helsinki, known for its multiculturalism and often referenced in Finnish rap lyrics (for example Ege Zulu: 'Puhos'). Its usage

in Finnish rap videos resembles that of the above-mentioned P Block, as a 'credible' and recognisable hip hop locale. The artist and his 'gang' wear ski masks and show not only gun-imitative gestures, but also (actual or fake) guns, something which the lyrics support: 'grown up on the streets, I'm used to shooting'. The video includes both a visual and linguistic reference to the artist's ethnic origin by displaying the Kurdistan flag on numerous occasions, while mentioning their 'gang', Kurdish mafia, for which the number 47 acts as a reference. The lyrics begin with a hook:

Helsinki city, haji I'm the finest

Helsinki city, haji I give pressure

Helsinki city, haji I'm the finest

Helsinki city, I own all of this

This homage to the home city of the artist signifies (the supposed) ownership of Helsinki and the leadership of the Kurdish Mafia. The song (and the hook) is a blend of Finnish, English, and Arabic. As in the lyrics of *En kommentoi*, derogatory terms related to one's own ethnic group are reused and taken ownership of: 'haji' is (initially) "a racial slur/slang for Iraqis, Afghans, or Arab people in general" (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). The first verse of the song is as follows:

East Helsinki, no point in investigating

Me and my gang we wear black

You and your gang, no point in investigating

Wasteman pussy, wasteman pussy

I can't take snitches, you tell stories about me

Police I rebel, interrogation a couple of those

Women, car, money, plata

I put them in a pile, I put them in a pile

These lyrics describe how Milan Jaff's gang (supposedly) dominates the city, especially its eastern parts, and others are depicted—in a derogatory, emasculating and misogynistic way—as 'wasteman pussys'. Like *En kommentoi*, these lyrics condemn snitching and talking to the police and expect the loyalty of peers. Police officers also appear in the video in these two scenes. Although the lyrics emphasise rebelliousness and boasting against the police, these scenes show, in quite contradictory terms, Milan Jaff and his crew talking to a blonde female officer on the street, in good, or even flirtatious, terms.

Drawing from Kubrin's (2005) work, these lyrics create a social identity and build a reputation, firstly through the ownership of a place and its 'streets'. Calling others wasteman pussies, and including references to guns, masks and cops in the video are all part of the act of toughness, where the rapper shows he is not afraid of anyone. Similarly to *En kommentoi*, the lyrics show social control, anti-snitching attitude and a demand for respect. Moreover, the song inverts several negative stereotypes for his own benefit: in addition to the racial slur 'Haji', the lines 'East

Helsinki full of refugees, East Helsinki, Kela³ pays for everything' refer to a prevailing Finnish populist discourse of welfare provisions. Kela is depicted as a financier for refugees living in East Helsinki. This type of discourse and associated stereotypical perceptions are often ironically (re) used and circulated in Finnish rap music (see for example, Kelekay, 2022; Westinen, 2018), but also among Black and Brown youth in general, both on social media and offline. Moreover, these lines are – perhaps intentionally – written grammatically incorrectly, that is, in 'bad Finnish' (e.g. Lehtonen, 2015), a linguistic strategy used by young people with 'migrant backgrounds' to create alternative, self-determined belonging and identities (Kelekay, 2022).

In *Helsinki city*, authenticity is constructed both visually and discursively, drawing on both local and translocal contexts: the lyrics and the scenes exemplify social dominance through (fear of) violence, the subjugation of others and the emphasis on loyalty to the local 'crew'. The personal-experiential aspect (Rantakallio, 2019) of authenticity is shown via acknowledging one's roots, locales, and ethnic background, along with personal involvement in many of the events prior to, but particularly after, the creation of this video – as reported also in the media (Nousiainen, 2022).

6 deep

The original music video of YB026's *6 deep* was deleted from the streaming services when he announced giving up his rap career in May 2022. The locations captured in the video are a home studio and a parking garage. It includes cars, fireworks, bandanas and caps, puffer jackets, gun-imitative 'rah rah' sounds and accompanying gestures that can all be interpreted as loyalty to dominant 'drill aesthetics'. Thus, they exhibit street cultural capital and embody 'street habitus' (Sandberg, 2008), streetwise disposition consisting of bodily capital, language and street smartness, a way of showing they know 'the rules of the game' (Alexander, 2023: 350) within the drill field. This knowledge is further promoted with the opening scene of the video featuring an audio-visual clip from the 2005 US hip hop film 'Get rich or die tryin'. The protagonists of the '6 deep' music video, all of them Black and Brown men, are in their home studio, watching the clip that explicitly spells out the rules, referring to the ways of succeeding in the gangsta rap entrepreneurship (see also *En kommentoi*). The clip also features a song by African American rapper 50 Cent, starring in the film and appearing on the soundtrack.

The lyrics are a mixture of Finnish, particularly Helsinki slang, English, and Somali. The title, '6 deep', is a reference to killing or being dead/buried, and the lyrics emphasise that the protagonist wants 'N***as six deep'. The topic is elaborated on with references to carrying knives or guns: *habad* (gun in Somali) that 'does not jam, and always fucking spits', 'I make habad sing like Ella Mai' (referring to a British singer-songwriter), and having 'an Uzi or Scorpion in the car' (referring to different gun 'brands').

In addition to carrying weapons, the 'street credibility' of the rapper is constructed by being indifferent to the police and prosecutors (interested in his whereabouts):

Prosecutors charge me, police watch after me

Fuck that shit, I do whatever the fuck I want

C-c-c-c-cops (Brr) don't feel me

I carry my gun or I carry knives, rah

In addition to equating women (or the artist Ella Mai) to weapons, the lyrics refer to women either as ‘Bad Bitches thick like Megan Thee Stallion’ or as ‘fucking groupies’, who want to be with him for fame, similarly to *En kommentoi*:

This ‘veija’ feels me, cos I’m a star
 I’m the reason why your bitch left you
 Fuck these rap n***s, they’re all fucking pussy
 When I step into the party, I have Dior or Gucci
 I don’t want these chicks, they’re fucking groupies

The local slang word ‘veija’ (woman in the so-called vede language)⁴ can refer (sometimes derogatorily) to a particular woman but also to a potential sexual partner. In this case, ‘veija’ has left her boyfriend because she wants to be with YB due to his celebrity status – and in this way is, in fact, ‘better’ than random groupies at a party.

In these lyrics, the street code -based social identity and reputation described by Kubrin (2005) is built around the image of toughness through the threat of violence and the depiction of different weapons as an immediate reaction to disrespecting him. The violence is directed at other men, who are threatened with ending up ‘six deep’. Simultaneously, authenticity is constructed around the elements Kubrin (2005) describes as social control: gaining respect, rejecting victimhood, fearlessness, and retaliation.

In terms of authenticity, the lyrics of this song and its life-threatening title can be seen as having a personal-experiential (Rantakallio, 2019) background, because, before the song was published, the artist was the target of threats described above. However, the audiovisual movie reference in the beginning of the video also sets the artist in a wider historical and translocal hip hop context and continuum, by showcasing intertextual references to the US hip hop – and thereby authenticating themselves into the ‘same’ narrative (Westinen and Rantakallio, 2019: 128).

First day out

The final music video is Kerza’s *First day out* (424 k views, 3.3 k likes, 313 comments; 29 November 2024). Of the analysed videos, ‘First day out’ has the second highest number of views and mostly encouraging comments. The young artist was sentenced to three years and four months for an attempted murder in October 2021 and released on parole in early 2022. The title of the song serves as a reference to getting out of jail. Visually, the video is set mostly on (the stairs of) a parking hall where Kerza and his crew ‘hang out’. The video begins with a scene where Kerza is shown alone outside in the snow, in front of a big grey building, thus hinting at ‘getting out’ [of prison]. Moreover, the video includes gambling, expensive vehicles (Lexus), distinctive outfits such as balaclavas and caps, and gun-imitative gestures (finger guns), all of which index specific drill aesthetics (Alexander, 2023).

The lyrics discuss topics such as guns, penitentiary institutions, masculinity, and gang life. The song begins with pleading allegiance to jailed friends – ‘Free the guys’ – and the chorus continues

with testimonials of involvement in 'real' crime: bail money and being in contact with the law enforcement.

No matter how much the bail would've been, money would be on deck yeah
Cro isn't interested in checks, he's interested in G check
I gave him Fendi, and still he uses Nike Tech yeah
Too many bros in xabs, I pray he won't be next
First day out, it's first day out
I heard opps wanna come, I say to them "Let'em"
I shake my nine like Erna Husko her ass
I came home fresh, they didn't wanna believe it

The chorus continues with declaring knowledge about the rules of the rap (and gang) game and by emphasising loyalty to 'cros', referring to friends or brothers. Kerza is also worried about his friends in 'xabs' (prison in Somali). This is followed by references to rival gang members, 'opps' (opponents, another localised drill expression), wanting to come after them when released from jail. The chorus ends with equating him shaking his 'nine' (9 mm gun) to a Finnish fitness influencer Erna Husko, known for her training videos, 'shaking her ass'. The dual role of women is also tangible in the second line of the first verse: 'I was in jail, my mom gave me love from distance', referring to the trope of motherly love in (US) rap lyrics (e.g. Motapanyane 2012).

Although the lyrics refer to the bail system, using bail as an alternative to pretrial detention is actually not used in Finland because it raises issues of equality related to, for example, the financial status and wealth of those suspected of crimes (Ministry of Justice 2016: 61). At this particular point Kerza's knowledge of the criminal law seems to be relying on and mimicking conventions related to the US prison system. Further in the first verse, Kerza refers to 'an anklet', which is in effect also in the Finnish legal system, and to staying away from drug affairs: 'I've got an ankle bracelet, so keep your fict' (drug dealer scale).⁵ In fact, showing or discussing monitoring devices in Finnish rap music videos has recently become more common, which may index the complex connections between rap, crime and authenticity.

Finally, at the beginning of the second verse, the quote: 'Your veija sucked me in Bentley, now I got a Rolls-Royce' illustrates the longstanding (rap) theme of misogyny (Oware, 2011). The protagonist fantasising about oral sex by another man's girlfriend in the backseat of a luxury car diminishes women as expendable beings, objects of men's ownership. In addition to placing himself above other men, such lyrics of casual oral sex and expensive cars as relevant hallmarks of his career also contribute to the construction of his authenticity as a gangsta rapper, representative of what is thought to be achieved with criminality and commodification of the badman trope: not only financial but also sexual power.

To sum up Kerza's lyrics, authenticity is constructed via social identity built on the (audiovisual and/or discursive) readiness to use violence, even weapons, as an essential part of masculinity and the creation of a reputation. As Kubrin (2005: 172, see also Kalkan 2022) notes, 'rappers are

virtually fixated on respect', and social control is part of maintaining respect in the eyes of both self and opponents. In addition to gaining respect from others with violence ('They say I'm a G cos I only used my chef'), another aspect of respect is self-defence ('I was only defending myself'), which can also be used due to the fear of being victimised, something the code of the street advises to avoid. In terms of authenticity, his testimonies of/as a 'G' (gangsta) also adhere to the requirement of truthfulness in authentic, personal storytelling (Rantakallio, 2019).

Gangsta rap, street code and authenticity summarised

In this article, we analysed four Finnish 'gangsta rap' music videos, examining song titles, lyrics, and audiovisual elements from the perspective of authenticity construction. Our primary focus was on understanding the complex, reflexive and 'placed' relationship between rap music, authenticity and 'the code of the street' (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005, see also Kalkan, 2022), particularly in Finland, but intertwining with translocal contexts.

Our analysis revealed 'gangsta' authenticity being constructed via the following, emerging themes: (1) prior or present involvement in 'real' crime, (2) knowledge of the 'rules' of the rap game, (3) loyalty to one's immediate locality and peers and (4) display of social dominance. The resulting *social control* and *social identity and reputation* (Kubrin 2005) is the combination of what being a credible 'gangsta rapper' requires.

The first theme, capitalising on the artist's criminal background, mostly focuses on a reputation of toughness, based on unpredictability, fearlessness and willingness to use violence or different weapons (Kubrin, 2005: 371). It is constructed by direct references to crimes committed (e.g. being on parole or being released from prison) or dealing with the police for other reasons (e.g. interrogations, arrests). The second theme consists mainly of demanding respect by rejecting victimisation, turning negative stereotypes into glory and highlighting anti-snitching attitudes, all of which are common themes not only in gangsta rap but also, admittedly, in street culture in general (Kubrin, 2005). The third theme centres around the importance of (trans)local loyalty, whether referring to jailed friends ('Free the guys'), an ethnic group ('pirates'; 'hajis') or a specific neighbourhood (East Helsinki; P Block). The fourth theme is the display of social dominance of/through money and women, and more precisely, misogynistic portrayals of women, whose roles in the videos and lyrics were very limited and marginalised (see also Kubrin 2005) and mostly related to the stereotypical madonna vs whore setting.

Thus, authenticity construction in our data draws both on cultural-historical and personal-experiential arguments (Rantakallio 2019): the songs and videos draw heavily on the drill legacy from the UK and the gangsta rap legacy from the US but contextualise it and make it meaningful via the local, personal viewpoints and (their own) life experiences. Moreover, in their rapping, using bits and pieces from Finnish, (African American) English, Helsinki slang and the artists' (other) home languages (Somali and Arabic) most likely reflects their everyday language repertoire (Blommaert, 2009). Thus, not only the (audio)visual tropes and discursive themes but also the artists' multilingual resources contribute to their (trans)local hip hop authenticity (Pennycook, 2007).

To sum up, the intertwining of the local and translocal elements in authenticity construction is a complex process, one which, in our case, seems to emphasise the latter at the expense of the former – at least in connection to the recent UK drill 'wave' in Finland. Using Finnish language, slang and Finnishised English (see e.g. Westinen 2023), and mentioning national welfare state

institutions like KELA and local celebrities is a way for the artists to connect with and highlight their local embeddedness in a translocal culture. Moreover, the videos highlight local places, like shopping malls, and architectural tradition (e.g. Tyvelä and Åberg, 2023, see also Kelekay, 2022) which are recognisable to locals but filmed in a way that aligns with the global drill aesthetic. Indeed, overall, drawing on translocal elements and aesthetics of drill and 'gangsta rap', seems to – in addition to constructing authenticity – focus on gaining popularity, money, and fame, and thereby also reflecting capitalist ideals and materialism of contemporary (Western) societies. While embracing these values, Finland and the Nordic countries differ, however, from the sociocultural and societal contexts of the original drill or gangsta rap in that they are often considered more equal, safe and ethnically homogeneous (i.e. White) than the UK and US.

Conclusion: Fighting 'gang fever' with 'street literacy'

Writing this article was inspired by a period when the Finnish media was grappling with the (mainstream) emergence of gangsta rap and its perceived association with youth violence and 'street gangs'. During this period, Milan Jaff and Cavallini received historically harsh sentences (ten and nine years' unconditional imprisonment) in 2022 after being charged for preparation of a serious crime against life or health and several other offences (e.g. Kirsi and Helpinen, 2022; Nousiainen, 2022). Later, in June 2024, the Court of Appeal reduced the sentences after ruling that the aggravating criteria for organised crime were not, in fact, met (Lehtokari, 2024).

Although the 'exceptional' – allegedly violence-provoking – nature of the Finnish rap lyrics was highlighted in the media and other public discourse, it did not take into account any of the themes addressed in previous gang studies or research on gangsta rap or drill (in the UK and the US), such as the difficulty to define 'street gangs' (e.g. Hallsworth and Young, 2008), the ready-made association between real-life criminality and violence, and rap lyrics, in particular, (Dunbar and Kubrin, 2018) and the policing of such lyrics (e.g. Fatsis, 2019a). This setting provided the backdrop for our study, particularly with reference to the legal and public debate.

What seems exceptional for the Finnish context is that despite evidence-based decision-making, justice and equality that Finland is globally known for (Himanen, 2021), Finland is actually no different from other countries in this respect: the media sensationalisation, lack of empiricism, and emphasis on the police perspective, as shown in previous research, can also be seen in Finland. Moreover, the 'gang fever' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008) in Finland has been linked, quite uncritically, to the rise of 'roadman culture' (e.g. Bakkali, 2019; Woods, 2022) among the Finnish youth – yet another concept alien to mainstream, adult audiences – referring to a certain kind of appearance and ethnicity that supposedly motivates violent behaviour on/offline. Although the public debate has quite understandably dwelled into the artists' crimes and harsh punishments, it has also been marked by the fear of 'the path of Sweden' as regards gun violence (Åberg and Tyvelä, 2023, see also Lönnroth-Olin, 2025). This kind of speculative, even malicious, talk reinforces stigmatisation, whereby young people, who are racialised as Brown or Black, or who listen to certain kinds of music, may become hyper-visible and be more readily defined as gang-members or their actions as gang-related. In line with Lynes et al. (2020), we argue that the media (and the law enforcement) tend to – if not promote, at least unquestionably drive the criminalisation of particular urban populations and the demonisation of particular cultural forms by presenting them as a 'necessary' safety issue.

This suggested nexus between music, race and crime is most obvious in the case of rap: when a genre based on imitation, exaggeration, provocative and oftentimes violent self-expression – foreign to the (White) general public – is introduced in national media, the risk of misinterpretation increases. Moreover, since rap music is, still, primarily seen as Black music, evaluations of it (and its fans) may draw on ‘preexisting attitudes and cultural stereotypes’, including anger, hostility, aggressive and criminal behaviour (Fried, 2003) – evaluations to which the media also continuously contributes with stereotypical depictions. Despite this – or precisely because of it – rap provides one of the few channels in which marginalised and racialized young people can get recognition (Westinen, 2023) and/or a way out of poverty and into success (Hall et al., 2023), thus wanting to fully invest in it. However, when (‘gangsta’) rap is decontextualized and brought into the realm of street gangs – typically by the media – the ‘suitable enemy’, as exemplified by Hallsworth and Young (2008: 185), is created. This enemy representation is simplified, without considering the consequences for marginalised young people, thereby criminalising a (mere) aesthetic and cultural expression that often depicts responses to broader structural inequalities (e.g. Bakkali, 2019; Hall et al., 2023; Lynes et al., 2020). Untangling such complexity and understanding the societal effects of such labelling requires cultural knowledge and critical theoretical lenses.

Contributing to the fields of global and Nordic hip hop studies, sociology and cultural criminology, our article emphasises a nuanced understanding of gangsta rap and drill, and their intertwining with authenticity – one that encompasses both local and translocal contexts and one that draws on ethnographic sensitivity. We argue that the community formed around this style of music constitutes a cultural ecosystem, a ‘resource for community-building’ (Schwarze and Fatsis 2022: 465), while the music itself is a space for various emotions, opinions and experiences shared through audiovisual and discursive storytelling (Goyes and Sandberg, 2024). Indeed, in this ecosystem, authenticity is built on certain shared conventions and personal, sometimes autobiographical, stories and must be approached as an ‘ethnographic place’ that cannot be interpreted without considering its shared understandings, norms, and—as we argue—without street literacy (Cahill, 2000, see also Ilan, 2015; Stuart, 2020). In this regard, the necessity of an in-depth, timely examination of rap in its cultural context, with a ‘placed’ understanding, cannot be overstated. This applies also to the Nordic context, often perceived as a socio-culturally and economically homogeneous area, shared by a common history. A systematic, ‘placed’ exploration into Nordic drill and its similarities and differences both within and in relation to the UK and US is needed. Our article focusing on Finland is a step in that direction.

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Notes

1. A mixed-tenure Helsinki neighbourhood in the western inner-city built in the 1990's.
2. The song is, in fact, a localised version of the song 'Stockholm City' (2016) by a Swedish rapper Sinan.
3. Kela is the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, 'a government agency that provides basic economic security for everyone living in Finland' (www.kela.fi/en).
4. 'Vede language' is an old slang or a type of language, used particularly in (East) Helsinki, typically among young people. It is based on the addition and/or inversion of syllables, functioning as a 'secret' language.
5. In the 'principle of least harm' (Chapter 1, Section 3 of the Coercive Measures Act), instead of imprisonment, the court may order electronic monitoring (wearing an anklet) of the suspect.

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Elina Westinen works as Academy Fellow at Finnish Youth Research Society. Her project (2023–2027) focuses on young people involved with hip hop culture from the perspectives of identification, ethnicity and conviviality. She has published widely on rap music, hip hop culture, belonging and social media and is an active member of the European Hip Hop Studies Network.