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The American Ghetto, Gangster, and Respect on the Streets of Copenhagen: Media(tion)s Between Structure and Street Culture

Abstract

“Street culture” is often considered a response to structural factors. However, the relationship between culture and structure has rarely been empirically analyzed. This article analyzes the role of three media representations of American street culture and gangsters—two films and the music of a rap artist—in the street culture of a disadvantaged part of Copenhagen. Based on years of ethnographic fieldwork, this article demonstrates that these media representations are highly valuable to and influential among young men because of their perceived similarity between their intersectional structural positions and those represented in the media. Thus, the article illuminates the interaction between structural and cultural factors in street culture. It further offers a local explanation of the scarcely studied phenomenon of the influence of mass media on street culture, and a novel, media-based, local explanation of global similarities in different street cultures.

Introduction

One Friday night, I sat in the club on X Street, Copenhagen. The other young men enjoyed themselves, drinking alcohol and smoking joints. The music was loud. Haitham,¹ who was tipsy, played a song by Bob Marley and, misunderstanding the English lyrics, taunted him for being a “perverted rapist,” much to the amusement of the rest of us. I then played a track by Tupac and told him I was using it in a chapter I was writing about how they look up to gangster films and music. He replied, “Yes. It was he who raised us. Not our parents or anything. He is the one who raised us.” He put on the Tupac song “Troublesome 96” and explained:

Haitham: Look, when we were young when we were going to fight other blocks—for example, when we were going to fight Y Street [a notorious block], we sat and drank and listened to this one. Every time we were going to fight other blocks, we first sat and drank and listened to this one.

Author: Why?

Haitham: It gives energy, you see. We got worked up over it. Saying “Yes, we’ll slaughter them.” Becoming angry, you understand? Then we went out and fought. And then, if anyone [of our guys] ran away, we [afterward beat them up for it or, as we did with one,] burned them.

Although the young men in the street culture of Nørrebro, Copenhagen, listened to much varied music and watched a variety of movies, they particularly admired and expressed the influence of the late artist Tupac Shakur and the movies *Scarface* (De Palma 1983) and *Blood In, Blood Out* (Hackford 1993), which, like Tupac’s songs, depict life in disadvantaged US neighborhoods and/or US gangsterism. This article provides a sociological explanation for why these three held such an iconic position in this culture during my fieldwork among the young men from 2006-2015—which they then continually held, due to the transmission from older to younger youths, of the special appreciation of these media products (see Author 2018). I particularly stress the structural reasons for this cultural phenomenon, thus contributing to a decades-long debate regarding structure versus

culture in the (re)production of an illicit street culture (e.g., Liebow 2003 [1967]; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Wilson 1987, 2009). A common argument for this (re)production is that street culture is a response to disadvantageous structures, but this relationship is rarely empirically depicted and analyzed, even in rich ethnographies (e.g., Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]). I probe this relationship by combining the traditional ethnographic approach to street culture with reception studies' focus on media consumption, through which I analyze the young men's prizing of the three media products—who themselves emphasize structural conditions as reasons for their appreciation, and as such empirically state and elaborate on structural reasons for their cultural praxis.

I further offer a local explanation of the mass media's influence on street culture. Whereas this influence is frequently described (e.g., Miller 2001; Thrasher 1942 [1927]), little empirical research exists on why and how it occurs (see, however, Hagedorn 2008; Lalander 2009; Moshuus 2005; Van Hellemont and Densley 2019). Answering this question, I propose a novel local explanation for global similarities in street culture, centered on the global reach and consumption of media representations of American street culture—a consumption, however, still based on structural factors.

This article is grounded on a theoretical synthesis of developments (esp. Wilson 1987) of the classical subcultural argument of culture being a response to structures, with an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991) accommodating a compound focus on both poverty (Wilson 1987) and recognition (Honneth 2006). This synthesis is further combined with reception studies' findings of differing interpretations of media content, partly due to differences in the social position of media users (Fiske 1987). Consequently, I argue that the spatial concentration of poor and disregarded young men from ethnoracial minorities gives rise to an “interpretive community”

(Fish 1980) that values certain cultural products—Tupac and his music, *Scarface*, and *Blood In, Blood Out*—because of their intersectional structural position.

The following section elaborates on these theoretical combinations, followed by a description of the ethnographic study, a presentation of the three media products in Nørrebro's street culture, and an analysis of why these youths value these media products.

Street culture as a response to structural factors

Studies of “street culture” (Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Ilan 2015) encompass a long tradition of American ethnographies on the often marginalized and criminal lives of mostly young men in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anderson 1999, 2003 [1978]; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Contreras 2013; Liebow 2003 [1967]; Whyte 1993 [1943]). By contrast, European street culture ethnographies are relatively new and scarce (e.g., Bucarius 2014; Lalander 2009; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011), and virtually nonexistent in Denmark, where the studies coming closest to this research tradition are short-term institutionally based ethnographies (Jensen 2007; Bengtsson 2012).

A longstanding argument in such studies is that street culture is (partly) a response to structural factors. This idea dates back to earlier subculture theories (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955) empirically influenced by Whyte's (1993 [1943]) street ethnography. These theories influenced later street ethnographies (Anderson 2003 [1978]; Hannerz 2004 [1969]; Liebow 2003 [1967]), which, in turn, influenced a predominant theory in newer American street ethnographies (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Venkatesh 1997, see also 2006), namely, Wilson's (1987) theory of the “ghetto poor.”

Analyzing several societal changes, crucially deindustrialization and the resulting dearth of jobs for many unskilled African Americans, and the increasing outmigration of working African

Americans from segregated inner-cities, Wilson (1987) depicts how the African American poor are spatially concentrated. Such findings are also relevant beyond America. The Danish shift from an industrial to a service economy exacerbated poverty among ethnoracial minorities, as many of them are unskilled. Owing to ethnoracial segregation, this poverty is, to some extent, spatially concentrated, as seen in Nørrebro—the poorest district in Copenhagen with the third highest number of ethnoracial minority inhabitants (Author 2018). For instance, 85.2% of the inhabitants of Mjølnerparken, a neighborhood in Nørrebro, are minorities from “non-western” countries² (2014) and 24.5% of them suffer from “relative poverty” (2010), as defined by OECD (Author 2018). Although this poverty in the egalitarian Danish welfare society— where the relative aspect of poverty might have a comparatively greater significance— is lower than that in some places discussed by Wilson (1987), there is nevertheless a poverty concentration in Nørrebro caused by deindustrialization and fewer manual jobs (Author 2018).

Wilson asserts that this results in poverty “concentration effects” (Wilson 1987, 58), mediated by network, institutional, and cultural processes that aggravate the situation in such areas. Regarding cultural processes, Wilson (1996, 2009) draws on Hannerz’s (2004 [1969]) street ethnography, arguing that the structural constraints shared by many inhabitants can lead to collective interaction-based cultural responses (Wilson 1987, 1996, 2009). For instance, the concentration of unemployed individuals brings about a paucity of working role models for the youth, such that joblessness and the underground economy can “come to be seen as a way of life” (Wilson 1987, 57), partly through exposure to drug-dealing role models (Wilson 1996, 2009). With limited opportunities for economic and status gains in mainstream society, inhabitants can develop “a code of shady dealings” (Venkatesh 2006) to subsist materially or develop a violent “code of the street” (Anderson 1999) on which they build their esteem (Wilson 2009). Wilson, in effect,

describes the emergence of “street culture” (Ilan 2015), or what Anderson (1999) dubbed the “code of the street.”

Wilson’s (1987) cultural argument resembles that of Anderson (1999) and Bourgois (2003 [1996]), who, despite differences in their influential street ethnographies, both conceptualize street culture as a response (comprising opposition) to structural factors. Anderson (1999, back cover, see also 32) argues that the code of the street is, *inter alia*, “a response to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, to the stigma of race, to rampant drug use, to alienation and lack of hope” while Bourgois (2003 [1996], 8) argues that street culture “have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society.” This relational understanding of street culture as responsive to structures is still being developed. European ethnographers have, for instance, drawn on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts, and clarified the relationship through the concept of “street habitus” (Sandberg and Pedersen 2011, 34), which is said to exist globally, because of “homologies of habitus” (Fraser 2015, 216), and result in global street cultural similarities. Formed by marginalized structural positions that give rise to participation in street cultures and are incorporated in the habitus, this habitus shapes practice and culture according (or “in response”) to these structures (Fraser 2015; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011).

Although such relational arguments are compelling, they are seldom empirically demonstrated. Instead, the linkage between structure and culture remains chiefly theoretical. For instance, street culture is understood as an alternative source of esteem for individuals with limited opportunities to gain esteem through legitimate occupations. This is substantiated by empirically illustrating the subjects’ precarious and humiliating work positions, and street culture’s emphasis on and alternative criteria for respect, and then *theoretically* connecting these structural and cultural conditions (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Liebow 2003 [1967])—as such, the connection

itself is not empirically demonstrated; the informants do not, for instance, themselves verbalize that the reason they participate in street culture is to gain esteem, as they cannot gain it the jobmarket. The Bourdieusean tradition furthers this reasoning by arguing that the subjects develop an alternative “street capital” as a source of respect, in response to a lack of cultural capital and hence limited opportunities in mainstream society (Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; see also Ilan 2015). The connections between these phenomena are similarly primarily theoretical; the informants for instance do not articulate such a connection regarding respect. Our *empirical* knowledge concerning the connections between structure and street culture remains limited.

On Recognition

Material structural problems cannot alone explain the (re)production of street culture. A particular problem for members of street cultures is their lack of esteem in mainstream society, which arguably results in an emphasis on “respect” in street culture (Anderson 1999, 2003 [1978]; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Contreras 2013; Lalander 2009; see also Liebow 2003 [1967]). We must therefore supplement Wilson’s material perspective with one of recognition, the search for which is a central impetus (Bourdieu 2000 [1997]; Honneth 2006) and the lack of which can result in alienation and the development of communities with “deviant” recognition criteria (Honneth 2003).

Thus, the poverty “concentration effects” that Wilson connects to street culture can be further understood as a result of the concentration of (poor and) disrespected individuals. In Denmark, unskilled workers, and particularly unemployed people, lack prestige (Author 2018). Thus, their spatial concentration entails an aggregation of persons without mainstream prestige or social esteem (Honneth 2006). Furthermore, inhabitants of neighborhoods with a concentration of poor ethnoracial minorities suffer from a “territorial stigma” that non-residents and institutions attach

to the neighborhoods (Author 2018; Jensen and Christensen 2012; Wacquant 2008), especially those on the Danish state's yearly public "list of ghetto areas" (Transport- og Boligministeriet 2019), which features three neighborhoods in Nørrebro. Lastly, ethnoracial minorities in Denmark can suffer from ethnoracial stigma, and young minority men can be vilified as dangerous criminals (Jensen and Christensen 2012).

These structural factors must be viewed "intersectionally" (Crenshaw 1991), as such material and symbolic forms of subordination overlap and result in unique social positions and experiences that cannot be understood merely by adding up the different factors (Collins 1998). This structural intersection (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006) of material problems and disrespect characterizes the young men in this study—to which the concentration effects of individuals with a similar disadvantaged intersectional position must be related. These structural problems are linked to their street culture, as will be shown in the forthcoming analysis.

Media and street culture

Mass media can play a distinctive role in street culture. In his seminal study of gangs, Thrasher (1942 [1927], 102, 107) writes that movies "furnish the gang boy with patterns for his play and his exploits. [...] Many of the exploits of the gang undoubtedly involve imitating the movies." Thrasher's students further described how children in Harlem applauded the villains and the defeat of the police in movies (Bourgeois 2003 [1996]). Akin phenomena are seen in newer studies. Anderson (1999, 36) argues that many criminal street youths (apparently inspired by Tupac's tattoo and album "thug life") "pride themselves on living the 'thug life,' [...] and sometimes model themselves after [...] rap artists like Tupac Shakur." Likewise, US gang studies describe the mass

media's contribution to gang proliferation in depicting a "gang culture" that is then imitated by prospective gangs (Decker and Winkle 1996; Miller 2001; see also Lozon & Bensimon 2017).

Similar processes can be observed elsewhere. Already in the 1950's and 60's, gangs in Paris imitated the clothing and hairstyles in American gang movies – as well as the styles of American and English rock music groups (Monod 1967). More recently, gangs in England, the Netherlands, and Denmark have named themselves after fictional film gangs and film fictionalizations of real gangs (Author 2018; Roks and Densley 2019; Van Hellemont and Densley 2019). Other gangs are inspired by rap artists such as the "Niggas with Attitude" in Sierra Leone (Hagedorn 2008; Prestholdt 2009)—named after a former US gangsta rap group—and the Tupac-referencing "Thugs" in South Africa (Prestholdt 2009). Gangs in various parts of the world also copy the business behavior of fictional television gangs (Van Hellemont and Densley 2019), appreciate gangsta rap and emulate its clothing style (Van Hellemont 2012), and understand their lives through the lens of these media forms (Hagedorn 2008; Miller 2001; Moshuus 2005).

While mass media influences street cultures worldwide, why and how this influence occurs is poorly understood. While there are many studies on hip-hop or rap among disenfranchised youth, which often argue that the global appreciation thereof among such youths is because of the music's themes resonating with them (Bennett 1999; Jensen 2006; Osumare 2001; Sernhede 2002; see also Ilan 2015)—although this global argument can be rather theorized than empirically drawn (see Jaffe 2012; Keyes 2002; Rose 1994; see also Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2009)—there is little research regarding this particular street culture influence. At least in Nørrebro's street culture, this is not a hip-hop cultural influence; among other things, the special valuation of not only Tupac but also the two aforementioned films combined, points to a different cultural configuration on the street than hip-hop culture per se. Our limited knowledge about this global influence centers on

media products, especially gangsta rap, offering marginalized street actors a dignified “resistance identity” (Hagedorn 2008, 59; see also Lalander 2009; Moshuus 2005; Lozon & Bensimon 2017). Van Hellefont and Densley (2019) also briefly discuss how a film and a television show mirror the marginalization of gang youth and their rage and frustrations and offer the emotional valorization of overcoming such marginalization. This scarcity of answers may be due to the lack of dialogue between street culture studies and media studies—as well as cultural criminology’s lack of focus on how mass media influences street culture, despite mass media being a focal point in this tradition (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2015). However, this influence is difficult to analyze, given this tradition’s theory of a blurring of reality and representation (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2015). Hence, whereas the influence is implicitly acknowledged, no further delineation is provided other than saying that “the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street,” as the blurring precludes any analysis of a “linear sequence” (Hayward and Young 2004, 259) between media representation and its influence on reality (see, however, Hayward 2004).

Some media scholars, however, do analyze such sequences. In fact, the influence seems to confirm “media effect” studies that explore phenomena such as the effect of media violence on real violence (e.g., Bandura, Ross, and Ross 1963). However, contradicting this interpretation, gangster films usually portray the gangster’s downfall (Langford 2005), and “hood films” (including *Blood In, Blood Out* [Denzin 2002]) often convey an anti-crime and anti-violence message (see Denzin 2002; Rafter 2006; Van Hellefont and Densley 2019). The implicit “hypodermic needle model” in media effect studies (Staiger 2005) would predict social learning that deters viewers from modeling the media figures (Bandura, Ross, and Ross 1963). That this is not the case for street culture illuminates the complexity of media effects and the inadequacy of the theoretical model. As argued by Morley (1980, 30), media effect studies see content “as a stimulus which may or

may not produce a response at the level of attitudinal change, rather than as a meaningful sign vehicle [...] which must be ‘decoded’ [...] before it can ‘have an effect.’” The latter perspective is adopted by reception studies, which has demonstrated the diverse interpretations of the same media (and, hence, its diverse potential “effects”) (Fiske 1987; Liebes and Katz 1990; Morley 1992).

Parts of these studies have related interpretations to social circumstances, showing that the former can be partly influenced by the latter. For instance, different ethnic groups interpreted the same television show differently (Liebes and Katz 1990). Indigenous Australian children identified with fictional African Americans, and with Native Americans’ fights against cowboys in Western movies, interpreting them as resistance to white domination, contrary to the producers’ presumed intentions (Fiske 1987; Hodge and Tripp 1986). Similarly, a popular television show about a women’s prison was interpreted by some children as related to school authority and by others as related to patriarchy, and was used by both to articulate resistance, just as some housewives use television shows to resist patriarchy (Fiske 1987; Hodge and Tripp 1986).

As these examples demonstrate, individuals can interpret media according to their structural circumstances and use it to resist them (Fiske 1986, 1987). Subordinated groups can find pleasure in identifying with oppositional characters and symbolically experience opposition. Central to this pleasure is identification based on social or value similarities between the viewer and media character(s) and most likely also wish-fulfillment, as the character embodies the viewer’s unsatisfied desire(s) (e.g., for success or resistance) (Fiske 1986; Rafter 2006).

Although social position determines neither interpretation (Morley 1992), identification, nor consumption—Tupac is, for instance, also popular among white suburban youth (see Hagedorn 2008)—it arguably makes some interpretations more likely than others. Individuals with similar

intersectional positions will tend to form some similar interpretations as they relate to their positions (see Jewkes 2004). Thus, although different groups may consume the same media products such as Tupac's music, they do not necessarily interpret them similarly (see Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2009). Intersectional structures (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006) interact with individuals' cultural practices and identities (Winker and Degele 2011). For intersectionally subordinated groups, this can lead to a "differential identification" (Glaser 1956), where some of them identify with media portrayed criminals. These individuals can hence form an "interpretive community," understood as a group of individuals who share similar interpretations or "interpretive strategies" (Fish 1980, 171), which may be embedded in an interaction-based community where interpretive strategies including identifications are learned (Fish 1980). Such an interpretive community exists among the young men in Nørrebro.

Methods

Data were gathered through ethnographic fieldwork among young men from Nørrebro, who spend much of their lives in a community on the streets. This multiethnic community consists of men mostly in their teens and twenties, who are primarily Muslim descendants of Middle Eastern and African migrants. They often have no qualifying education or steady employment and subsist on welfare, their parents' income, the illegal economy, and/or periodic work in the off-the-books economy (particularly demolition and transport).

I conducted fieldwork from 2006, when I moved to the area to this end, until 2015, when I moved away. This period comprised approximately 5.5 years of intensive (2-7 days a week) and 2.5 years of less intensive (usually 1 day a week) fieldwork—which were not consecutive periods

as the intensity of the fieldwork varied throughout the first 8 years, due to differences in my time available for fieldwork. During the final year, I conducted further fieldwork intermittently.

In the course of these years, I regularly interacted with over 100 young men, some for a couple of months, others throughout the entire fieldwork period, and most for a period in between both extremes. I first became acquainted with several of them while initiating fieldwork in a youth club that they frequented. I later moved on to their street spheres, where I got to know others in their network, and through them, others yet, and so forth. The relationships I developed with them ranged from acquaintances to close friendships—partly facilitated by the fact that I was 24 years old when fieldwork began and a Muslim ethnoracial minority male from an unskilled working-class background. Through these social relationships, I participated in and observed virtually all spheres of their lives. Besides the streets, their blocks and yards, the fieldwork took place in, for instance, our homes, (illegal) hashish clubs, malls, nightclubs, hospitals, barbershops, basements (used to keep warm), beaches, parks, parking lots (where cars are used as shelters), and in cars cruising aimlessly around Copenhagen. The only places I did not join them in were schools and prisons.

I conducted numerous unrecorded “informal ethnographic interviews” (Agar 1996) with the young men and recorded “ethnographic interviews” (Spradley 1979) with 84 of them, of which I interviewed some several times. I coded the transcriptions of these recordings with the data analysis program NVivo and my extensive fieldnotes manually on the computer. Some codes concerned these youths’ mass media usage. The coding, and analysis more broadly, were carried out through the abductive reasoning, characteristic of the ethnographic “funnel approach” (Agar 1996). This comprises an initial open-ended research procedure, that allows for themes to emerge gradually throughout the fieldwork, which are then pursued through further fieldwork—by way of

example, realizing through the fieldwork that Tupac, *Scarface*, and *Blood In, Blood Out*, seems particularly important for the youths, which is then pursued further (and rejected, or as in this case, validated, elaborated and understood) through further participant-observations and conversations with the youth. Accordingly, such themes, and the corresponding (sub)coding, and the further analysis thereof were both based on an open-minded reading of the written data, but also widerly on my continual reflexive processing of the lived experiences from the fieldwork that I accessed as a “partial insider” (Sherif 2001)—comprising my methodological reflections on what that position entailed for the data acquired (see Author 2018)—as well as ideas and perspectives gained from the reading of theories and other research, which were set against the empirical data (see Okely 2002, for an elaboration of the holistic forms of analysis that the “funnel approach” entails). Before presenting the results of this abductive analytical approach, regarding the youth’s mass media usage—the reasons for these young men’s prizing of the three media products—I present these media products and preliminarily illustrate their importance among these young men.

Scarface, Blood In, Blood Out, and Tupac Shakur on the streets of

Nørrebro

Scarface (De Palma 1983) depicts “Tony Montana,” a Cuban exile in Miami, and his rise from the bottom of society to the top of the underworld as a drug lord. Like gangster films in general, the film presents a criminal version of “the American dream” followed by the protagonist’s “inevitable downfall and defeat” (Langford 2005, 341). Like many gangster films (Langford 2005; Munby 1999), *Scarface* touches on the structural factors, such as ethnoracial exclusion and marginalization, which can lead to gangsterism.

The hashish dealer Artan noted the importance of *Scarface* one night at his sales territory, while waiting for customers:

Artan: Do you know what the biggest problem for us has been, Author? It's gangster movies. If I could go back in time, to when I was 15, then I would tell myself that I should not watch these movies, that it was wrong what they showed [raises his cellphone so I can see its screen display Tony Montana, gun in hand].

Author: Okay. But aren't they just movies? That is, how much can they mean?

Artan: No, Author, you don't understand, they meant a lot to us back then. We looked up to them a lot. We wanted to be just like them. Tony Montana, gangster. Rule things. If there was one thing I could change, that would be it.

Another illustration of *Scarface*'s influence came one afternoon when one of my informants asked me to give him the pseudonym Tony, "because Tony plays with this: [pulls a gun from his pocket, twirls it and puts it back, while yelling] Tony Montana"³ to the amusement of the other young men present.

Portraying a barrio in Los Angeles, *Blood In, Blood Out* (Hackford 1993) tells the story of how "Miklo," a new member of the Vatos Locos gang, ends up in prison for murdering a rival gang leader. There, he joins the prison's Mexican gang and rises through its ranks, eventually becoming the leading "godfather behind bars" (Denzin 2002, 146). Beyond the theme of social ascension, the film resembles other gangster movies and also resembles so-called "hood" movies about life in African American "ghettos" (Chan 1998; Denzin 2002) in its partial implication of structural and cultural causes of crime. This film's popularity manifests, inter alia, in repeated viewings and tributes both spoken and written: VL, which stands for Vatos Locos, adorns many walls in Nørrebro.

So does "2pac." Tupac Shakur's songs fall within the "gangsta rap" genre, which was first developed by American gang-related youth (Hagedorn 2008). Hence, this genre reflects street

culture (Kubrin 2005; Lozon & Bensimon 2017), including violence, crime, and sexism (Ilan 2015; Keyes 2002; Quinn 2004), as well as having depictions of the marginalized life in the ghetto and criticism of related disadvantageous structures (Hagedorn 2008; Rose 1994). Street culture and social critique are particularly prominent in Tupac’s lyrics (Iwamoto 2003; Quinn 2004), perhaps, apart from his great musical talent, explaining his hero status in disadvantaged areas worldwide (Hagedorn 2008; Prestholdt 2009; Quinn 2004).

Beyond the introductory “Friday night” fieldnote, another illustration of Tupac’s—the favorite singer of the teenaged youths, who frequently listen to a wide variety of his songs—significance occurred one night as Daud, Latif, and I were heading to a bar. When Daud ironically commented that we should drink beer (which the young men rarely do, as beer is perceived as something that “Danes” drink, and thus, outside their symbolic ethnoracial boundaries), Latif asked what difference it made whether it was beer, as all alcohol is “haram” (forbidden in their religion, Islam). He concluded: “if Tupac had sung ‘beers’ instead of ‘Hennessy,’ then we’d all have been drinking that.” Daud agreed.

The street life of the “ghetto”

An important reason for their embrace of two of the three media representations discussed here is that they can identify with them, as they are about the “ghetto”:

Safwan: So Tupac, all he writes, is something he sees himself. That’s why I think people [here] look up to him. [...] That is, what he sings about, is the ghetto. How it is, the life, how hard it is. That’s what you like to listen to. [...] [It’s] almost the same life, that is, living almost the same life as us. This is also a ghetto, this one here, X Street. So in that way, people very much look up to him.

These youths recognize structural aspects of their lives in the representations of the hardships faced by ghetto inhabitants in the poor, segregated, and stigmatized areas of the US (see also Jaffe 2012; Osumare 2001). As depictions of ghetto life feature centrally in gangsta rap (Keyes 2002; Rose 1994), including Tupac's music, which is perceived as particularly authentic (Quinn 2004), these youths are drawn to it and can identify with it.

Author: What about things from TV and music? Was there anyone you looked up to?

[They all laugh.]

Berkan: Most immigrants look up to Tupac. [...]

Ghaith: He is "thug life." When you were little, it was totally [...] cool. [...] Gangsters. Such things, right? [...]

Author: What was it that you liked?

Umar: You could relate to it. He lived in the ghetto, we lived in the ghetto.

The state-sanctioned "territorial stigmatization" (Wacquant 2008) of neighborhoods in Nørrebro as "ghettos" may influence this process. Some of the young men adopt this stigma and define their neighborhood as a ghetto. This state-sanctioned categorical uniformity between their neighborhood and its alleged American counterparts can dispose street youths more toward interpretive strategies that seek and emphasize other similarities between their lives and those rendered in the media. Hence, the stigma may increase the sense of relating to the media depictions.

However, they not only adopt the ghetto stigma, but also revalorize it. This makes it difficult to clarify whether their recognition of their lives in the representations is strictly due to perceived resemblances, as they also *want* to live the portrayed "cool" ghetto life. It is thus a question of the chicken or the egg. As Safwan and Berkan noted, "People look up to Tupac." He has become an iconic role model that they, in Ghaith's words, "try to emulate." Jiinow further explains:

Those gangsta rappers, it's also something that makes you get influenced by it. You see that ghetto. They live ghetto lives. [...] Quietly you also start, like walk around like them, talk like them, [...] mark oneself over other people's streets [show off to, or fight, young men from other streets], just like [the American gangs] Bloods, Crips. [...] You feel, that the [youth from] other cities, they are your enemies. And you must protect your own yard, your own brothers. [...] You see a ghetto, you understand? The way they are. You just thought all of it was cool; the way they live, in the ghetto. [...] So if you like it, then you also start to quietly become just like them.

The young men identify with the ghetto delineations not only because they see structural aspects of their lives in them (Fiske 1986), but also because they are “influenced” by and imitate the representations, which results in their lives resembling them more, hence increasing their appreciation for and (differential) identification with them, which makes them more susceptible to imitating them and so forth.

Jiinow exemplifies such imitations and influences with the young men's “walk,” for many an idiosyncratic swaying of the shoulders/upper body as depicted by the media characters. Twice during my fieldwork, I asked different limping youngsters if there was something wrong with their legs. Both said no. Afterwards it dawned on me that they were imitating the “pimp walk” done by, among others, Tupac in his rap videos. Another example of such body techniques (Mauss 1973) is street language (see Bourdieu 1991). Besides Danish and words from their mother tongues, the young men also use words from these media, for instance, “G” (gangsta) and the English words “busted,” “booze,” and “jumped” (attacked/beaten up), which are adapted from Tupac and other gangsta rap sources. Words from *Blood In, Blood Out* are also common, such as *órale* (“hurry up”/“it's okay”/“cool”), *vato* (“friend”/“guy”), and *carnal* (“brother,” lit. “of the flesh”).

Jiinow elaborates that—through this community's peculiar interpretive strategies of more or less (in)accurate media representations of American street life—the media also influences their antagonistic relationships with youths from other cities, and consequently their loyalty and status

principles, engendering fights with them (see below). Other important influences concern their recognition criteria, masculinity, and crime, as discussed below.

However, these youths are not only influenced and imitating; they also recognize themselves in these songs and films. Farhan, for instance, “used to look up to” American rappers as their music:

Reminded me exactly of us. Because he stood and rapped [about] what he had experienced, what he is doing to survive. [...] So it’s like someone who has had it as I have, right? Maybe he has had it a little worse, but it was like the same. Like Tupac, what he says is the same.

Their recognition of and identification with ghetto life also partly explains this interpretive community’s fondness for *Blood In, Blood Out*. As Osman and Malik explain:

Osman: They stuck together in the movie, as we also stick together. You know, I cover his back, while someone else covers mine. [...]

Malik: Brotherhood. I could see brotherhood in the movie.

They identify with the portrayal of the brotherly communities in disadvantaged American neighborhoods (e.g., *Vigil* 1988), as their community also has a family-like character (Author 2018; see also Lalander 2009). Thus, they recognize themselves in the movie’s “cool” male community. As Parvaiz explains: “They protected each other, defended their territory, with respect. They [...] stuck together as a team, just like a family.” The young men are not only influenced by, but also relate to, the alleged displays of loyalty to “brothers,” through “defending” one’s neighborhood, or attacking youngsters from other neighborhoods—to gain the coveted status of a sovereign “street elite” (Katz 1988, 131). As such, *Blood In, Blood Out* is seen, through Berkan’s eyes, as being “similar to here in Denmark, [as] there is street war and block against block, right? It’s in that movie too.”

So are tests of the block-based brotherhood's loyalty. The film is, thus, a source of learning about street life and tests—for example, that criminal partners can “snitch” to the police. These youths extracted elements relevant to their lives:

Author: We watched *Vatos Locos* [together] last time. [...] Does that [film] mean anything to you?

Tadi: Like that, it shows, you know, unity, but suddenly it can become betrayal. For example, [if you steal together, then your partner] [...] might be [a] snitch and say, “it was him [who did it].” You know, it's more that rule, there you can get acquainted with things [from the film]. Not throughout the whole movie, but in some of its elements. You can take examples from it.

Another aspect of *Blood In, Blood Out* that appeals to this group is its portrayal of American prison life. The prison is structurally connected to disadvantaged areas in the US, and increasingly in Europe (Wacquant 2009), including Denmark (Nilsson and Delica 2015). The film depiction is fascinating for teens in this community, for some of whom prison life is an ambivalent wish, as they view being incarcerated like many of the older youth as “cool” (Author 2018). These “elders” are familiar with the depicted prison life, thus (differentially) identifying with the characters.

Author: *Vatos Locos* [...] why does everyone watch that, what does it give?

Ali: It's a prison movie. [...] I have done time. [...] I just think when you've done time one, two, three, four times, right? Then it's just cool to watch movies like that, “I'm also a gangster, like him, have done time like him. Then we can also do this and that when we are in there.” And they [the young men from the street community] are all living inside the prison now.

The gangster—the street economy's success story

The gangster media discussed here depict marginalized men who become successful and rich through illegal means. This explains some of the main reasons for their appeal and for the gangster's iconic status among these youths:

Author: You said *Scarface*, you said *Vatos Locos*, why did you like them?

Osman: Because we liked the way they made money. Business.

Malik: It's realistic.

Osman: Yes [...] we want to see ourselves like them. [...]

Malik: Yeah, he [Tony Montana] is loaded. He comes to town, he doesn't have shit on him, he just got out of prison. [...] Then after a while, he starts the business, [...] transporting coke. [...] Then he lives in luxury. [...]

Author: But what if it's someone who gets loaded differently? [...] Some CEO? [...]

Osman: I don't watch stuff like that. [...] It's way too boring.

Malik: It is also in that way, how are you to get there, how to reach that [position]? [...]

Osman: You just look up to people you think are cool, you know. You think I can as well, I can also play along with that, I can also be the same things. But even if you cannot do exactly the same things, you can do something similar, something that also makes you black money.

The “gangster” represents a path to economic success as opposed to the limited and low-paid unskilled jobs that these youths might procure, or well-paying jobs that many, if not most, of them will likely never gain because of their lack of cultural capital and higher education (Author 2018). The gangster protagonist faces similar structural problems and poor opportunities for success in society (see Langford 2005; Munby 1999). Nevertheless, he becomes rich and rises from the bottom of society to the top by illegal means. Therefore, the gangster, the economically successful criminal—until his downfall, which is overlooked in this community's interpretive strategies—becomes both a source of “differential identification” (Glaser 1956: 440), owing to wish-fulfillment (Fiske 1986) and, hence, a role model for these youths who find it difficult to succeed by legitimate means (see Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Merton 1938). Some young men aspire to the depicted criminal lifestyle (Author 2018). Gradually, they can also partially recognize this criminal life, for example in gangsta rap, as the rapper “tells a story” that is “very exciting,” as it is about “what happened to him because we are also almost like him, criminals, you understand? Then you

hear it from another,” as Yakub explains. The teens Ehaad and Chiragh elaborate on this while explaining why they like Tupac:

Ehaad: Because when he sings, it makes sense. [...] He’s singing about his life, about his childhood. [...] The only thing that comes [through in the songs], it’s like our lives. [...] Robbery, burglary, car theft, that kind of stuff. It makes sense, [it’s] just like our style.

Chiragh: Crime, how it is to be a gangsta.

The gangster is thus a role model who shows how to make money illegally and with whom they can identify once they start committing crimes.

The respected minority

A crucial reason for this interpretive community’s fondness for and identification with these representations is that they reflect the conditions for ethnoracial minorities.

Author: Why do you like Tupac? Why do you look up to him?

Nuri: For the life he has, the way he makes music and the things he says, [...] things he has experienced in his life, like that. It’s not just about ladies and things like that, but about the government. [...] He says it’s a bad government. [...] I also think we have a bad government in this country. [...] What’s bad is—

Mahmoud: [interrupts Nuri] We have a racist government in Denmark.

Nuri: Racist government.

Mahmoud: And people can realize that. But you know, they just shut up because they can see that we don’t... We are some people who do not belong to this society, therefore. And as long as the *Danish People’s Party*⁴ is sitting on that shit, we will never get up.

Tupac articulates the young men’s views on the government and their position as ethnoracial minorities in Denmark. He is a resource for social critique (Iwamoto 2003; Prestholdt 2009; Quinn 2004) and resistant and revolutionary calls for change, and hence empowerment (Hagedorn 2008),

against what they perceive as an oppressive “racist” government—much more so than other rappers (who sing about “ladies” and other glorifications of “gangstas”). This appreciation is further based on, first, the feeling of being disregarded because of one’s ethnorace, as conveyed by Tupac (Hagedorn 2008; Prestholdt 2009; Quinn 2004) and gangster and “hood” films (Chan 1998; Langford 2005; Munby 1999). Second, it is based on the alternative and oppositional recognition criteria that Tupac and such films portray, instead of those of the mainstream society that disregard them—according to the young men’s interpretive strategies. These become the criteria by which these youths can establish themselves as worthy and oppose ethnoracial stigmatization and potential discrimination. Thus, Farhan likes gangster films such as *Scarface* as they depict people “just like us” who:

Must fare the hard way to get up, in order for people to give them respect. That’s cool, I think. When you look for a job, they say “fuck you.” What are you going to do? So you have to prove yourself, you have to get money from them by the hard way yourself.

As gangster films often acknowledge the structural causes of crime (Langford 2005; Munby 1999), they also—as perceived through these youths’ interpretive strategies and differential identification with the media characters—justify criminal actions. As indicated by Farhan, they also link minority status, respect, and economy. Ali elaborates:

Ali: Tony Montana also came to the United States as an immigrant. [...] And try to see what he also became [...] in the end, you know, very [...] rich and powerful.

Author: That’s why people like it so much or what?

Ali: If he can, and you start making some small money, and it’s becoming more and more and more, then you think, I can too. I want to be like that too. [...]

Author: Why?

Ali: Money. [...] Don’t you see everything, in the end, what it’s about, is money? [...] Money is everything. Money is power, money is freedom, money is when people hold... [...] [Says

something in Arabic to Rafi and “holds” his hand in a salute]. [...] In our country, [...] in the military, [...] when they show respect. [...] That’s the money talking, you understand?

Author: The more money you get, the more respect you get, like that?

Ali: Yes, exactly. Money, that’s what it’s all about.

The portrayal of the gangster is not only of a poor man beating the odds and becoming rich; it is also of a man from a disregarded ethnoracial minority who gains “respect.” This is also why he becomes a role model. The valorization of a marginalized man who, against expectations, rises in the social hierarchy also partly explains why they value *Blood In, Blood Out*:

Kadeer: Movies also play a part in believing in the gang environment. [...] The movie affected the people so [much] emotionally, that it completely dawned on them, that that is what they want to try to be. [...] It has given them a way of seeing themselves in those people [characters]. [There are] many things that they can [see and] compare to those people. [...]

Author: What was it about those [movies that] you [yourself] looked up to?

Kadeer: That, what’s the name [...] I’m talking about *Blood In, Blood Out*. The fact that, you know, he goes to the prison, and then becomes really cool. [...] He was [first] such a little shit [...] and then he becomes like that, [...] controls it all [in the prison]. [...] To look up to doing the things you saw in the movie. For example, “you have to be crazy and just shoot, and one does not dare to shoot if one is. [That is] you are not cool if you do not shoot.” [...] Not “cool,” it’s just a word that comes up in me all the time. That, yes you know, powerful, like that, respect, people respect him and... fear him. That’s it, everyone wants to be a leader.

The young men’s partially limited opportunities for acquiring power and status in mainstream society due to their lack of education (see Author 2018) prompt interpretive strategies where such characters illustrate alternative ways to achieve their desires and alternative masculinity-based criteria for recognition, or, in their words, “respect.”

The gangster who rises to the top does so primarily through his “tough” masculinity (see Langford 2005). His entitlement to respect is not only due to wealth, but also particularly this masculinity, which includes courage, risk-taking, and violent prowess—just as in street culture (Anderson 1999). This masculinity is valorized as “cool” and creditable, and hence, imitated.

Cemal indicates this in his expression of a “form” of manhood that is liked by the community, as this form has “defined man.” As he said: “All I have in this world is my balls and my word.”

Author: Is it Tony Montana?

Cemal: Exactly. [...] That’s why that movie is so famous. Then they knew that that guy is a man. [...] Why? Because he has some principles that he adheres to. In reality, it is completely far out “everything I have in this world.” But okay, we understand what he’s saying. He means, he’s saying he’s not afraid. All I have is courage. [...] And my word. He doesn’t lie.

Similarly, Yakub’s reading of *Blood In, Blood Out* emphasizes challenges and courage:

Yakub: Young people, they will always challenge something [as in the movie]. [...] Us here, the boys, we’re not into reading books and stuff like that. [...] So us, we challenge someone, challenge something. Doing some things, this and that, fights and stuff. Big challenges, big chances. It’s something dangerous for your life, but you don’t care, you just challenge.

Author: Is it then about being courageous [as in the movie]?

Yakub: Yes, courageous, courageous.

Author: [...] Is that why you can identify with them [the courageous movie characters] or what?

Yakub: Yes, exactly.

Tupac’s image of tough masculinity is likewise important for his popularity in this community (see also Iwamoto 2003; Moshuus 2005; Prestholdt 2009):

Nuri: Most people here from Nørrebro look up to Tupac a lot. He is like a role model, for the way he lived, and the way he had, the problems he had with the whites and all.

Abdoulaye: He was fearless, he was that hardcore type, that’s what people want to be. [...] He had like his own clan. He was the boss. [...] All those employees who worked for him, they were afraid of him, they feared him. They didn’t even dare to arrive late.

An important reason for these youths’ admiration of these representations is that they portray disrespected minority men who both oppose the disrespect from mainstream society and compel respect through their masculinity. They depict marginalized men who achieve status, power, and

wealth through alternative means. Two representations further illustrate men from disadvantaged (poor and presumably stigmatized) neighborhoods. The young men can draw on these media representations and their “solutions” to the structural problems that resonate with their experiences. These problems are material, as marginalization, and symbolic, as disrespect of (both their neighborhood) and potentially racism against their ethnoracial group. While these two conditions are analytically separated here, they are intertwined. Marginalization also causes disrespect, and marginalized ethnoracial minority members encounter a different type of disrespect (and potentially racism) than affluent minority members (and still another type if residing in a stigmatized neighborhood). However, the media figures share a similar intersectional position; they not only cope with the same two conditions (or all three, if they reside in a disadvantaged neighborhood) but also occupy the corresponding intersectional position between these conditions and must contend with the additional problems caused by this intersection. The community from Nørrebro can recognize itself in this position, which paves the way for their differential identification with the media characters and hence their drawing on the portrayed masculine solutions to their shared problems. The young men thus exploit these portrayals to both legitimize their crimes and oppose a perceived social disregard, and develop similar masculinity-based recognition criteria. They ultimately draw on these media portrayals to reevaluate their stigmatized intersectional position and marginalized, illegal street life as something creditable. These representations of structural conditions and alternative “solutions” are, thus, important reasons for this interpretive community’s embrace of these media in their identity and cultural development. Presumably, the media would not have such influence if not for these youths’ intersectional position.

Conclusion

Research on why and how mass media globally influences local street cultures is limited. This article addresses this gap by exploring why Tupac, *Scarface*, and *Blood In, Blood Out* are so valued in Nørrebro street culture and finds that the reason is largely structural. These media products depict poor and disrespected ethnoracial minority men who, in two of them, live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This structural intersectional position is shared by the street community of Nørrebro, and in their interpretive strategies, these products depict adoptable solutions to such structural problems—using economic crime and tough masculinity to gain wealth and recognition.

It must be emphasized, however, that these media products do not directly cause crime. The street culture of Nørrebro's so-called "slums" was characterized by economic crime, neighborhood fights, and valorization of violent prowess decades before these media representations and its settlement by ethnoracial minorities (Author 2018). However, the shape and intensity of the present culture, such as its body techniques, particular legitimization of crime, self and structural understandings, and cultural icons, would undoubtedly have been different and perhaps less significant. Media influences and stylizes street culture, including its criminal aspects. This finding implies that the global street cultural similarities may not only be the result of "homologies of habitus" (Fraser 2015, 216), based on global similarities in structural conditions. They may also be based on the global reach and consumption of American media products, and hence, global *cultural* influence of (more or less [in]accurate) representations of American street culture. However, as the value of these products for these youths is largely based on structural intersectional factors—why it is, for instance, unlikely that the white middle-class youths who appreciate Tupac's music (see Hagedorn 2008) would interpret, identify with, or use these products similarly (see Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley 2009)—it is these factors that are primary. Perhaps,

then, the global homologies of the street habitus, due to structural similarities, entail probabilities of homologies in media—that is, cultural—preferences (see the similarities between the media products here and in Anderson 1999; Decker and Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 2008; Lalander 2009; Miller 2001; Moshuus 2005; Roks and Densley 2019; and Van Hellemont and Densley 2019) and even in interpretive strategies that result in cultural similarities. This is, however, not to say that structures deterministically cause a certain culture or crime; rather, they are enabling and limiting factors that agents can utilize and deal with in manifold creative ways.

This points to a theoretical issue in street culture studies where it is commonly argued that street culture is a response to structural conditions. However, this relation is rarely empirically probed. This article shows that this community's media use is intertwined with, largely based on, and reactive to intersectional structures. This may also be the case in many other street cultural phenomena, although such relations are seldom illustrated.

One reason for the scarcity of empirical clarifications of this relationship may be methodological. By analyzing three concrete cultural products, it is easier for both the researcher and the researched to see and analyze perceptions and practices related thereto than to abstract and general cultural phenomena (e.g., the notion that violence becomes a source of self-esteem in the absence of mainstream social esteem [Anderson 1999]). Hence, future research should examine concrete cultural phenomena to unveil the potential structures behind them. Another focus of future research, based on a limitation of this study, should be on the media representations valued by female street participants. As masculinity is salient for the young men's prizing of the representations, it would be interesting to clarify the implications of gender for female street participants' media usage. Finally, this study's findings obviously cannot be generalized beyond Nørrebro. To assess whether and to what extent the global street cultural similarities are due to

American media influences and whether processes similar to those described here occur elsewhere, future research should focus empirically on the media consumptions in other street localities around the world.

Notes

¹ All informants' names are pseudonyms.

² For an elaboration of the countries included in the category “non-western”, see: <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/dokumentation/documentationofstatistics/immigrants-and-descendants/statistical-presentation> (20 August 2021).

³ Indicating this character's popularity, several others also wanted me to name them Tony.

⁴ The *Danish People's Party* (*Dansk Folkeparti*) is a populist right wing political party and was a central supporting party for the Danish government from 2001–2011 and from 2015–2019.

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