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# The characteristics of street codes and competing performances of masculinity on an inner-city housing estate

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## ABSTRACT

With analysis occurring during a heightened concern with the Black Lives Matter movement and knife crime in the U.K., this paper aims to delineate the characteristics of a street code, constituting a specific dominant and often hegemonic form of 'street masculinity' found on an inner-city housing estate in London called Maxwell. The fieldwork ran over nine months in 2019, involving 48 Black, Asian, and minority ethnic men aged 18–22. Using an ethnographic methodology, the principal methods of data generation were observations, interviews and informal conversations. The main theories this study draws on to understand 'street masculinity' were Connell's and Messerschmidt's dominant, hegemonic, subordinate and complicit masculinity forms. Findings centre on data from two young men who exemplify different patterns of masculinity performing the street code. Findings are presented under a series of characteristics that make up the game of the 'on-road' street masculinity and include (1) authenticity, 'swagger' and not being 'pussy'; (2) a preparedness for violence; (3) knife-carrying; (4) a presence on the digital street. Although this way of living drove a desire for respect and group status, there was also an underlying and pervasive sense of vulnerability derived from risk-taking and anticipation of danger.

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Street codes; hegemonic masculinity; complicit masculinity; social media; knife-carrying

## Introduction and background

Ain't no mans looking after me except for me!

This quotation comes from a young black man living on a London housing estate in an area of high socioeconomic and cultural disadvantage, which we call 'Maxwell', and highlights understandings that many young black men feel about life 'on-road', which is a distinctive way of living and being, involving a set of street-oriented values, practices and behaviours. This paper uses the King (2020) doctoral research<sup>1</sup> with its analysis occurring at the Black Lives Matter movement's apogee and heightened concern about knife crime in the U.K. Its main aim is to delineate the features of Maxwell's street code that constitutes a specific 'street masculinity' (Miller 2020), which often condones violence and explains why young men carry knives.

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Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) young men in inner-city communities are most likely to be involved – as victims or perpetrators – in knife crime (Home Office 2018). However, we know little about the pressures they face when making knife-carrying choices (Grimshaw and Ford 2018; Harding 2020). Research shows that a sense of vulnerability and anticipation of danger leads many young BAME men living in communities of high neglect and disadvantage to carry knives for ‘protection’ (Harding 2020). The impact is cyclical: the perceived availability of knives increases the perceived need to have them (Brennan 2018). Nevertheless, there are gaps in the literature concerning young BAME men’s descriptions of how experiencing vulnerability shapes their knife involvement (McAra and McVie 2016). We address this deficit by exploring how young men’s performances of an idealised ‘street masculinity’ – against a backdrop of vulnerability – influence their knife-carrying and engagement in other violent actions.

Thirty-four per cent of U.K. knife offences occurred in London in 2020 (ONS 2020). Meanwhile, almost 25% of males aged 11–16 in the city know a regular knife-carrier (Harding 2020). Knife deaths in the U.K. are increasing, and for the year ending March 2020, knife crime was the highest on record (ONS 2020). However, research shows that police rarely catch young people carrying knives (Harding 2020; Home Office 2018). While quantitative data indicates knife-carrying prevalence among London’s young BAME men, there are few explanations in young men’s own words (Palasinski et al. 2019). As Bottrell, Armstrong, and France (2010) paraphrase: by ignoring these voices, we neglect those with a significant contribution to understanding knife crime: those most at risk.

King’s study adopts a sociological and interactionist approach, which intersects fields of gender and youth studies. In this urban ethnography, fieldwork occurred over nine months in 2019, involving 48 young (BAME) men aged 18–22. The study echoes Anderson’s (1999) and Bourgois’s (1996) pioneering work by gazing into unexplored urban spaces. An original aspect of the first author’s research is in his access to Maxwell’s young men, including to some of the private spaces in their homes, and being able to explore new issues such as the effects of digital technologies. He moved through their spaces hearing their stories and giving them a voice. This paper aims not to condemn or condone, but to understand young men’s motives and practices and the rules that inform and govern their lives. The paper argues that knife carrying forms part of a way of engaging in ‘The Game’ – a term used by Harding (2020) as a proxy for ‘street life’ – which has its own localised set of rules and codes. Part of ‘The Game’ also involves the acquisition of street capital, which may decrease, for example, if young men feel disrespected in front of peers, but, conversely, can grow by stabbing someone for peers’ respect. For Harding, this inflation/deflation economy creates social competition, replete with threats, risk and violence as young men compete to maintain positioning before advancing through street hierarchies. Essentially, ‘The Game’ is inextricably linked to highly performative formations of masculinity, played out as a highly specific form of urban street culture in a particular geographical location intersected with race and social class.

Following the introduction, this paper briefly reviews key literature about knife-carrying and street codes before discussing the main theoretical orientations underpinning our analysis. After describing the methodology, we present the main findings that explore this street masculinity’s features by focusing in-depth on two young

men practising two formations of masculinity. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion.

## Literature review

Elijah Anderson's (1999) ground-breaking '*Code of the Street*' observed two neighbourhoods in 1990s Philadelphia. Here, young black men developed behavioural practices to cope with their threatening environment. Anderson's work interwove notions of 'risky spaces' with violent practices, becoming a framework for understanding youth violence in high-risk communities. For Anderson (1999), the code of the street (the 'street code') is a contextual reaction that describes cultural practices rather than an explicit theory. Without full adherence and acknowledgement of the street code's legitimacy, it is dysfunctional (Densley, Deuchar, and Harding 2020; Lane 2016).

For Anderson, socioeconomic disadvantage and societal discrimination foster an oppositional youth culture. Subsequently, these cultures forge informal codes that prescribe 'the proper way to respond if challenged' (1999, 33). Anderson further states that street codes regulate violence, supplying a justification and approval for those inclined toward violence (1999). Moreover, due to deep-rooted discrimination, jobless young people turn to criminality for a livelihood, charmed by its seemingly glamorous lifestyle and lucrative dividends.

Among inner-city communities, street codes intertwine with 'respect'. Young people, whose currency is respect, behave in ways that will garner it (e.g. violence). Meanwhile, an inherent distrust of state institutions (e.g. the police) facilitates a decisive retaliation to an assault or disrespect becoming part of the street code. Philippe Bourgois (1996), in his ethnographic study of Puerto Rican street drug dealers in East Harlem, also suggests that inner-city youth face a 'cultural assault' outside of their community. Subsequently, young people locate safety, dignity and respect in their neighbourhoods' street codes (Bourgois 1996).

Anderson (1999) (and latterly Taylor et al. (2010) and Nowacki (2012)) indicate that street codes are predominantly the domain of inner-city young men. For Anderson, a chief concern for these individuals is acquiring a masculine identity that generates peer admiration. Thus, respect and masculine identity are often two sides of the same coin for many young inner-city men, enabling their bravado and a propensity for violently responding to disrespect. Those young men unable (or unwilling) to publicly display this identity may put themselves (or peers and family) at risk of victimisation (Thompson 2019; Whittaker et al. 2020). Knife-carrying thus becomes a means of generating admiration and status not afforded by society (Thompson 2019; Whittaker et al. 2020). Knife-carrying also provides promotions through street hierarchies (e.g. via robberies or kudos-enhancing assaults) and visible role models with symbolic and material wealth (Thompson 2019; Whittaker et al. 2020). Knife-carrying is alluring for inner-city youth, where 'performing violence', while seeming hostile, is essentially a self-defensive reaction to vulnerability and the expectation of danger.

We posit that Maxwell's young men possess feelings of alienation and a particular vulnerability – a concept noted for its universal quality and integrity to the human condition and experience (Gilson 2016). Vulnerability confronts us with fallibility and uncontrollability, prompting fear, defensiveness, avoidance, and disavowal (Gilson 2016, 3). For Levell

(2018) and Harding (2020), most knife-carrying follows feelings of vulnerability – including self-defence and previous victimisation. Further, Marfleet (2008) argues that knife-carrying is a defensive behaviour possessing value despite the risks of being caught or hurt. Being (or at least appearing to be) ‘protected’, or someone ‘not to mess with’, is both a response to and cause of young men’s vulnerability and feelings of being under threat.

While Anderson (1999, 69) suggests that street codes may explain youth violence in general, some scholars question its explanatory quality for the knife-carrying of groups and individuals (e.g. Kurtenbach and Rauf 2019; McNeeley and Wilcox 2015). Nonetheless, research (e.g. Holligan, Mclean, and Deuchar 2017; Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler 2011) shows that the U.K.’s inner-city young men experience similar street code pressures to those in U.S.-based research. Other researchers enhance the emergent U.K. street codes work to which this study seeks to add. For example, Earle et al. (2019) investigated being on-road as a means for understanding inner-city cultures. Here, being on-road confers the codes of conduct (mentioned above) framed by a ‘masculinity of the street’, a localised ideal feature. Meanwhile, the chief focus of Reid’s (2017) PhD thesis, an ethnography also set in London, with 29 young men, was on street issues including ‘roadmen’ – specific characters familiar to living life ‘on-road’ – who were generally acquiescent and submissive to those higher up the street hierarchy and on a journey to ‘prove’ their masculine credentials and scale the street ladder. Reid used semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and although she did not examine knife-carrying per se, she argues that young men lacking positive masculine exemplars during formative adolescence may turn to (violent and knife-carrying) street codes to guide their masculine performances. As in the work cited above, the street codes we refer to in this paper are the particular practices of inner-city young men in a specific geographical location, and they are socially positioned at the intersection of gender, race and social class.

## Theoretical orientation

Masculinities are constructed, negotiated and performed, and are also multiple, fluid and contextual, dependent on time and place. They are also relational, defined in opposition to femininity. The theories we draw on to understand ‘street masculinity’ are Connell’s (1995) and Messerschmidt’s (2018) *hegemonic, dominant, subordinate* and *complicit* masculinities. Rather than categorising them as ‘types’ (see Waling 2019), we prefer the term ‘formations’ of different masculinities, which is less reductive and more suggestive of the role of agency plays to perform these given masculinities. *Hegemonic and dominant masculinities* are ways of *being* and *doing* that constitute the features of the street code at the pinnacle of the masculinity hierarchy. Particular and localised cultural ideals regulate thought and action by defining norms, and become markers for young men’s positioning, shaping a sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Messerschmidt 2018). Thus, if these cultural foundations of masculinity valorise knife-carrying on Maxwell, its young men are more likely to have them.

Several scholars have critiqued and reappraised the notion of hegemonic masculinity, and there has been a gradual change in its conceptualisation from Connell (1987, 1995) and Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) earlier understandings. A recent and important conceptual advance in the field of critical masculinity studies has been a move to clarify

the difference between dominant and hegemonic masculinities, led by Beasley (2008), Flood (2002), Schippers (2007) and particularly by Messerschmidt (2018). Dominant masculinity is the most culturally honoured and celebrated form in a particular setting, and while hegemonic patterns may be also highly influential, and indeed dominant, what theoretically differentiates 'hegemonic' from 'dominant' is that while dominant practices are 'individual', in the sense of referring to particular individualised practices, hegemony involves a *relationship* that legitimates men's power over women and subordinates other forms of masculinity within gender relations. In other words, it 'legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt 2020, 21). Thus, as Schippers (2007) argues, we need to distinguish masculinities that legitimate men's power, both over women and other men, from those that do not. Both formations can be present in the same setting and be practised by the same people, and the empirical data in this paper show that talk can switch from being hegemonic, when it can be seen legitimising unequal gender relations (e.g. being misogynist), to dominant at another, when it does not sanction them (e.g. talking about drugs). Thus, both hegemonic and dominant masculinities can become the predominant formation at different times and in different places. Both, though, are dynamic, open to contestation and the possibility of being changed.

We also draw on two other formations of masculinity that Connell (1995) proposed, both hierarchical and relative to each other: *subordinated* and *complicit*. While hegemonic and dominant masculinity is synergetic with status and respect, if Maxwell's young men see another not following, performing, or possessing the necessary hegemonic or dominant qualities, they would be vulnerable to victimisation and being deemed 'unauthentic' (Harding 2020). The features of the subordinate form were thus the antithesis of the hegemonic and dominant patterns.

Although many of the young men performed certain aspects of the hegemonic and dominant forms at different times and in various settings, it was, for the majority, out of reach and thus impossible to fully commit to. We argue that the most prevalent form of masculinity practised by the young men on Maxwell was *complicit*; they embodied much of the 'idealised' form without ever being one of 'the frontline troops' (Connell 1995, 79). Although these young men could become threatening (through, for example, knife-carrying) and imitated and practised many of the characteristics of the street code, this was an aspirant form of masculinity. Essentially, they were watchers and followers. These adolescents and young men did not have the power and the influence, and they also lacked the resources to 'trade up' and become accepted into the hegemonic or dominant form. They still, nevertheless, benefitted from, what Connell calls, its 'patriarchal dividend' (1995, 79), in terms of the rewards they gained, particularly in terms of status over young women.

## Methodology

Knife-carrying is most common in socioeconomically deprived inner-city areas (Home Office 2018). In 2020, the London borough where Maxwell sits had a higher rate of knife crime than the London average (Metropolitan Police 2019). Notwithstanding pockets of regeneration, there are few green space or amenities, and Maxwell sits within the 20% of most deprived neighbourhoods in England (IMD 2019).

The first author had lived and grown up in the community from birth until his late-teens, where he was affectionally known as 'WB' – White Boy – giving him an insiders' understanding of many issues he set out to explore, and afforded him a level of trust and authenticity during his interactions with the young men on the street. Sometimes, however, the fieldwork was difficult and even dangerous and, for instance, the positionality of the researcher as a standout 'white guy' in a black community meant that when he was walking around taking pictures or making notes, he had to be careful of not raising suspicions of being a police officer or perhaps of colluding with other official agencies of state. During fieldwork, he lived around 100 metres from the estate and his employment involved working with former youth worker colleagues, who are well-established on Maxwell, and who helped him access its uncharted spaces and inhabitants, including private areas such as homes, and introduced him to some of the young men's mothers and siblings. He also chose the estate for its knife-crime issues: youth workers had linked several recent stabbings in the borough to Maxwell's young men.

The sample was 48 young black men (aged 18–22) and may be categorised as being working-class.<sup>2</sup> We recognise that the participants were not just 'young black men', and it is not our intention to reify and pathologise violence as being racial. Identities are intersectional. Although the participants live in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage and social class (and sexuality) may be as important as age, ethnicity and gender, in this paper, we focus on these last three structures. Although we argue that the participants were able to exercise agency, and, for instance, not all of them chose to carry a knife, these structures meant that their scope for their expression of the agency was 'bounded', (Evans and Biasin 2017, 261), or curtailed.

Participants were apportioned into three layers. Primary participants ( $n = 6$ , including one youth worker) were those most engaged and thus most present in the analysis. Secondary participants ( $n = 16$ ) were those whom the researcher encountered less frequently but still contributed to data generation. Tertiary participants ( $n = 26$ ) were those encountered infrequently. All Primary participants were unknown to the criminal justice system and seldom carried knives themselves or were associated with frequent knife carriers. Nonetheless, one could consider Maxwell's entire youth population vulnerable and at risk of knife-carrying due to their geography, demography, and proximity to life on-road (Bakkali 2019).

This study is an urban ethnography, framing Maxwell's inhabitants' activities' socio-cultural importance, and used conventional ethnographic methods, including observation (formal, informal, and participant), informal conversations, formal interviews and focus groups. Although his work is more concerned with the role of the education system in the reproduction of social equality, we have found MacLeod's (1987) ethnographical work, *Ain't No Making It*, particularly useful, methodologically. Using the example of two groups of teenage boys (one black and one white) living in a housing project in the U.S., MacLeod, like King, also gained significant access to street and neighbourhood life, and explored the nature of, and the relationship between, poverty, opportunity and racial inequality, and the tensions between personal agency and structural barriers to social mobility. In this study by King, observations ( $n = 15$  separate occasions) circumnavigated trust issues (as many young men were reluctant to be recorded by or being seen 'colluding' with a white adult) and included young men's interactions and informal

conversations. Semi-structured interviews ( $n = 6$ ) with Primary participants were recorded – where appropriate, given the sensitive themes and young men’s anonymity.

Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and Qualitative Data Analysis (Seidel 1998), the analysis used participants’ otherwise oppressed perspectives and language (Bryman 2012) to code constructs (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 43). This study adopted thematic qualitative data analysis to mitigate the overly inductive approach of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the central tenets being (a) noticing and interpreting events, places, interactions, and relationships; (b) coding meaning into general and smaller themes, using both *a priori* and emergent *a posteriori* codes; and (c) making sense of what is happening (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

## Findings

We organise this section under a series of critical features of Maxwell’s street code. These features, or characteristics, make up *the game of being and performing* the on-road street masculinity and include (1) authenticity, ‘swagger’ and not being ‘pussy’; (2) a preparedness for violence; (3) knife-carrying; and (4) a presence on the digital street. As we argue above, although these ways of living drove a desire for respect and group status, there was also an underlying pervasive sense of vulnerability. We also acknowledge that these four themes overlap and contain several sub-themes, making up additional street codes, which one can detect in our findings, such as: (i) hedonism and risk-taking; (ii) peer-pressure, one-upmanship and brinkmanship; (iii) appearing successful; (iv) flaunting material possessions; (v) loyalty towards peers; (vi) being independent and looking out for oneself; (vii) hostility towards the police; (viii) promiscuity; (ix) taking (or talking about) illegal drugs; (x) explicit misogyny (particularly towards young women) and (xi) homophobia.

The important point to emphasise here is that for most of the time this pattern (made up of particular practices) was a dominant form of masculinity, which did not explicitly legitimate unequal relationships between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among different forms of masculinity (Messerschmidt 2018) (e.g. risk-taking; living a fast life on the edge; having expensive possessions; using violence; being anti-police; being loyal; being independent; taking drugs; using social media and music platforms). When they did, the practices became hegemonic and this could be seen where, for example, girls were objectified, misogyny and homophobia were endemic, and other formations of masculinity were feminised and derogated.

We use data from two Primary participants, Azeez and Bankz, as exemplars, or representatives, of wider typologies or ways of enacting patterns of masculinity, which allows us to present more descriptive and in-depth characterisations of the young men performing the street code.

- (1) Bankz embodies many hegemonic and dominant qualities that others aspire to replicate.
- (2) Azeez aspires to join the hegemonic and dominant groups but lacks the resources. He, therefore, tends to perform a complicit masculinity for much of the time.

Bankz, 19, has lived on Maxwell for four years and identified as black ethnicity. He lives with his older brother, Mo, 22, in a two-bedroom flat. Their father left when they were

young and so they lived with their mother until recently moving out. Bankz's past is somewhat ambiguous. He has something of a 'celebrity status' around Maxwell due to his emerging status as an artist in drill music (defined by violent and nihilistic content and ominous trap-influenced beats). Bankz's music dominates his life, and he often appeared on the street with music (often his own) booming from his phone's speakers, with a cabal of copy-cat young men around him. In public, he spent much of his time recounting boastful stories, exerting his dominance, and subjugating and disabusing many others of any status, and thereby highlighting his competences in 'The Game'. From the first author's perspective, Bankz had an abundance of street capital.

Azeez, 18, has lived on Maxwell for 12 years and identified as mixed black and European. His biological father is estranged, so he lived with his mother, Amina, and two younger siblings (who have a different father) in a tiny three-bedroom flat. Azeez left school at 16 and has held sporadic minimum-wage employment since. Azeez was violent at school, and Amina found knives in his bedroom on several occasions, which Azeez would claim he was holding 'for a friend'. One youth worker said Azeez was on the cusp of becoming involved with the wrong people and 'getting up to no good'. In general, Azeez and his peers spent time rebuking one another in jest and browsing social media, although without the same level of engagement as Bankz. For King, this showed the different audiences they commanded – Bankz had many captive and latent online followers to engage; in contrast, Azeez seemed content with his small circle of friends.

### *Authenticity, swagger, and not being 'pussy'*

Maxwell's street code drove young men's fundamental desire for group status, linked to having respect and a fearsome reputation. If a young man wanted to be in the top group on Maxwell, he needed to look successful and have a physical presence. Bankz was six foot and looked powerful, while Azeez stood 5'6 tall, shaven-headed and slightly built. When the researcher encountered Azeez's at home, he wore a T-shirt and jeans. Still, on the street around Maxwell, he wore, like his peers, dark, designer sportswear with his hood over his head, which symbolised a type of 'casual-cool', and which tied in with the sense of possessing physical prowess and sporting ability, which were key features of the dominant masculinity. It also, in the young men's words, allowed for quick and nimble fleeing from the police or assailants.

Azeez wore several layers of clothing under his outermost sportswear, which made him appear bulkier. One youth worker noted that layering allowed for better concealment and multiple pockets for storing money, drugs or weapons; however, King also believed that he wanted to appear bigger than he was. Azeez's trousers invariably hung low, with his hands seemingly always grabbing his crotch (a sort of phallic gesture that many would practice). Amina spoke of Azeez's pride in his appearance and desire to give the impression that everything he owned was new and 'fresh out the packet'. In Azeez's mind, it was not enough for a man to *be* successful on-road; he must also *look* successful amid Maxwell's impoverished surroundings.

Being part of the leading hegemonic and dominant group, Bankz was also obsessed with clothes, but he wore more exclusive brands than most. He regularly flaunted them in front of his peers, many of whom mirrored his style and mannerisms. When

King asked Bankz about his music, and whether this drill ‘uniform’ was symbolic, he responded:

Yeah. Most mans cover up [their faces] on Insta or Shapchat cos they don’t want next mans peepin’ at them. If shit goes off, like mans call you out ... then you don’t want mandem knowing your face ... the feds [police], they be peeping too ... the threads are standard, all about poppin’ tags and lookin’ dope ...

Having and performing ‘style’ included a specialised way of talking. As we can see by this quotation above, Bankz’s vernacular was ‘of the street’, and at times, King needed youth workers to translate his speech.

Around his peers, Azeez would also use profanity and derogatory remarks about others, particularly young women, and was thus seen being complicit in the hegemonic pattern of legitimising unequal gender relations. King’s impression was that Azeez enjoyed ‘performing’ this bravado; his peers approved, laughing and offering lots of affirmation. Azeez’s language for his peers was different from that he used with adults. When Azeez spoke with his mother, he was polite. During one-to-one conversations, Azeez was courteous and softly spoken, making little eye contact and shuffling his hands nervously. Conversely, Bankz would stare assertively at the researcher – giving the impression of someone keen to establish dominance.

Although Maxwell’s street code demanded that young men display the fruits of their labour (e.g. expensive clothes and jewellery), they also had to present themselves as authentic and pay homage to their roots. A throwaway comment from Bankz shows this; as one young man mentioned going home for dinner, he replied:

Ah man, I bet you got some three-course meal, innit. Mans belly is rumblin’ fam, but that’s the struggle, innit ... brothas be hungry ... as long as I got my blaze, I’m cool.

As Bankz lamented his lack of food at home, he wore clothes and jewellery seemingly worth several hundred pounds. Nevertheless, his peers nodded approval, validating Bankz’s ‘struggle’. This excerpt shows the lengths that Bankz went to verify his street credentials: his authenticity – it was not enough to be successful; he had to be both successful *and* struggling.

During one interview, the first author asked Azeez what ‘being a man’ meant to him. Azeez said a ‘real man’ should ‘be able to look after himself’ and ‘not act a pussy [a weak or feeble person]’, akin to the ‘tough black boy’ ideal in Phoenix, Frosh, and Pattman’s (2003) work. Later in the same interview, Azeez’s tone became charged, hitting the table and stating:

Azeez: He’s gotta have swagger ... lookin like you aint gonna back down if someone steps to you.

BK: And what would you think of a man if you saw him back down?

Azeez: If that’s one of my [friends], I’d be like ‘stop being a pussy’. I don’t know many people who would back down. Once you back down one time, people think you always a pussy.

Azeez’s dictum: ‘once a pussy, always a pussy’ infused his conversations with friends, and again shows his complicity in expressing features of the hegemonic form. King observed that if someone in the group failed at something (e.g. sports), they were (albeit jokingly) called a ‘pussy’. Similar derision followed anyone failing to ‘chat up’ a girl; in many cases,

group members forced others to go beyond a point of no return. While Azeez and his friends used the term humorously, those outside of friendship groups dreaded being weak and effeminate. Thus, showing weakness was the main characteristic of the subordinated form of masculinity.

### *A preparedness for violence*

We have already noticed Bankz's 'myth-making' above, but he also had a great propensity for storytelling (Miller 2020). In one example, he entertained his peers by recreating a confrontation with a gang from a nearby estate. Narrating with his usual bravado, his peers interrupted only to ask about the ferocity of Bankz's violence. Bankz retold the story during one interview (with more than a hint of performativity):

- BK: Can I ask you about [when] the gang confronted you?  
 Bankz: [laughing] Yeah. I made them shit themselves, innit. Fuckin pussies aint gonna mess with me no more. They think they oh so ghetto and shit, fuck that. I'm ghetto.  
 BK: You didn't explain last week why they confronted you in the first place?  
 Bankz: I reckon they beefin' with Mo [Bankz's brother] and can't get at him, so they gonna try me, innit? Think mans a pussy tho. They don't know that I aint playing games. I'll fight any mans. So, I did.  
 BK: It was a fistfight?  
 Bankz: It started like that. I knocked some prick out. Switched off his lights [laughing]. Then mans pulled a shank. But they aint got the balls to wet mans. I aint gonna hesitate to knock mans out or wet him if I gotta. Fuck it. I kinda get a buzz from that shit.

Bankz calls himself 'ghetto' – a term young men used to describe toughness and willingness to go to violent extremes. Bankz's assertion that he is more 'ghetto' than his 'gutless' confronters speak of hardiness and being ready to use violence, but also of his being 'of the streets'. This is another reference to his authenticity and enthusiasm to demonstrate his 'realness', and is, we argue, is an example of a typical feature of the dominant, rather than the hegemonic, form.

According to the youth workers, Azeez got into trouble after leaving school, falling into a crowd committing petty crimes. One youth worker told King that this was when the police caught Azeez carrying a knife. For one youth worker, Azeez was 'easily led and influenced by older kids'. When Azeez was asked about this period, he recalled his motivations of 'rolling with some bad people', which 'gave him some status' on Maxwell. Azeez spoke of undertaking opportunistic muggings with both pride and embarrassment, including the ritual of asking victims for a cigarette before demanding their possessions. During such transgressions, Azeez made it clear how young men used knives:

... they're [knives] for scaring ... If someone got brave. [Sometimes] we knew mans would probably be carrying too. So, like, eye for an eye, you know?

### *Knife-carrying*

Carrying knives was another feature of the dominant form of masculinity on Maxwell, but the reasons were complex and ambivalent. Although knives were, as Azeez says, used for threatening violence and as scare tactics during other 'opportunity-related benefits' (Marfleet 2008, 16), the main reason why many young men on Maxwell

carried knives was for defence and the added protection stemming from their underlying sense of vulnerability; however, the peer pressure of showing bravado and not being a 'pussy' also played a part. Very few ever actually used knives though – 'the threat' usually sufficed.

Bankz was at 'high-risk' of gang involvement and criminality. Many youth workers already believed that he was involved in criminality. Nonetheless, at the time of fieldwork, Bankz had only minor infringements on his criminal record and none for knife-carrying. While Bankz appeared not to be carrying knives, one youth worker, Alex, argued he did not have to while his peers were nearby. They guarded their greatest asset – someone who, through association, afforded them the status and street capital they craved (Densley, Deuchar, and Harding 2020; Harding 2020). Thus, the majority of young men who were in possession of knives were, like Azeez, practising a complicit form of masculinity; the elite group to which Bankz belonged to, did not need knives as they were looked after by their followers.

The first author chose not to ask Bankz directly about knife-carrying because Bankz was slightly suspicious of him, and he did not want to antagonise him. He, therefore, relied on youth workers' testimony instead. When asked about Bankz's involvement with knives, Alex emphasised some of the symbolism within Bankz's drill music videos:

Drill music isn't necessarily about carrying knives ... it's about not standing for disrespect. There's a 'code' that says if someone calls you out, then you have to react: either call them out back yourself or tool yourself up and get them.

As Alex suggests, drill music is not associated with knife-carrying *per se*. Still, its notion of retaliation sparks such behaviours. Therefore, (some) drill music is an incendiary medium, like other social media forms, for young men to goad one another into violent retaliation. As Irwin-Rodgers and Pinkey's (2017) review of U.K. gang violence and social media shows, this creates a 'digital street' (discussed in the next section) for sharing threats – present within the videos Bankz showed.

When broached about the subject of knife-carrying with his peers, Azeez spoke frankly:

If there's like, four or five of us, I know there's probably two or three people backed up. Especially when we go on-road, at least someone's backed up 'cos that's the way it's gotta be.

Azeez's admission shows that, among some young men on Maxwell, knife-carrying is an expectation, and that you were 'always looking over your shoulder'. Azeez's explains that some consider knife-carrying as 'responsible' behaviour given their 'on-road' vulnerability (Harding 2020). As his conversations became expansive, he divulged the extent of his knife-carrying behaviours. During his later school years, Azeez had a circle of friends from Maxwell with older brothers and male cousins who met after school to smoke weed. As Azeez became part of this ritual, he joined them in smoking, drinking and playing video games. This practice quickly escalated to Azeez accompanying them when they were 'picking up girls' or 'seeing what to rob from the shops' around Maxwell's perimeter. Azeez's group would then encourage escalation through 'peer pressure' and 'expectancy' (Gunter 2008); rather than stealing from shops, friends would help steal from others on the street. When Azeez was asked how knives entered this scenario, he deemphasised their severity in one recorded interview, noting the necessary 'scare tactics'.

Azeez: It was some jokes. No drama. When Jay wanted to rob some man, he pulled a knife. After, two or three people would be backed up, kinda like Jay gave us permission when he was backed up, he was like: 'Well if mandem's gonna put up a fight, I gotta be backed up'. I don't think he was gonna wet [stab] someone; he just wanted to scare them so that they wouldn't fight back. Then when [the muggings] were regular, we knew people we were jacking [robbing] would be backed up too. Word was that people were getting jacked on-road, so more people were backing up. So, we knew that we had to carry, 'cos mandem gonna be carrying [knives] ...

### *A presence on the digital street*

Using his drill music, Bankz drew upon a social media presence – that was conspicuously absent for Azeez – that validated his street authenticity. Bankz happily showed the researcher his hundreds of online followers on his *Instagram* feed, while his *YouTube* videos had thousands of views. Whenever Bankz spoke about such achievements, he did so with great pride and satisfaction – a seismic shift from his usual disinterest. Bankz also said that 'people had been chatting shit' about him or his drill collaborators online. In one interview, Bankz was asked to describe such messages:

Fuckin bait shit. Just mans callin' me and my boys out. Sayin' they comin' for us, gonna bring mandem to Maxwell and shoot up the place or shanking people. They always beefing these pussies ... throwin' up gang signs like pop [gun sounds] ... they just chatting shit tho, aint no one coming to Maxwell, 'cos they knew we prepared.

Bankz's reply touches on peer pressure themes and the responsibility of looking after the peer group. Bankz had multiple social media accounts and took pleasure from showing other pages or accounts he followed, including sites proliferating the buying and selling of weapons. These accounts centred on many epithets of street culture, including street fashion, drugs and knives. When asked whether he followed any pages that King might find surprising, containing artists who were perhaps not into drill music, Bankz (with two of his peers present) responded dismissively:

Bankz: [laughing] You mean like ... Justin Bieber or some shit like that?

BK: Do you?

Bankz: [laughing] Fuck off, man! [laughing] This mans [pointing at BK] thinks I'm pussy, fam! You think I'm pussy? Nah. That's black music for white people. Fucking gay shit. You don't listen to that shit, do you [pointing at BK]? I don't follow that fuckin gay shit, man.

Bankz's confrontational use of 'pussy' coupled with his homophobia ('fucking gay shit') confirms his subjugation of these masculine forms. Bankz seemingly attempts to enhance his heterosexual masculinity by slandering homosexuality, a feat echoed by Carnaghi, Maass, and Fasoli (2011) in their study of how homophobic epithets construct gender identities. It appears that, in Bankz's mind, listening to drill and following its various designations is more masculine and genuinely street than listening to '... black music for white people'. Moreover, Bankz associates this music (and culture, to an extent) with homosexuality and weakness. Indeed, the researcher took his question towards the end of the excerpt ('You don't listen to that shit, do you?') as a 'test' of the

credibility and status that he had accrued during fieldwork. Bankz's following of social media sites offering the purchase of knives correlates with the clear symbolism within drill music. While being careful not to demonise or scapegoat the genre, the videos that Bankz showed were replete with violent imagery and calls to bear arms. Thus, although his drill music – awash with violence – was part of the dominant pattern of masculinity, it was also suffused with unequal gender relations and so overlapped with the hegemonic form, which derogated femininities and other forms of masculinity.

### *Vulnerability*

Alongside these masculine performances is the overarching theme of vulnerability, which is exacerbated by neo-liberal policies of austerity and exclusion across all areas of social life (White 2020). Bankz did not have to feel vulnerable or protect himself (through anything like knife-carrying). Still, when Bankz was asked whether he felt unsafe because of the online threats, he became defensive. He stated that he knew of people close to him who would arm themselves 'just in case ... pussies come to the ends and try anything'. Bankz's brother, Mo, whom he lived with, had greater notoriety than his younger brother; he was the target of rival gangs and had recently spent time in hospital after a brutal assault. By association, Bankz could therefore attract unwanted attention. Nonetheless, he appeared to revel in his notoriety as it raised his authenticity, legitimacy and status as the brother of a known 'face' around Maxwell.

When Azeez was asked about his movements through Maxwell's spaces, he candidly talked about his anticipation of danger:

Whenever I leave [Maxwell], I never go alone. You never know when next mans around the corner. Even on Maxwell, people looking for trouble ... chasing beef and status.

Azeez's never travelled far alone. When he did, there were usually 'three or four boys' with him, which spoke of the need for safety in numbers and an inability to feel at ease. Also, Azeez tacitly acknowledges that people 'chase trouble' to further their street status. Still, the following exchange illustrates feelings of hostility towards the police, the need for safety in numbers, and the awareness of needing to take responsibility for oneself, which also has links to individualisation and neo-liberal logics of selfhood.

BK: Don't you think you should feel safe wherever you are?

Azeez: But it aint happening, is it?

BK: What happens when you don't feel safe?

Azeez: Well, aint no man looking after me except for me! Aint no police giving a shit. I look after myself and if that means being backed up then, whatever [...] Aint no-one for people like us.

Azeez's frustration (and aggression) in this excerpt was typical of his interactions with the researcher. Despite often observing Azeez among large groups, his descriptions of 'aint no man looking after me except for me!' also imply a feeling of isolation and show how the vulnerability is experienced in embodied ways. He also appeared aggravated talking about feeling 'vulnerable' or 'unsafe', inferring a fragility to his masculinity. Indeed, his preoccupation in appearing belligerent echoes Barlas and Egan's (2006) work, who argue that knife-carriers possess a significant concern in appearing aggressive. Azeez's behaviours reflect his inherent precariousness. These behaviours were particularly

evident when moving through unfamiliar spaces where other young men would gather (an occurrence that some groups sought out on social media).

## Discussion and conclusion

King's familiarity with Maxwell from birth, coupled with his daily proximity and access to Maxwell's young men during fieldwork, gives this study an originality missing from many other studies. It makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to youth studies by showing how the highly talked about and relevant social issue of knife crime is inextricably linked to constructions of masculinity, class and race in a highly deprived and disadvantaged area, and provides empirical data that differentiates between theoretical conceptualisations of dominant and hegemonic masculinity. The research shows how the theme of vulnerability plays a part in knife carrying, and how carrying a knife is a way of engaging in 'The Game' of being and performing 'on road'. The study builds on work from Anderson and Bourgois, although their research came before the advent of many contemporary technologies and social media platforms, and issues involving the digital street. It also has a methodological originality by including data generated from informal conversations, so giving a greater voice to those on the margins and vulnerable to knife crime.

The young men in the study were involuntarily born and raised on Maxwell. In general, their lives were harsh and underscored by a sense of vulnerability. While we do not wish to portray these young men as victims, there was an ever-present expectation of danger, an imperative to take risks, and a daily pressure to gain respect and status by proving one's masculine credentials. Looking up to Maxwell's elders as role models, they became part of a culture underwritten by rules or codes on how (and how not) to behave as they learnt their street literacy (Cahill 2000). We have not drawn on 'gang' literature in this paper as the young men King spoke to were adamant that they were not part of a gang. Instead, participants spoke of hanging out around Maxwell with friends or their 'boys'.

There were three main patterns of masculinity on view in these public performances on the street and these data show they were fluid and overlapped. Where it clearly legitimated unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities, it can be termed hegemonic, and where it did not, it can be classified as the dominant form, which included the characteristics of violence, living on the edge, displaying expensive possessions and so on. There was also a form of complicit masculinity that attempted to emulate both the hegemonic and dominant formations, and although young men, like Azeez, practised elements of both these patterns, it was a weaker form, and had less influence than the version espoused by Bankz. Whereas Azeez was a follower, Bankz was the 'real deal', and we posit that by calling this a complicit form provides an analytical device that enables us to distinguish between these two forms, and between these two people. The researcher did not encounter many subordinated masculinity forms, although its traits were evident. We speculate that this was because the hegemonic formation was so strong and powerful that few people dare to practice a formation where they risked derogation.

The successful performance of hegemonic and dominant masculinity, exemplified and embodied by Bankz, was based on the ability to draw on various resources as forms of capital, ranging from *physicality* (physical size, strength; posing a threat; being prepared

to use violence); *material possessions* (clothing; jewellery; cars); having *specialised knowledge* (music; social media platforms; information about events; ways of doing something); as well as less tangible *personal resources* (being able to show authenticity act cool). Bankz's performances of a masculine swagger had a dramaturgical quality; he carefully prepared them, and, in their choreography, they resembled Goffman's (1959) presentation of self; they were also played out in the way he spoke, moved and acted – like the 'cool pose' identified by Majors and Billson (1993).

Youth workers described young men like Azeez as 'foot soldiers for those higher up the food chain'. For some, the prospect of becoming part of the streets' lucrative economy was enticing, although these lower-ranking roles were highly perilous. Although they lacked the resources to join the top, influential group of Bankz, such functions, nonetheless, offered opportunities for progress into more profitable positions promising a lifestyle akin to the hegemonic and dominant masculinity of the streets – replete with material wealth, female attention and peers' respect (Anderson 1999; Gunter 2008; Harding 2020). In this way, the balance between risk and reward falls on the side of the gains available, as seen in other research (e.g. Grimshaw and Ford 2018; Palasinski et al. 2019). Azeez commented that he could not obtain respect 'from the streets' while 'stacking shelves at Tesco', which speaks of what the street defines as respect-enhancing.

Rather than making money legitimately, a significant minority of Maxwell's young men were motivated by a somewhat hedonistic 'fast lifestyle'. For example, making money swiftly, doing whatever it takes to rise quickly up the street hierarchy and, once there, indulging oneself in superficial and ultimately disposable relationships. This lifestyle commanded respect among Azeez and his friends. As in Anderson's (1999) study, this regime was the lifeblood of Maxwell's streets and was characterised by knife-carrying. There were also overarching issues of respect that young men could gain from knife-carrying. For some young men, the larger and more fearsome the knife or weapon, the more fear or respect one could command. This (somewhat phallic) trend resembled competitiveness, one-upmanship and brinkmanship. However, although young men used knives to scare and commit acts of violence, we maintain that the primary reason for knife-carrying on Maxwell, by most young men, stemmed from a sense of vulnerability, anticipation of danger, and the need for protection.

## Notes

1. The first author's thesis was approved by the UCL ethic committee. UCL Data Protection Registration Number: Z6364106/2018/11/40-12-November-2018.
2. We are defining working class as a group who tends to be non-property owning, has a general low level of education and social status, and whose occasional work is often low paid and low skilled and involves physical rather than intellectual skills.

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