Crime as Pop: Gangsta Rap as Popular Staging of Norm Violations

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Abstract: Crime is quantified extensively, mostly in order to prevent it, therefore assuming it as something purely negative. With the concept "Crime as Pop" we argue that such a view is one-sided, since crime is often staged as something that can be attractive and that can be used constructively for different purposes. We investigate this perspective by studying gangsta rap, which we consider a pop-cultural phenomenon that young people relate to in the context of interactive practices of identity construction. The stories told in gangsta rap are used by the youth recipients in a situation- and location-specific manner to present themselves in a certain way. Young people reproduce motifs of success that often characterize gangsta rap. They portray themselves as agentive and stage forms of resistance against people and institutions to which they might otherwise appear passive and powerless. Young people's engagement with gangsta rap thus shows how the pop-cultural phenomena can be appropriated in many different ways. "Crime as Pop" illustrates the contingent connections of cultural phenomena and their appropriation that require detailed empirical reconstruction.

Keywords: pop; crime; gangsta rap; narrative; statistics; youth

1. "Crime as Pop"

Crime is a very popular phenomenon in several respects: It is committed frequently, reported on and staged extensively in the media, so that it is an integral part of pop-cultural discourse. In the following, we will investigate gangsta rap to outline a perspective that devises crime as an element of pop culture. We assume that crime in this context is not purely negative. On the contrary: "Crime as Pop" is connected to complex strategies of staging crime as an ambivalent, often attractive and at the same time risky, event, in whose representation recipients are constitutively involved. The example of gangsta rap makes this view particularly clear, as the depiction of criminalized actions and characters is constitutive of this music genre. As an essential component of contemporary culture, gangsta rap is certainly relevant to the question of images and interpretations of crime. In the following, we turn to a perspective 'from below' by using an ethnographic study on the reception and appropriation of gangsta rap, taking a look at how young people connect to motifs of the genre and integrate them into their own narratives and practices.

We expand on this view by first discussing statistically measured attention. Compared to 'traditional' forms of quantifying crime, "Crime as Pop" exhibits particularities that can be analyzed if—as contended in the following—we do not (only) focus on statistics but on stories that are associated with the representation of crime and that enable its broad appropriation. Against this background and with a focus on gangsta rap, we explore how adolescents appropriate stagings of crime.

2. Statistical Measurement of Attention

Statistics are supposed to provide information on the frequency of crimes. Official statistics show how many cases of crime come to the attention of the police and other agencies of the criminal justice system,[1] and the numbers are—of course, depending on the

perspective—more or less high. To give an example: In Germany, the police crime statistics for 2021 count an absolute number of 5047.860 cases of crime; 1,892,003 persons were identified as suspects (BMIUFH 2022, p. 10). The number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants was 60,704 in 2021. The corresponding numbers vary considerably historically and internationally. They can be used—despite the difficulties arising from the fact that each country's official national statistics measure different things—to carry out international comparisons and to determine explanatory factors as to why similarities and differences exist (Harrendorf 2018; Lappi-Seppälä 2018; Nelken 2017).

Further statistical data on crime are collected through offender and victim surveys, which aim to provide more precise information on the frequency and background of offences. Official statistics are rightly accused of only recording crimes that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies and are processed by them. However, crimes often remain institutionally undetected, so that it is necessary to also make the so-called dark field visible through offender and victim surveys, i.e., cases that may escape the attention of the police and public prosecutor's office (Desrosières 2007, p. 10). As these surveys concentrate on certain groups of people and offences, they also do not paint a complete picture of crime (Brown et al. 2019, pp. 67–121; Newburn 2013, pp. 49–80) but still show a relatively high crime rate, as do official statistics. This is especially the case in adolescence, as most young people engage in delinquent behavior at least once in their lives.[2] Official statistics and dark field surveys differ considerably in their conception, but both are employed to depict the reality of the crimes actually committed in a given social or geographical area. They are thus part of a quantification of social processes that goes back to the late 18th century and continues today with the increasing differentiation of statistical methods (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Mennicken and Espeland 2019).

There is another form of statistical recording that is crucial for "Crime as Pop", namely the measurement of crime as something that is *portrayed and staged,* for example, in the media, by tracking the corresponding demand through audience ratings, book purchases, likes, etc. Already in the early modern period, crime was a media event through pamphlets and other printed matter, depicting, for example, acts of violence and executions (Haerter 2010; Peil 2002). Subsequently, this interest became successively greater (Schwerhoff 2011, pp. 181–82). With recent developments in digital communication, representations of crime have become an integral part of everyday life. There is probably no medium today that does not report extensively on crime.

Crime is omnipresent in digital media; its representation reinforces certain images of crime and the threat associated with it in the everyday life of recipients (MacCahill 2014). With the permanent media representation of crime, however, according to Ferrell et al. (2015, p. 171), the boundary between reality and staging becomes questionable, "resulting in the categories of the 'real' and the 'virtual' becoming ever more hybridized". It might therefore be difficult to distinguish where the 'real' and the 'virtual' reality begins and ends, as they become blurred in the media staging of crime.

According to Ferrell et al. (2015, pp. 161–64), gangsta rap is an example of this blurring of boundaries. It reverses the logic of statistical measurements by official offices and dark field surveys. These have as their constitutive reference point the actual commission of crime. For methodological reasons, it may hardly be possible to depict it exactly, but the aim of getting as close as possible legitimizes them. Gangsta rap, however, demonstrates that something else can be measured relatively precisely: The mass attention of this music genre in the public and among certain groups of recipients.[3]

As Espeland and Stevens (2008, p. 417) explain, numbers have a high authority; "people find numbers credible". Recorded music sales and streaming frequencies can be measured more or less objectively. Large-scale attention—millions or even billions of streams, clicks, followers, etc.—can develop a strong authority: What is demanded by many people seems to be worth paying attention to; it thus legitimizes itself (Döring et al. 2021). Crime statistics had already shown that crime is attractive insofar as the corresponding acts are committed millions of times over. With billions of sales and streams of songs (and

of course, movies, books, comics, etc.) that deal with crime and especially violence, it becomes even clearer that crime is not simply something negative that must be prevented but, on the contrary, something that people find attractive or fascinating, for which they provide mass attention and spend money. The quality of crime as something negative and to be devalued, as a 'low culture,' is thus irritated—especially since by no means only disadvantaged youths listen to gangsta rap (Riley 2005). For official statistics and dark field studies, crime is by definition something that belongs to 'low culture' since it is forbidden and must be prevented. Pop-cultural attention, on the other hand, implies that depictions and stagings of crime are attractive and have special appeal or can act as "seductions" (Katz 1988).

In this sense, "Crime as Pop" differs from the mere representation of crime in the media. Crime in the media often follows the logic of official statistics and dark field studies to axiomatically discredit crime and call for its prevention (Surette 2011). These media portrayals often dramatize offences, and they selectively draw on serious crime, such as murders, extremely violent acts, sexual offences, etc. In criminology, the concept of "moral panic" (Cohen 2002) has been established for such dramatizing presentations of crime. According to this concept, crimes are presented by the media as a threat to order and security, and countermeasures are demanded and implemented. Media, politicians, and experts—Cohen (2002, p. 1) speaks ironically of "editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people"—represent the morality and order to be protected (high culture), while crime is the undesirable phenomenon to be suppressed (low culture). As Garfinkel (1956) adds from a different theoretical perspective, this moral imputation is associated with a degradation of the status of those who function as the object of the accusations. These persons are devalued, while the accusers present themselves as representatives of higher values in whose name they speak and whom they protect.[4]

"Crime as Pop" overlaps with these representations. Moreover, in gangsta rap, crime is often stereotyped and exaggerated, and in public discourses of scandalization, gangsta rappers are stylized as a "danger to the social order" (Seeliger 2017, p. 38). At the same time, however, the traditional high/low distinction is irritated and challenged by "Crime as Pop". Compared to the usual portrayals of crime in the media, three differences can be cited for "Crime as Pop":

Firstly, in "Crime as Pop", it is partly the perpetrators who articulate themselves, and they are not anxious to hide their offences but tend to present them publicly. In gangsta rap, rappers boast about particular crimes they have allegedly or actually committed or plan to commit. While official statistics, dark field investigations, and 'established' media reports primarily make visible what perpetrators want to conceal, pop statistics display the attention paid to something that is supposed to be public. Pop-cultural stagings refer to attempts of "self-exaltation". They seek "attention and recognition" (Klein and Friedrich 2003, p. 40), and the presentation of crime is part of this staging in gangsta rap.

Secondly, pop is always associated with a tendency to violate norms and risky behavior (Klein and Friedrich 2003, p. 116). Elvis's hip-swinging, the hairstyles of the Beatles, the drug intoxication in *Trainspotting* etc. are also part of pop culture because they each crossed boundaries in their time. This transgression also applies to the character of the gangster as part of pop culture, to which gangsta rap connects (Leland 2005, p. 232). Violations of norms are presented that cross boundaries—but in a specific way compared to other media representations. Thus, "Crime as Pop" depicts certain types of criminality. Gangsta rappers do not boast about sexually abusing children, for example. Environmental crime, tax evasion, and the like do not serve well for their self-promotion either. Instead, gangsta rappers use norm violations that have a connotation of protest, such as drug use (Leland 2005, pp. 260–81), or that, like violence or misogyny, aim to stage superiority. They speak in part from a delegitimized social position and strive to reverse devaluations in their songs.

Thirdly, media representations of crime often aim to create interest by shocking their audience. People are supposed to be outraged and see themselves as members of a superior moral community (Cremer-Schäfer and Stehr 1990). "Crime as Pop", on the other hand,

hinges on attention. Pop is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation, and gangsta rap also thrives on the attention and appreciation it receives (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013, pp. 119–20). Those who only reject gangsta rap will not buy the songs, will not stream them, and will not spend money on attending gangsta rappers' events. Gangsta rap is often about the—albeit ambivalent, see below—heroization of actors who commit crimes, not about their demonization. Thus, there is also a clear difference here to media "moral panics".

These three points illustrate central characteristics of "Crime as Pop" in comparison to the representation of crime in official statistics, dark field surveys, and 'established' media reports on crime. "Crime as Pop" refers to pop-cultural mass attention, in the context of which crime is often staged by (alleged) perpetrators themselves; crime appears as a form of protest and self-assertion that can be attractive and appealing. The devaluation of crime as an unacceptable kind of 'low culture' is challenged by "Crime as Pop". Nevertheless, crime cannot simply be portrayed in a positive light. In "Crime as Pop", it does not readily become an element of 'high culture,' but ambivalences are presented that tend to contrast a high/low differentiation. This balancing act of presenting crime as attractive and risky at the same time, we suspect, points to particular narratives.

In this article, we aim to reconstruct this narrative balancing act. Using gangsta rap as an example, we ask what lies 'behind' the statistics of attention measurement. The statistics show that gangsta rap is a phenomenon that is popular with a large number of (especially young) people, but we must explore in more detail what this attention actually means for them. From our perspective, this point should not be approached on the basis of a devaluation of criminality, but the aim should be to fathom what attention to gangsta rap and its depictions of offences and norm violations actually means for recipients.[5]

3. Narratives of Gangsta Rap and Their Appropriation

3.1. Gangsta Rap as Narrative

Gangsta rap is attractive to a particularly large following (Baker 2018; Keyes 2002). For a deeper analysis of its success story, it is necessary to take a closer look at the story of success that it recounts. Gangsta rap taps into the most successful and well-known narrative of the Western world: "from rags to riches" (New York Times 2003, cited in Smith 2003, p. 80; see also Boendel and Kargoll 2021, p. 315). Stories cannot be told arbitrarily; there is a cultural "common stock of plots" (Polletta 2006, p. 21) that can be drawn upon to make stories understandable and plausible. Additionally, the story of success, according to which someone rises from misery ("rags") to wealth and success ("riches"), is the central story of the Western world and possibly beyond it (El Ouassil and Karig 2021). In gangsta rap, success is staged extensively: As monetary success using status symbols, as sexual success through the portrayal of submissive women,[6] as social success in the sense of popularity with fans and recognition in the peer group, as physical strength, and so on. Gangsta rap refers to power and agency. Well-known rappers earn considerable sums of money (examples in Baker 2018, pp. 225–37)—a kind of success that stands in sharp contrast to the original narrative of gangsta rap, which refers to the lives of disadvantaged black youth in the US, to "stories of black ghetto life" (Rose 2008, p. 4). Rappers seem to be able to be very successful despite this environment, which is often perceived as difficult and problematic. The texts and images of gangsta rap thus reproduce the story "from rags to riches" and give it specific twists through which recipients can relate to gangsta rap in different ways. Ultimately, it is the recipients themselves who give pop-cultural phenomena a special meaning; depending on the context, stories can always be interpreted differently (Polletta 2006, pp. 171–75). However, previous work on gangsta rap has identified various motifs that can be taken up in processes of appropriation, and combined with the "from rags to riches" narrative, offer a high level of appeal for recipients.

Such a motif is that of *self-assertion*, which refers to the almost heroic characteristics of gangsta rappers. Stories of gangsta rap tie in with this motif in that individual rappers stage themselves as extremely capable of acting and asserting themselves, especially with reference to the character of the gangster who has worked his way up to riches (also)

through crime (Boendel and Kargoll 2021, p. 190).[7] Offences are celebrated with which one presents oneself as great and superior. As Ahlers (2019, p. 468) cites the example of a particularly successful gangsta rapper in Germany ("Kollegah"): "It is evident that his artistic identity or *persona* is a mixture of the hustler, criminal and pimp stereotypes [. . .]. He very soon establishes his self-representation as the boss, even using this for his album titles (*Boss der Bosse* [Boss of Bosses], *Bossaura*)". Gangsta rappers seem to be able to realize a heroic rise due to their assertiveness and cleverness, which contrasts with origins—a "ghetto"—that are often portrayed as bleak, discriminatory, and disadvantageous. They are not 'pure' heroes, as their actions obviously contradict traditional moral categories and legal guidelines (Watts 1997). They can be described as "anti-heroes" (Lena 2012, p. 463) who nevertheless appear heroic and have a broad appeal. The violation of norms and the heroization of the gangster are an integral part of pop culture. Gangsta rap picks up on this attractiveness of norm violations and integrates them into the heroized plot structure of the "rags to riches" narrative.

Another motif that directly follows from narrative heroization but gives it a specific turn is that of a *stable, authentic identity*. Well-known heroic stories combine with an inner conversion of the hero (El Ouassil and Karig 2021): He becomes more mature, wiser, more prudent, etc. with his experiences. In gangsta rap, the hero or rapper is instead portrayed as someone who, despite his success, remains at the core who he is and has always been. Part of the staging of authenticity and realness in gangsta rap is the statement that one can remain connected to one's origins and thus at least to a part of one's former identity, so that gangsta rap is, in a sense, anti-educational: A person does not have to be formally educated or otherwise transformed but can be successful and street-smart if they remain themselves. Despite all socio-economic advancement: "Ghetto" and "street" remain key reference points of a gangsta rapper's identity (Smith 2003; see also Rauch 2019, p. 81). According to Rose (2008, p. 38), this imputation of an enduring, authentic identity gives "fans a sense that they themselves have the potential to reach celebrity status, to gain social value and prestige while remaining 'true' to street life and culture, turning what traps them into an imagined gateway to success". Success is therefore possible without revealing that it would require self-conquest and alienation from one's origins. You remain who you are and can still be successful, which in turn legitimizes that you are valuable as a person.

Another motif is *resistance*. Narratives of heroization are often associated with extensive mobility and travel. Not so with gangsta rap, whose main protagonists stage authenticity by being able to assert themselves against all the adversities they face in their milieu of origin. By claiming to remain true to themselves while being successful, rappers remain connected to their environment and their origins.[8] Their success unfolds against all impositions, and by resisting them, they prove their assertiveness. What marks heroes in the first place are "heroic deeds" (Broeckling 2020, p. 40). While socially critical academics often point out that living in precarious conditions makes people victims of society, this is negated in gangsta rap. Rappers locate themselves in 'their' neighborhood and 'their' peer group and attest to the possibility of being active and successful. The greater the resistance and disadvantages, the greater the ability of the individuals to assert and defend themselves. Those who overcome powerful opponents—and stage this strength widely—prove to have the capacity to act (El Ouassil and Karig 2021). Dissing and fighting with rival rappers as well as against elites, discrimination, the police, or the mainstream are part of this staging. In gangsta rap, breaking the rules is proof of the possibility of overcoming resistance and succeeding—even at the risk of tragic failure, as Riley points out (Riley 2005).

These three motifs—self-assertion, stable identity, and resistance—could be expanded, which is primarily an empirical task. They illustrate that the "rags to riches" narrative is harnessed and commodified in a special way in gangsta rap, so that it can be attractive for heterogeneous groups of recipients. Gangsta rap offers a polysemous, broad range of possible references (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013). These references can be used to identify with songs, characters, or the genre as a whole by comparing one's own life situation or desires, interests, and experiences with the narratives presented (see Loseke 2019, pp. 7–9).

3.2. Narrative Appropriation

Thus far, we have described narratives and motifs that characterize gangsta rap as a pop-cultural product staging crime in a special way. However, "crime as pop" is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation, which is to be understood as a creative, interpretative process "in which there is no inevitable correspondence between coding and decoding" (Hall 2004, p. 77). The framing of meanings (encoding) and their appropriation (decoding) can differ, so the latter must be examined empirically.

In the following, we exploratively reconstruct the meaning of the motifs presented from the perspective of young people based on selected excerpts from field protocols. The protocols and findings are taken from a research project that is currently ongoing; in this project we study interactive identity practices of young people with an affinity to gangsta rap.[9] Our focus is on the question of how young people—who are often the center of attention in public discussions about gangsta rap—perceive the norm violations associated with gangsta rap, and if applicable, assign a special meaning to them. In a total of four facilities of open youth work[10]—i.e., in facilities where young people can spend their free time with socio-pedagogical guidance—we conduct ethnographic observations and group discussions in order to collect relevant practices and stylizations as well as conversations of the youths. The corresponding data makes it possible to analyze whether and how the young people connect to the narratives and specific motifs just described.[11]

Against this background, we describe the initial findings from the research project using ethnographic data on one of the facilities. Given the visitor structure and the local setting of this institution, our data refers primarily to male youths who live in a segregated part of a large German city. These structural categories were made relevant by the young people themselves during our fieldwork, for example by pointing out 'their' neighborhood.[12]

We selected the excerpts from the field protocols by identifying passages that relate to the gangsta rap motifs presented. These passages were compared with each other and analyzed by the research team. We have translated them from German into English for this article. It should be noted that the findings are preliminary and will be specified as necessary in the further process of our research. Nevertheless, we assume that they provide a consolidated impression of the appropriation of gangsta rap as a pop-cultural phenomenon.

(a)　Success

The representation of success is constitutive for the main narrative in gangsta rap: "from rags to riches". If one takes into account the often marginalized position of the speaker, the relevance of motifs such as self-assertion and resistance becomes particularly clear. In gangsta rap, these motives and the pursuit of success are portrayed through style and linked to criminality through the character of the gangster. Our empirical data shows that the young people who participated in our study also stage their social, sexual, or other success in narratives to each other. In the context of their aesthetic and stylistic references to gangsta rappers, fashion plays an important role and can symbolize financial success. Accordingly, our ethnographic observations revealed that the youth recipients almost exclusively wear clothes with brand symbols or lettering, with Nike and Adidas occupying a dominant position alongside luxury brands. This mix of streetwear with expensive luxury brands and jewelry was worn and popularized early on by gangsta rappers. Wearing luxury brands—Palm Angels, Moncler, or Balenciaga, among others—can function as a status symbol that, according to Bengtsson (2012, p. 684), can be part of a "gangsta style" in the sense of representing "expensive consumption". However, since the clothes and accessories of these brands are hardly affordable for large parts of society, and apparently, also for the youth in our sample, a discrepancy between financial resources and self-portrayal became apparent. Some of the young people who wore brand-name clothes dealt with this discrepancy by acknowledging that the brands were counterfeit, thus indicating that what counts for them are the brands as signs and symbols, not their genuineness. Nevertheless,

some young people marked their clothes or accessories as genuine and stated that they could afford the brands. The following excerpt from a field protocol, which focuses on an interaction with a 12-year-old youth ("Dragan"), illustrates the relevance of luxury brands, the discrepancy described, and the connection to gangsta rap:

> *Dragan answers that the film "House of Gucci" will be released in cinemas next week. He adds that he definitely wants to see it and tells me that he used to exclusively wear Gucci himself. Astonished, I ask him if he wore real Gucci clothes. He replies that some of them were also real. "But aren't they incredibly expensive?" I ask further. "It's OK," Dragan answers and says that3 sometimes he got Gucci-pieces as a gift. For Christmas or something. "And now you only wear Adidas, it looks like," I say laughing, looking at the black trousers with the white Adidas stripes, the black hoodie with a big Adidas emblem on the chest and the Adidas shoulder bag. I have seen this outfit on him many times before. Dragan jumps up and happily tells me that he used to wear only Louis, "Louis Vuitton" he adds, and then Gucci and then Nike and now Adidas. (. . .) I still have a lot of questions, but Dragan has already been fidgeting a bit and now asks me if I would like to play table football with him. "Sure," I say, and we go over to the adjoining hallway where the football table is located. While we play, Dragan casually tells me that he is a Capital fan. "Capital Bra?" I ask and Dragan nods enthusiastically. "Oh, I see," I laugh, "that's why the Gucci and the switch to Adidas?" Dragan confirms and explains that he always wore exactly the brands that Capital Bra was wearing at the time.*

In the passage, Dragan himself refers to the brand "Gucci". However, he does not initially address why he "used to" wear exclusively Gucci clothes and how the change came about. The fact that wearing these clothes is not a matter of course but rather arouses astonishment due to the high price of the products is expressed in the ethnographer's questions. She articulates the obvious contradiction between a rather disadvantaged living situation, which is often described as such by the young people themselves, and wearing expensive clothes. Since Dragan does not react indignantly to the insinuation that he can probably hardly afford the clothes, he too seems to acknowledge the discrepancy. He tries to resolve it, or at least to provide an explanation, by stating that only "some" of these clothes were genuine. At the same time, he puts the association of Gucci as "incredibly expensive" into perspective and thus presents himself as a person who is not further impressed by the prices. Expensive brands seem to be quite affordable for him, at least in part. After all, some of his clothes from Gucci are "real", so he confirms that he has or has had sufficient financial means. The contradiction between rather precarious living conditions and economic prosperity is thus not completely resolved but persists. At least financially and symbolized by owning and wearing luxury brands, Dragan—or at least people around him who can afford to give him expensive gifts—seems to be successful.

In the continuing interaction, the connection between the success or prosperity motif and gangsta rap becomes clear. The ethnographer points out that Dragan now wears Adidas clothes exclusively, whereupon he first lists different brands that he has worn exclusively one after another. He begins with the brand Louis Vuitton, which he initially only calls by its 'first name' ("Louis"); only for the researcher he indicates that it is Louis Vuitton, so he conveys a special familiarity with the brand. How and why the change of brands came about, or why he became enthusiastic about these specific brands, is not explained in more detail at this point. However, after the conversation about brand-name clothing was broken off by Dragan, he mentions during the table football game that he is a "Capital fan", i.e., a fan of the gangsta rapper Capital Bra, who is well-known and very successful in Germany. Dragan himself does not make any explicit connection to the previous topic of brand clothing; only when the ethnographer asks, based on contextual knowledge, whether "Gucci and the switch to Adidas" can be linked to Capital Bra, a connection between the young person's clothing preference and his rap idol is drawn.[13] This connection is confirmed by Dragan, so that the rapper's function as a fashion model becomes clear. Accordingly, a brand does not stand for itself, even if it is a luxury brand. It is attractive for style appropriations if it is exemplified by a prominent gangsta rapper

([Ege 2013](), pp. 200–7). Even a brand like Adidas, which can hardly be described as a luxury brand, can be used for aesthetic self-expression, provided it is promoted by a suitable role model.

(b)   Self-assertion and Criminality

According to [Dimitriadis]() ([1996](), p. 189), the character of the gangster, which is constitutive of gangsta rap, functions as "a ready-made tool for male teen rebellion". Particularly based on song lyrics, Dimitriadis describes how, during the popularization of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and 1990s, a gangster narrative with which this "ready-made tool" was established prevailed. Appropriation, however, is a complex process that cannot be explored primarily through texts. With our data, it is possible to break down this complex process more precisely.

If we look at the "ready-made tool" of the gangster character, then for the young people in our field it is closely interwoven with stories of successful self-assertion in which criminal action can play a role. The success just described, which can manifest itself, among other things, in the wearing of exclusive brand-name clothing, is framed in a special way because it is seen as a symbol that someone—by whatever means—can assert himself and overcome resistance. Gangsta rappers appear as highly empowered actors who can act cleverly to obtain large sums of money. For example, the rapper Xatar is repeatedly named by the young people as someone who can authentically talk about crime. This is also the case with Bari (19 years old), who recounts the following about Xatar:

> *This one is definitely real too. But the old things are better, Bari points out. Meanwhile, he [Xatar] has become a real entrepreneur, Bari explains. I should think about it: he now owns a kebab shop, a record la3bel and all that. He had really made something of himself and really achieved something. But he [Bari] truly celebrated the gold robbery, that was really good. Bari also recommends that I watch an interview of Leeroy with Samy, in which he talks about the gold robbery that he committed together with Xatar. They made 1.8 million euros. That's not like selling a few packs here, Bari comments. Think about it, Bari continues, they dressed up as policemen and one of them hid in a bag, you must come up with that first.*

This excerpt is exemplary for similar descriptions of Xatar in the field. It follows the ethnographer's question about what music Bari likes to listen to. In addition to French rap ("here it looks like at them at home, with all the skyscrapers"), the youth names the rappers O.G ("he's really real") and Xatar. These statements, as well as the reference to Xatar, are closely connected to the imputation of authenticity, which is central to rap in general and which we will discuss in greater detail below. The excerpt also makes it clear how important success is: Xatar has "really made something of himself and really made it". He seems to have become a successful entrepreneur, evidenced by having his own shop and record label. Such attributions, which are characteristic of gangsta rappers ([Baker 2018]()), imply self-assertion and agency, especially against a background of precarious biographical circumstances. Accordingly, Xatar is very successful and can assert himself. Young people appreciate that—but this status also seems to jeopardize his standing as a credible, 'real' gangsta rapper: His "old stuff was better", while now he is "a real entrepreneur". Good rap and entrepreneurship seem to be at odds with each other. Nevertheless, Xatar knows what he is rapping about, since he himself was a criminal, and a relatively big one at that. The gold robbery is described as "really good", so it meets with approval from the young people. It is not rejected by Bari on a moral level but is evaluated as particularly successful ("1.8 million"; "not like selling a few packs," i.e., not like selling just a little bit of drugs) as well as creative and clever ("you'd have to come up with that first"). Xatar appears as a gangsta rapper who is authentic because he 'really' was a criminal, who is also highly empowered and can be credible despite his new role as an "entrepreneur"—as the following quote will underscore. Bari's assessment of Xatar is balancing and not comprehensively positive. But with the attributions that Xatar "really made something of himself and really made it" and that the robbery "was really good", it becomes clear that criminality can be

attractive in the staging of gangsta rap. Xatar functions as a positive projection surface for the youth in the field. This is all the more true since Xatar describes himself as someone who comes from a precarious background and was a refugee (Seeliger 2021, p. 64).

(c)　Stable and 'Authentic' Identity

A central motif for gangsta rap is local attachment. Well-known rappers highlight their financial success and emphasize their social advancement (Smith 2003). However, they maintain references to their origins. In their lyrics and videos, they refer extensively to their origins and the milieu they come from (Rose 1994).

The discrepancy between successful entrepreneurship and precarious origins is also perceived by the young people. Using Xatar as an example, a youth (Hamza, 18 years) reports

> *that Xatar and SSIO live in [luxury district] and only come here to make their videos—because of the high-rise buildings and because it's dirty and all that. I ask him what he thinks about that. "Let t3hem," he answers briefly. After a short pause, he adds that Xatar is also doing some correct stuff. He has this kebab shop, Hamza explains, and after the last shoot he had set up a large table here and all the children were invited to eat from a huge kebab skewer.*

The youth's narrative suggests that the rappers are not seen as members of the neighborhood but as coming from outside. For the imagery of his videos, Xatar uses the socio-spatial environment of the youth ("high-rise buildings"; "dirty"), which stands in stark contrast to his current residential neighborhood. Hamza's short answer to the question about his opinion in this regard apparently does not pay any further attention to this fact, but in the designation of the rappers ("them") the demarcation is additionally reinforced. After a short break, Hamza takes up the topic again by saying that Xatar nevertheless "is also doing correct stuff". With his kebab action, Xatar seems to be interested in the neighborhood. He seems to be or to have remained connected to it despite his success. He may only use the neighborhood as a stage for video recordings, but there seems to be a continuing bond. Xatar remains true to himself and his origins, according to this portrayal, by caring for the neighborhood and the children who live there. Success and origin are therefore reconcilable. Keyes (2002, p. 171) also notes this motif, stating: "As they move up the socioeconomic ladder, rap artists generally do not forget their humble beginnings". This is precisely why, Keyes argues, rappers become the heroes of young people, as they simultaneously symbolize success and remain connected to their origins. Despite their social and economic mobility, they appear as role models with whom one shares common ground and with whom one can identify.

(d)　Resistance

We noted at the beginning that "Crime as Pop" irritates the traditional distinction between high and low culture. Crime, such as Xatar's gold robbery, is in a way even celebrated by some youths as proof of the authenticity of gangster portrayals. This kind of crime is not disapproved; the youths do not mention the harm that it may cause but they appreciate the courage and cleverness to which it attests. It takes on a semblance of resistance against disadvantageous, oppressive living conditions, such as those repeatedly associated with gangsta rap (e.g., Lamotte 2014; Riley 2005; Rose 1994).[14] Discriminatory notions of people and places seem reversable in rap and appear transformable into attributes of honor and pride (Bengtsson 2012; Judy 1994); likewise, criminality can become evidence of assertiveness and strength.

But the demonstration of resistance against norms and laws does not always have to refer to 'big' crimes such as robbery, murder, or drug dealing. More minor forms of deviance can also be staged with the help of gangsta rap—in a kind of game that negotiates which norms are valid in a social space and how or whether they are enforced. The following excerpt illustrates this game-like negotiation. It describes a sequence of interactions in the youth center where listening to gangsta rap is prohibited if the songs contain content that can be interpreted as misogynistic or glorifying violence and drugs:

Then the young people who have been sitting on the couch with their backs to the rest of the room turn around and the whole group in the chill corner looks towards the bar with expectant grins on their faces. The music has got a bit louder. I pay closer attention to the lyrics and a few words come up that I immediately classify as not conforming to the rules of the youth club. Then one of the staff members walks towards the young people with determined steps. Halfway there, he says loudly that they should skip it and that this is a deliberate provocation. Turning to Deni, who is apparently connected to the box, he says he exactly saw how Deni turned his head. The young people laugh, and Deni starts the next track.

The situation described in the field protocol is about the music selection in the youth club. Deni (16 years old) is connected to the PA with his smartphone and has already played some gangsta rap tracks. This situation is not unusual for the youth club. However, as the young people turn "towards the bar with expectant grins on their faces," it becomes clear that something unusual is happening. By looking at the bar, the staff of the youth center standing there becomes the center of attention. Obviously, the young people know that something special is happening and now expect a reaction. By turning the music up a little louder than usual and by turning toward the bar, the expressive quality of a 'small' violation of norms becomes clear: The young people are playing a song with illicit content. The ethnographer also notices this norm violation and thus confirms it. The subsequent intervention of the staff member is then consistent and as expected; he explicitly recognizes and articulates the provocation. The violations of norms thematized in gangsta rap are thereby used by the young people to flout or play with norms; they exhibit a certain degree of resistance to the rules set by the staff. At the same time, the non-verbal communication of the young people ("expectant grins"; "laugh") makes it clear that breaking norms can be quite appealing and fun, as theoretically laid out in the concept of "Crime as Pop". In this sense, rap does not have to be 'serious' per se, and for example, point to disadvantage. It can also just be fun (Kelley 2012). Through the provocation that the lyrics trigger in the staff, the chosen track has an appealing effect on the young people. They can test boundaries, undermine rules, put staff members to the test, prove themselves, etc. The playful handling of the deviance conveyed in gangsta rap makes these actions possible.

4. Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this article, official statistics and surveys of crime as well as measurements of the attention paid to pop-cultural stagings of crime represent its most important quantifications. Quantification forms a common point of reference for the cultural perception of crime, and the numbers indicate that crime carries a high degree of social relevance. Statistics on crime prove that it is committed very frequently, and pop-cultural measurements of attention prove the high attraction that depictions of crime experience. From our perspective, a distinction should be made here: On the one hand, there are representations of crime that portray it as something purely negative to be prevented. The concept of "moral panics", for example, refers to such negative attributions. On the other hand, there are more positive or 'alluring,' or at least ambivalent, depictions of crime. We conceptualize "Crime as Pop" as a respective kind of staging that exhibits a particular attractiveness of crime. "Crime as Pop" challenges the purely negative evaluation of crime as 'low culture' and focuses on crime as a phenomenon that receives attention because it is attractive to recipients. This quality is reflected, for example, in the great economic success of gangsta rap and the broad attention it has received internationally. This attention may sometimes be conditioned by stereotypical and discriminatory attributions (Khan 2022), for instance when members of middle-class social milieus assert their distance from a "ghetto" life as the essence of gangsta rap (Kelley 2012; Rose 2008). But there are also numerous connections to gangsta rap when young people engage with and identify with the characters and stories that distinguish gangsta rap. In this article, we have illustrated some of these connections, although further studies are needed to determine the manifold ways in which gangsta rap can be appropriated. This multifaceted appropriation can be

related to "Crime as Pop" in general: It is essentially a phenomenon of appropriation that needs to be elaborated empirically. What pop-cultural, statistical attention measurements point to are ultimately extensive possibilities of connecting to the various representations of crime. They must be researched in detail by focusing on the question of how crime is turned into a phenomenon that 'deserves' and experiences attention and that can be attractive to various audiences. Our contribution provides a small step into this direction.

One possibility we find particularly useful in this context is a narrative approach.[15] Through specific narratives, people can assign meanings to crime that make it attractive. In the case of gangsta rap, they can identify with successful rappers who stage themselves as formerly disadvantaged and discriminated against and who tell of multiple norm violations in their songs, so that they seem to prove that one can be successful despite multiple disadvantages—among other things also by committing crimes. Crime is an authentic and at the same time a staged part of life experiences that one may be proud of and that, even if challenging, do not automatically prevent social and economic upward mobility. One may grow up in a precarious neighborhood but still seem to have opportunities to find a way to climb the social ladder. Deviant behavior can demonstrate a willingness to assert oneself against all odds, which in turn can be emotionally stimulating and yield social status. Benefits can not only stem from 'big' crimes, but also from 'small,' relatively inconspicuous rule-breaking and provocation that young people perform as part of their everyday identity practices. In this sense, "Crime as Pop" makes it clear that pop-cultural phenomena can be harnessed in very different ways. Their appropriation—which quantifications only represent as a numerical entity and thus one-sided—is a complex and contingent process.

Notes

[1]   Official statistics were introduced mainly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when statistical offices were established in Europe, for example, in Prussia in 1805, in France in 1800, in Sweden already in 1756 (Desrosières 2005, p. 21). The starting point of these statistical-administrative efforts lay in the "need to know a nation in order to administer it" (Desrosières 2005, p. 19).

[2]   The exact percentage of offences committed in adolescence depends to a large extent on the exact formulation of the survey questions, the groups surveyed, and the types of offences focused on. However, we can assume that more than 90% of adolescents commit offences that can be considered typical of adolescence (such as theft, drug use, fare evasion, etc.). Muncie (2021, p. 19) therefore speaks of crime as an "everyday part of young people's lives". The vast majority of young people stop committing offences without special interventions, but it must be acknowledged that crime is extremely popular among young people, as the vast majority commit offences.

[3]   According to Tricia Rose (2008), gangsta rap in its current form is essentially a product of measured attention. When new measurement tools were introduced in the early 1990s to track the popularity of songs, the result was an unexpected appeal of relatively 'hard' genres such as gangsta rap, which was then massively promoted by the music industry, for example, on the radio and through videos. In the course of new attention measurements and new media distribution possibilities, gangsta rap became an extensively propagated commodity, so that Rose (2008, p. 23) states: "gangstas, pimps, and hoes are products that promotional firms, working through record companies for corporate conglomerates, placed in high rotation".

[4]   Critical criminologists, in particular, assume that parts of criminological research and the administrative handling of crime follow a moral devaluation. Hester and Eglin (2017, p. 51) speak of a "correctional criminology", since on the basis of a respective devaluation claims are made to change the individual behavior of offenders. The demand for behavioral change implies that the

behavior is considered undesirable. Following this assessment, we can assume that criminal prohibitions determine a behavior not only as illegal, but also as amoral, as part of a 'low culture' (which of course is not illegal as a whole).

5   An important point of reference for our paper lies in the question of how delinquents can become celebrities or heroes (e.g., James and Lane 2020; Kooistra 1990; Penfold-Mounce 2009). Studies related to this question usually refer to Hobsbawm's (1969) analysis of "social bandits" and the question as to why some of these "bandits"—like their prototype Robin Hood—appear to be heroes. Hobsbawm limited the emergence of social bandits to agrarian societies but described the gangster as a kind of successor to the social bandit (Hobsbawm 1969, p. 113). Recent studies relate a celebrity status of delinquents to the present as well. In this regard, James and Lane (2020, p. 8) emphasize the role of escapism and voyeurism, which they cite to explain the creation of criminal heroes. In our view, this explanation is insufficient, as the staging of crime as a pop event, we assume, refers to the complex narrative balances described above. Penfold-Mounce (2009, p. 107) points to the need to connect "the public's resonance with elements of a good story"; Kooistra (1990, p. 219) identifies a kind of central plot in the heroization of delinquency. We follow up on such findings, but we do not aim at tapping the breadth of popular crime stagings as a whole; instead, we take a detailed look at the narrative appropriation of crime depictions by specific recipients.

6   Gangsta rap is a male-dominated music genre. But of course women can also be important gangsta rappers and deal with gender stereotypes, reproduce them, or subvert them (Suess 2021).

7   To name just one example: The US rapper Snoop Dogg claimed gangsters were his inspiration. He wanted to combine the gangster model with a business model (in Baker 2018, p. 227).

8   It therefore seems problematic when Rose (2008, pp. 51–60) notes that the criticism of gangsta rap and its violent lyrics often ignores the fact that rappers come from disadvantaged and discriminatory backgrounds. She argues that social problems are wrongly personalized and decontextualized when rappers are attacked as individuals. This critique of criticism is problematic insofar as this is precisely a core of the narrative used in gangsta rap, namely the reversal of the assumption that rappers or the youth recipients of gangsta rap are passive victims of social circumstances.

9   Following Michael Bamberg (2012), we understand identity as a multidimensional, interactive performance. The communication and negotiation of narratives and forms of narrative self-representation are of central relevance for negotiating identities.

10   The institutions were selected according to the criterion that gangsta rap plays a significant role on site. The relevance was determined through prior consultation with staff and observation of the music actively selected by visitors. In addition, we made sure to contrast institutions in different local contexts.

11   We thank Katharina Bock and Friederike Schmidt, who participated in the data collection and interpretation.

12   Although the categories are grounded in the field, we are aware that with this selection we reproduce, among other things, the male dominance in the sphere of gangsta rap (cf. Suess 2021) as well as in criminological research (cf. Ferrell et al. 2015, p. 23). In the further research process, we will expand the sample, taking into account an intersectional perspective.

13   Capital Bra had dedicated a track to Gucci at first. Later he switched to Adidas.

14   As Hobsbawm (1969) had already described, the type of offense plays an important role in the appreciation of delinquents, which still holds true today (Penfold-Mounce 2009, pp. 97–101). The decisive factor is the symbolic quality attributed to offenses.

15   There are, of course, many options to stage crime and portray offenders. A narrative approach is one among many; its relevance is confirmed by the recent criminological interest in narratives (e.g., Fleetwood et al. 2019).

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