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DissTraktors: Deconstructing YouTube's Emergent Diss Culture and its Music, Economic and Cultural Impact within the Platform

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Music (MA) by Research

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*DissTraktors: Deconstructing YouTube's Emergent Diss Culture and its Music,
Economic and Cultural Impact within the Platform.*

Joel Felix

Thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters by Research

The University of Huddersfield

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Contents

Abstract

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1: <i>In This Paper</i>	1
1.2: <i>Research Questions</i>	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	5
2.1: <i>Money</i>	5
2.2: <i>Music</i>	6
2.3: <i>Masquerade</i>	7
2.4: <i>Further Exploration</i>	8
Chapter 3: History of Diss Tracks	9
3.1: <i>Origins of the Insult</i>	9
3.2: <i>Hip Hop Roots</i>	10
3.3: <i>Virtual Flyers</i>	14
Chapter 4: Methodological Research	23
4.1: <i>Grounded Theory</i>	23
4.2: <i>CMC/DCOE</i>	23
4.3: <i>Object Orientated Approach</i>	25
4.4: <i>Data: Qualitative and Quantitative</i>	25

Chapter 5: Methodology in Practice	26
5.1: Research into Source Material	26
5.2: Analysis of Works	26
5.3: Data Gathering and Handling	27
5.4: Acknowledged Weaknesses in Methodological Approach	28
Chapter 6: Money	30
6.1: SMI Value, and Reaching Audiences	30
6.2: Profiting from YouTube	33
6.3: Money in Diss Culture	37
Chapter 7: Music	43
7.1: Lyrical Markers, and 'Keeping it Real'	43
7.2: Defining Musical Factors	47
7.3: YouTubers in Music; Legitimate or Fake?	52
Chapter 8: Masquerade	59
8.1: This Is Content	59
8.2: Clarification of Diss	62
8.3: Wavering Realities in YouTube	68
Chapter 9: Application of Theory to Diss Tracks	70
9.1: Jake Paul – It's Everyday Bro	71
9.1.1: Money	71
9.1.2: Music	72
9.1.3: Masquerade	75
9.1.4: Summary	76

9.2: <i>KSI – Ares</i>	77
9.2.1: Money	77
9.2.2: Masquerade	78
9.2.3: Music	79
9.2.4: Summary	82
9.3: <i>iDubbbz – Asian Jake Paul</i>	83
9.3.1: Music	83
9.3.2: Money	84
9.3.3: Masquerade	85
9.3.4: Summary	86
Chapter 10: Analysing Audience Reception	87
10.1: <i>Social Comment Warriors: Buzzwords</i>	90
10.2: <i>Social Comment Warriors: Full Comments</i>	95
10.3: <i>Face-to-Face: Interviews with YouTubers</i>	98
10.4: <i>A Summary: Contradictions?</i>	101
Chapter 11: Conclusion	102
11.1: <i>The Body of YouTube Diss: Money, Music, Masquerade</i>	102
11.2: <i>A Mixed Audience</i>	105
11.3: <i>Future Implications</i>	106
11.4: <i>A Final Review: A Past Impactful Opportunity</i>	109
References	

Abstract

The social media platform YouTube has become central in the consumption of content by the public, outperforming 'all cable networks in terms of reaching audiences 18-49 years old in the United States' (The Nielsen Company, in Xiao et al, 2018, p. 188). The platform has allowed for independent artists to make careers from across a wide range of genres, 'transforming how [the] celebrity is defined' (Singh, 2016, p. 209). In 2017, YouTube saw an influx of content creators producing music to insult other influencers on the platform despite having little musical background, leaving audiences intrigued and questioning their motives. This paper investigates the trend's popularity, firstly exploring the history of diss from the early literature of flyting, to more modernized hip hop offshoots on the web 2.0 platform YouTube. This paper highlights three key concepts that form the backbone of the trend: money, music and dramatic materials otherwise known as 'masquerade'. This paper applies the findings in each of these areas to three tracks by influential online personalities who helped further the trend. Having explored these concepts, an audience view is explored to further contextualise the trend's rise in popularity. This includes the use of data tools to extract words and sentences from the YouTube comments section, as well as one-to-one interviews with smaller content creators who engaged as audience participants in the trend. With the findings gathered from the main study of the trend and the study into audience reception of the overall culture, a summary of YouTube diss track is formed. These findings indicate that whilst the artists capitalised on marketing techniques that arose from diss track culture such as 'view loops', the content of the view loop material in the form of diss tracks is one that probably won't see as much success as its peak in 2017. Regardless, the investigation into the trend provides a learning opportunity from the content creators and their teams, and one that should be further explored with the changing landscape of online platforms such as YouTube.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Hip hop has long been a platform for which artists can provide 'social knowledge and social reality.... through a variety speech genres' (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 43). It has also operated as a platform for artists to demonstrate bravado and intimidation. In recent years this has included big-name artists such as Machine Gun Kelly and Eminem, whose 2018 bout was of importance in mainstream media, with the release of 'Rap Devil' (2018) and 'KILLSHOT' (2018) from the respective parties. This is due to Kelly claiming to be the 'greatest rapper alive' according to Gaspar (2020). However, the idea of diss tracks has extended beyond major artists within the music industry and has now been adopted by a new form of celebrity established within the online realm of YouTube. In an ad-friendly environment where drama sells, content creators on the platform, known as YouTubers, have created an impactful variant of the weaponised use of words in poetry, a culture whose foundations are heavily found as a means of self-expression in the world of rap music.

1.1: In This Paper

This thesis investigates the emergence of diss culture within YouTube and its content creators, analysing its origins from hip hop culture, the rise of interest in more isolated online groups such as Blackpool Grime Media, and later its adoption in the wider YouTube community. To understand the economic values, cultural and musical importance, concepts that helped to form the emergent musical culture are explored. For this paper, the focus has been divided into three key areas of interest:

Money: examining the financial motivations and impact of the Social Media Influencer (SMI) through tools such as Word of Mouth pressure (WOM), target audiences, synergistic relationships, visual aesthetics and virality of content.

Music: exploring concepts such as authenticity and musical integrity, its applications to both the artists and their work, musical aesthetics, devices, and ideas such as cultural currency.

Masquerade: investigating the relationships and dynamics between the content creators on the platform, defining drama based on Hardaker's list of impoliteness and other factors mentioned in Pihlaja's work (2012) such as the legitimacy of drama presented to the viewer, and its applications to scenarios featuring YouTubers who have exchanged diss tracks with one another.

Other areas of interest are explored, including the overall cultural divide present in the UK and USA, despite the inherent crossover in western society. This thesis also attempts to understand an audience viewpoint of the culture by examining different comment threads on videos and the viewer interactions. Interview transcriptions have been collated and compared to the ideas found within the comment threads to further enforce or break down certain understandings. This paper concludes by assessing the overall impact of this trend, how each area holds importance to understanding its rising popularity and financial success, whether it is linked directly or indirectly to the tracks themselves, and what that means for both music and entertainment consumption on the platform.

1.2: Research Questions

This paper not only serves as potential exploration for new audiences in understanding the diss culture phenomenon on YouTube, but also to answer questions contributing to its reception in terms of popularity and financial successes. Questions that will be tackled include:

- What are the intentions of the celebrities: is it for financial gain, creating art, popularity, a statement of authority, or some combination of them all?

This question will be explored throughout the paper as we go through the three main criteria titled **Money**, **Music** and **Masquerade**. Each section will apply both academic and online materials to the diss track trend, and then later to a track analysis of three tracks to see the weightings of each segment in their songs. In the chapters **Money** and in **Music**, there is a focus on how monetary incentives play a role in the trend and see whether artists create music as part of a passion or a way to create another money stream. This will mostly be answered by looking at the substance of the material and determining the artists intentions based on external factors. An extension to this question would be, how do YouTubers capitalise on a platform, which is essentially free to view as an audience member? This will look at marketing practices in the online world, again in '**Chapter 6: Money**'.

- To what degree are the celebrities invested musically in their work, and what is their musical/artistic input in the tracks they release?

This serves as an extension of the previous question, but aims to look further into the musical practices, including what the sonic makeup of the songs typically consists of and see the process of the artists engaging with the work. This includes how well the artists are utilising their mentors, producers or co-writers, and whether they are engaged in the music and its history. This will be discussed further in '**Chapter 7: Music**'.

- Is drama necessary, both in video and songs, and if so, how does it serve to benefit the trend?

This question will look at why diss tracks are a popular form as opposed to other rap songs which use topics of interest to the artist. Tackled primarily in '**Chapter 8: Masquerade**', drama will be defined based on Hardaker's list of impoliteness (in Pihlaja, 2012, p. 30) and then applied to the music, and to the external factors leading to the development of these tracks. The classification of drama will address whether the content real, or whether the drama involved in the culture is falsified to create a different form of reality entertainment.

- What characterises the audience reception of both artists and the music?

At the end of the paper, the audience perspective will be considered as an important contributing factor, as the dynamics of YouTube will be highlighted as dependent on the audience early on in this paper. Understanding the audience perception will be important in understanding how the trend became of public interest.

- Why have diss tracks become a popular trend on YouTube?

This question serves as the main basis of the paper, acting as a foundation for the previous questions and aiming to unify the paper by explaining why this trend has emerged. This will be explored throughout as each aspect of the trend explains a section of the diss culture and its importance, before summarising the popularity in the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The amount of research on YouTube, its practices and subcultures present on the platform is one that is steadily growing. It is becoming a key area of study, especially since YouTube 'has become a substitute for television' (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). As YouTube is a wide cross-cultural platform with a variety of different media genres, it is important to narrow the scope of necessary literature. As a result, the structural framework of '**Music, Media and Masquerade**' presented in '**Chapter 1.1: In This Paper**' is utilised to see past relevant research.

2.1: Money

In understanding YouTube as a functioning commercial vehicle, researchers have delved into the profitability the platform brings. Two important areas arise, including ad revenue on video material and the potential of influencers as marketing devices. Kartceva (2018) notes that YouTube serves as a 'platform where any individual can upload content, build a personal brand and turn [Their] YouTube channel into a working place' (p. 10 - 11). Equally, YouTubers may be considered less a brand developer and more of a 'commodity celebrity' (Cocker and Cronis, 2017, p. 457). Marketing tactics have been explored and applied to social media platforms such as YouTube, with concepts such as word of mouth and seeding strategies discussed (Mohr, 2014, p. 43). As observed, 'social media has led online user-generated content to become a prevalent consumer practice' (Audrezet, 2018, p. 557). These practices are further contextualised and applied to YouTube's diss culture in '**Chapter 6: Money**'.

2.2: Music

Whilst research has been conducted on YouTube's music scene, alongside other streaming services such as Spotify, the spectrum of research is varied and explores music as a wider concept, as opposed to specific trends. For example, research has been conducted on YouTube's reception of content, with music accounting for as much as 38.4% of total traffic (Liikanen and Salovaaram 2015, p. 108). However, Liikanen and Salovaaram's focus moves towards mainstream music streamed via the platform, as opposed to the impact of an independent artist utilising the tools provided on YouTube.

Online videos/articles do explore some discussion about independent YouTube music. One example includes Mench's breakdown of Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' as an 'extremely calculated way to drum up internet controversy' (2017) but fails to explore much further musically. YouTuber Trap Lore Ross contextualises one artist of the trend KSI, noting that his contributions with reputable artist Sway DaSafo was KSI's 'first legitimate collaboration' (04:53 - 04:59). However, the previous observation looks further into the context of KSI's music career and less on the musical content.

With little research into the specific YouTube diss trend, parallels are drawn from the mainstream equivalent of hip hop and its history that led to this online celebrity variant of rap. Multiple authors reiterate about the lyrical importance of 'keeping it real' (in Kruse, 2016, p. 54), and so different modes of authenticity such as First-, Second- and Third-Person Authenticity (Moore 2002) can be used to explore the lyrical content of YouTube's diss culture. The effect of musical devices found in hip hop have been investigated, including the use of beat switches where the 'beauty of the new musical material is dramatically enhanced by the ugliness that preceded it' (in Shannon, 2019, 01:28 - 01:35). Further musical observations are contextualised in **'Chapter 7: Music'**.

2.3: Masquerade

One of the more researched areas of YouTube - second to the monetary possibilities - is the interactions on the platform between content creators and the audience members. This can vary from 'positive occurrences such as face-to-face meetings, to 'The YouTube drama' - disagreements and conflicts that arise between users, resulting in mutual "video-fights" (Rotman and Preece, 2014, p. 328). In investigating drama found in YouTube diss tracks, frameworks such as Hardaker's list of impoliteness (Pihlaja, 2012, p. 30) help to contextualise the seriousness of the threats and disses in the song content (further explored in **'Chapter 8: Masquerade'**). In addition to the conflicts that arise from the YouTube drama, narratives develop and become interesting stories for the audience to consume. This is emphasised as important by Cocker and Cronis (2017), who highlight the importance of narratives within videos on the platform, as a tool for 'social reinvention' (p. 464). These observations are also explored and contextualised in **'Chapter 8: Masquerade'**.

2.4: Further Exploration

Researching YouTube's background can provide relevant information to contextualise why content creators engage in the diss trend. For example, Himma-Kadakas et al. note the varied works of European performers such as KSI and W2S covering a range of areas such as lifestyle and gaming, in addition to music (2018, p. 62). These findings show the readiness of YouTubers engaging in cross-cultural practices as they embrace a wider range of genres. This can indicate why YouTubers may readily engage in music making, despite their lack of experience.

However, the research behind Himma-Kadakas et al.'s paper revealed a lack of specific academic sources commenting on YouTube's diss culture and/or related practices. Instead, most sources focus on other aspects of YouTube and attempt to understand the platform as a wider social networking construct.

What has been previously researched is useful for providing context to this paper's area of focus, but there is little academic research on this specific area of independent music on the platform with reference to diss track culture. As a result, this paper serves as a benchmark for future investigations in diss culture on the platform, providing a contextualised understanding of the trend.

Chapter 3: History of Diss Tracks

Before exploring the facets that typify diss track culture on YouTube, it is important to acknowledge the historical timeline that shaped the culture into its current form. This includes early uses of insult as creative entertainment, its adoption into more contemporary forms, and how those contemporary forms transitioned into an easily accessible platform.

3.1: Origins of the Insult

Before its conceptualisation in current day online media, diss tracks have existed in other forms of art. One of the oldest traditions of using insult as an artform was 'flyting', which according to The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics, is a Middle Scots word from the verb (flyte) meaning 'to scold, quarrel, vituperate' and at the Stuart Courts 'came to mean a contest in verse between two poets in which they insulted each other employing as much metrical expertise, wit...' (2012, p. 493). According to Bawcutt, 'in early literature, there is plenty of evidence that the power to hurt was regarded as an important function of poetry' and that examples of these 'taunting verses survive in sagas, the poetic Edda and Saxo Grammaticus' (1983, p. 5). One notable example of this poetic taunt from the poetic Edda is 'Ægisdrekka, eða Lokasenna, eða Lokaglepsa', otherwise known as 'The Flyting of Loki', where the Norse gods in Norse Mythology flyte with Loki. In the poem, Loki accuses the gods of deeds such as sexual misconduct and sorcery. We can see this in one verse where Loki insults Tyr.

40. Be Silent, Tý;
To thy wife it happened
To have a son by me.
Nor rag nor penny ever
Hadst thou, poor wretch!
For this injury.

(1866, p. 153)

In this verse, Loki insults the fellow god for his wife bearing Loki's child, with Tyr receiving barely any compensation for his losses (not only does this refer to his wife having birthed Loki's son, this also serves as an attack on Tyr who sacrificed his hand to a great wolf known as Fenrir). Whilst this stanza is important in its wording, the musicality is of equal importance, adopting an Old Norse alliterative metre known as ljóðaháttur.

Over the past century, this form of insult moved to more contemporary forms such as rock, pop and more prevalently, hip hop, which has 'emerged as a cultural, social, and political force, constituted and instantiated through language style, often illustrated in the rap itself' (Morgan, 2001, p. 187).

3.2: Hip Hop Roots

Carrying cultural meaning with the messages given in the song content, hip hop 'has developed from an African American street culture into a globally acknowledged form of youth-cultural expression' (Androutsopoulos, 2007, p. 3). Beyond its musical importance, with aspects such as 'ruptures in flow from the DJ scratching a record' (Kruse, 2016, p. 55), language within hip hop plays a key role in the assimilation of audience listening. Morgan (2001) notes that hip hop is 'constructed around the exploitation and subversion... of language', citing several tenets of language as examples:

All sounds and objects have specific meanings in culture;
All languages have system;
All leaks in grammar can be exploited;
A society's reference system or indexicality is often political;
Meaning is co-constructed and co-authored

(Morgan, 2001, p. 190).

Morgan also writes of how hip hop and its performers became something the urban youth can rely on for representation, honesty, and leadership (p. 187), having 'done more to crystallize a young, urban African American identity than any other historic and political change since the late 1970's' (p. 189). A defining example for youth in the late 1980's was rap group N.W.A's 'Fuck tha Police' (1988), a protest song which discussed the troubles of racial profiling and police brutality. One of the members, Ice Cube, opened the song with his view on police presence within urban areas such as Compton:

*A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown
And not the other color, so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority*

The song as a whole serves to represent N.W.A's 'unfortunate reality' (Green, 2018, p. 10), but also one of an African American's life in an impoverished area. Green further explores this in 'The Rhetoric of NWA's "Fuck Tha Police"':

N.W.A. had the intentions of raising awareness of systematic injustice with cops and the justice systems, informing people of the predetermined life created by racism toward the African-American community within Compton, and finally to reorient feelings towards cops/judges/black urban youth (Green, 2018, p. 9).

Being an artform where music, language and social settings are intertwined, diss tracks in application have served as a form of communication between other parties, where artists boast about being the better rapper. In an interview with Goldstein, rap artist Kool Moe Dee, who gained prominence in the 1980s, explained why rapping is competitive:

Rap is basically an egocentric art... anytime you have music made by teenagers where the whole idea is to appeal to your peers or girls, then you're gonna have an awful lot of rivalries. Rap isn't very far removed from the street. And on the street, one of the ways you survive is by getting recognition and respect. So if you can get the guys to laugh and get the girls' attention, then you got it made (Kool Moe Dee, in Goldstein, 1987).

Moe Dee was involved in feuds with other artists, most notably with L.L. Cool J., whom he claimed was disrespectful to other artists by claiming that 'he's the (king) of rap' (1987). As a result, a string of tracks targeting each other were released over a four-year span, with Cool J.'s last track in the series titled 'Mama Said Knock You Out' (1991). The nature of the feud between the two artists reinforces Moe Dee's point on rap being an egocentric artform, with lyrics designed to put the other artist down. This can be seen in 'Mama Said Knock You Out' with the following lyric.

*That you know I had beef with
Why do you riff with me? The maniac psycho
And when I pull out my jammy get ready 'cause it might go blaow
How ya like me now?*

This verse reinforces both the egocentric and problematic nature of hip hop as L.L. Cool J. threatens to use guns against those who write him off as insignificant. The lyric 'How ya like me now?' refers to Cool Moe Dee's diss track 'How Ya Like Me Now' (1987) and serves to recognise his competition, whilst getting back at him. Moe Dee responded to this diss track with the last song in the series 'Death Blow' (1991), stringing a series of insults at Cool J.

*Here's some mouthwash, G
Your mouth smells like my jockstrap,
C-A-U-S-E you're riding me
T-O-D-D, junior Moe Dee*

Here, Moe Dee uses sexual language as a metaphor to imply Cool J. idolises him and was copying his style, suggesting that he is actually a miniature Moe Dee. 'You're riding me' also alludes to groupies in rock band culture and could therefore suggest that he views Cool J. as insignificant. This feud between Moe Dee and Cool J. has been cited as one of the earlier series of diss tracks in hip hop history, according to former N.W.A member Ice Cube in an interview with Seth Myers, saying it was one that 'went to big heights' (2017, 3:15).

Ice Cube was also known to have one of the more documented bouts between his former group N.W.A, documented in the biopic 'Straight Outta Compton' (2015). Ice Cube released 'No Vaseline' on his album 'Death Certificate' (1991) as a response to various references of betrayal in N.W.A's music, such as 'Real Niggaz' (1990). Dr. Dre calls upon American history to illustrate Ice Cube as a traitor by referring to the U.S Revolution with the following lyric:

*We started out with too much cargo,
So I'm glad we got rid of Benedict Arnold*

Similar to the feud with Moe Dee and Cool J., Ice Cube's response serves to raise himself above N.W.A, targeting the rap group as a whole before insulting each of his former colleagues in N.W.A.

*First you was down with the AK
And now I see you on a video with Michel'le
Looking like straight Bozos
I saw it coming, that's why I went solo*

Much like the previous examples, Ice Cube reinforces the image of rap being an egocentric artform by putting the members of N.W.A down. This is achieved by comparing their gangster roots to where they are now, with Ice Cube implying they sold out to a mainstream audience. Whilst these lyrics feature egocentric elements, Ice Cube achieves something more as the song also serves to be his account of the events leading to his departure from N.W.A. The line 'I saw it coming, that's why I went solo' explores Ice Cube's intentions as an artist, which he communicates to the listener and to his rap group. This transparency is considered important, especially within the culture of hip hop, where artists' lyrics are part of 'keeping it real' (in Kruse, 2016, p. 54), an idea that is further explored in **'Chapter 7: Music'**.

3.3: Virtual Flyers

Whilst diss tracks have continued in a mainstream format, the progression and development of their online presence has emerged in parallel, with separate sub-cultures of the trend cultivating in different environments.

The importance of YouTube is highlighted by O'Neill as a tool which has 'become part of everyday activity and carries considerable cultural currency' (2014, p. 1). For some, it has served as alternative entertainment, with Cunningham & Craig noting 'as for teenagers, YouTube has become a substitute for television' (In Himma-Kadakas et al, 2018, p. 1). O'Neill also highlights the platform's ability to 'simultaneously erase and also proliferate or hybridize earlier forms and practices into something novel or unprecedented' (2014, p. 6). This proliferation, when applied to the nature of diss track culture, can be seen in the likes of Independent YouTube channels, with one popular example being Epic Rap Battles of History. Epic Rap Battles of History is a YouTube channel created by online personalities Epic Lloyd and Nice Peter, whose content focuses on a comical approach of diss tracks where 'historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Ben Franklin and William Shakespeare' will face off against each other in a rap battle format (Humphrey, 2011). Humphrey attributes their success to not just the 'blending of wit with what-

the-hell, but the interaction the creators have built with their audience' (2011). This is further illustrated by Nice Peter, who explains the freedom of control with his content.

We have no studio executive telling us what is funny, no advertisers threatening to pull toothpaste ads if we make gay jokes about Dumbledore. We say and do and make whatever we want, because we only answer to our audience and we have a pretty solid relationship with them. (Nice Peter, in Humphrey, 2011)



Figure 1: Screenshot of Epic Rap Battles of History 'Rasputin vs Stalin', indicating the flexibility of their content (2013).

This self-certifying accountancy allows the creators of Epic Rap Battles of History to develop the content that they want to create for their audience, despite being on a platform that is designed to be ad-friendly. In part, this is due to the era of YouTube that their content was made in, where video monetization and uptime on the platform was determined through audience reporting of content, as opposed to the algorithmic approach YouTube uses today. Equally, YouTube's earlier policies were designed to tackle piracy as opposed to offensive content, as it was 'far too easy to watch anything and everything on YouTube (Alexander, 2019). However, policy changes and other impacts on revenue through YouTube will be explored further in **'Chapter 6: Money'** and **'Chapter 11.3: Future Implications'**.

Of recent notable interest was the rising popularity of a certain YouTube channel which fostered talent from UK's Blackpool youth. Blackpool Grime Media (BGMedia) is a channel that gained significant traction over the course of 2016 - 2017. Artists such as Afghan Dan, Sophie Aspin and Little T took to performing freestyles, known as "sends" where artists use another as subject matter to insult and provoke a response (usually those involved with Blackpool and BGMedia). Whilst garnering popularity with viewership numbers in the thousands, commentaries from YouTubers including Memeulous and WillNE brought the culture into the spotlight with videos such as 'The Next UK Rap Sensation - Little T' (2016) and 'Worlds Cringiest Kids Make Grime' (2016).

Whilst introducing this content to a new audience online, adopting a comical stance with the commentaries using responses such as 'you're bloody right that's a bit harsh' (WillNE, 2016, 0:26), these videos also highlighted the extreme comments made in these sends. Artists including Dylan Brewer and Little T amongst others within BGMedia were known to use phrases such as 'I'm gonna rape your little sister' (in WillNE, 2016, 00:19) and 'I run to the ISIS and blow them dead' (2016, 3:24). As such, major news companies reported on the trend, including the *BBC* with their video 'Gangin' in Blackpool' (2019). Black highlighted this violent aspect, saying 'if the bars are to be believed then Blackpool's 12-year-olds are way more into guns, robbery and violence than we'd ever imagined' (2016).



Figure 2: Little T in 'Road Rage', which features his renown use of controversial lyrics (2016).

Noisey, a channel owned by media network Vice, released two documentaries on the localised Blackpool diss culture. The first of these documentaries titled 'NOISEY Blackpool: The Controversial Rise of Blackpool Grime' (2016) further explored the controversial lyrics of the Blackpool youth's sends, hosted by media personality Poet. The first artist from the platform interviewed, Afghan Dan, was questioned about the nature of the lyrics adopted by those on BGMedia. Afghan Dan was concerned about the extreme nature of what was being said by others, noting that 'the content of what they're saying, end of the line, is just explicit' (07:36 - 07:40). Later in the documentary, Little T, a young artist who had not shied away from controversial comments or racial slurs in his sends, was questioned on his use of language. In his response, he explained that he believed nothing would come from his use of words, saying 'it's just us, no-one's gonna view it' (10:50 - 10:52) and 'I thought there was like no consequences to it' (11:07 - 11:12). Ultimately, the backlash has seen a departure from the use extreme language, with artists such as Little T stating their intent to not use such words (11:15 - 11:20).

Whilst initially criticised for the dangerous use of language, the shock factor of the lyrical content maintains an import role for those involved in BGMedia (albeit less extreme than the threatening language previously discussed). Artists such as Sophie Aspin employ vulgar lyrics to play on the shock factor of the music, with an example including her send on Little T titled 'Run Outta Bars' (2017).

So I'll get you in the back of a van and force you to go finger your nan

Another artist that also utilises shocking language on the channel is Dylan Brewer, who uses the following in a send against artists Afghan Dan:

*He's getting all stressed, you know what it is
Danny Martin was touching a kid*

As we can see from the example lyrics, sexually charged and other vulgar statements serve to insult other artists on the channel, whether it is an insult about incestual relationships or accusing another artist of paedophilia. However, most of these claims appear baseless, and play into the tradition of rap being an 'egocentric art' by putting others down and ruining their credibility.

Despite the varying degrees of extreme lyrics found in BGMedia sends, Blackpool rap is more than just a means to create controversy. For some, creating a vibrant scene and putting Blackpool on the map takes a greater priority, with Afghan Dan noting 'we've built something out of nothing' (in Simpson, 2017). *The Guardian* also highlighted the emergence of such trends has provided a voice, as 'music provides a rare platform for disenfranchised youth, desperate to be more than reality TV fodder' (2016). For the artists, it opened-up opportunities, as presented in 'Noisey Blackpool 2: One Year On' (2017) where artists Little T and Sophie Aspin performed a sold-out show to 300 audience members.

Whilst 2016 saw the beginning of diss track culture cementing itself as a serious artform, as opposed to parodic entertainment such as Epic Rap Battles of History, 2017 saw a major development in both the production and reception of the content. Big YouTube names had been toying with the concept in the lead up to the sudden burst of interest within the YouTube mainstream, such as American YouTubers including RiceGum. However, it was American YouTuber Jake Paul and his song 'It's Everyday Bro' (2017) that provoked greater interest and adoption of the culture on a wider scale. According to Jake Paul's vlog 'You won't believe what we did...' (2017), the intention for the song was to record it and make a music video in one day. The song not only promoted the development of his influencer group Team 10 and his own clothing brand, but also targeted personalities such as Paul's ex-girlfriend Alissa Violet and top independent YouTuber Pewdiepie, as well as targeting other influencer groups, Magcon and Digitour. This track was quickly interpolated by YouTuber RiceGum, who made his own diss track as a response to Jake Paul, titled 'It's Every Night Sis'. This track attacked Jake Paul over the release of his track, featuring a verse from Paul's ex Alissa Violet. Both releases gained high viewership numbers (as of November 13th 2020, they have both separately gained between 175-255 million views according to their YouTube pages) and continued to be interpolated by other artists, leading to a rise in diss track culture via the constant interactions. As mentioned by YouTuber Zerkaa (2017,10:06) this creates a narrative view loop where audience members need to watch the other diss tracks to understand the complete story.

This form of criticising fellow YouTubers soon became popular with other users on the platform. As noted by content creator WillNE when talking about YouTube trends in 2017 'you can look a bit airy and bang out random vlogs, or you become a rap artist' (2017, 1:54 - 2:01). Popular tracks were primarily made by YouTube celebrities with a large following and a hand in music making, but also from non-musicians who used diss tracks as a platform for comedy and parody. An example of such track was produced by YouTuber iDubbbzTV, who released a track on RiceGum, having admitted a lack of experience as a musician (in Boyinaband, 2017, 01:06 - 01:28). However, in reference to producing his Content Cop series, in which

his diss track on RiceGum featured, iDubbbzTV stated 'it was fun to be creative' (in H3H3, 2017, 02:25). This can be seen in his development of non-traditional lyric writing, which features aspects counter to egocentric ideals seen in hip hops roots.

I wanna be gay

'Cause you're fucked and I wanna savour it

Whilst presenting an egotistical element of wanting to savour his rival's downfall, the choice of the opening lyric 'I wanna be gay' is one that is unusual in what was historically a hetero-rooted artform. This idea will be explored later in **'Chapter 7: Music'**. However, iDubbbz also uses lyrics that arguably border on being culturally offensive, targeting RiceGums race as well as his lifestyle. Despite this, the lyrics in nature are less violent than that of BGMedia. Further observations are made later on in this paper, primarily in **'Chapter 8: Masquerade'**.

You're like Kanye, without the talent

Like Jackie Chan, but a little faggot

Like Soulja Boy but...

Actually, yeah, you're exactly like Soulja Boy

Mirroring this US trend, the UK saw a spike of interest in diss culture around August of 2017. Various sources attribute this to British YouTuber KSI leaving UK content creation group Sidemen, and as a result, 'several diss tracks were released from both sides' (Dodgson, 2019). This is evidenced by data from Google trends, which shows a spike around the period of the 7th of August. Here, Sidemen member, Behzinga, released the first of a series of diss tracks against KSI titled 'Drama' (2017).

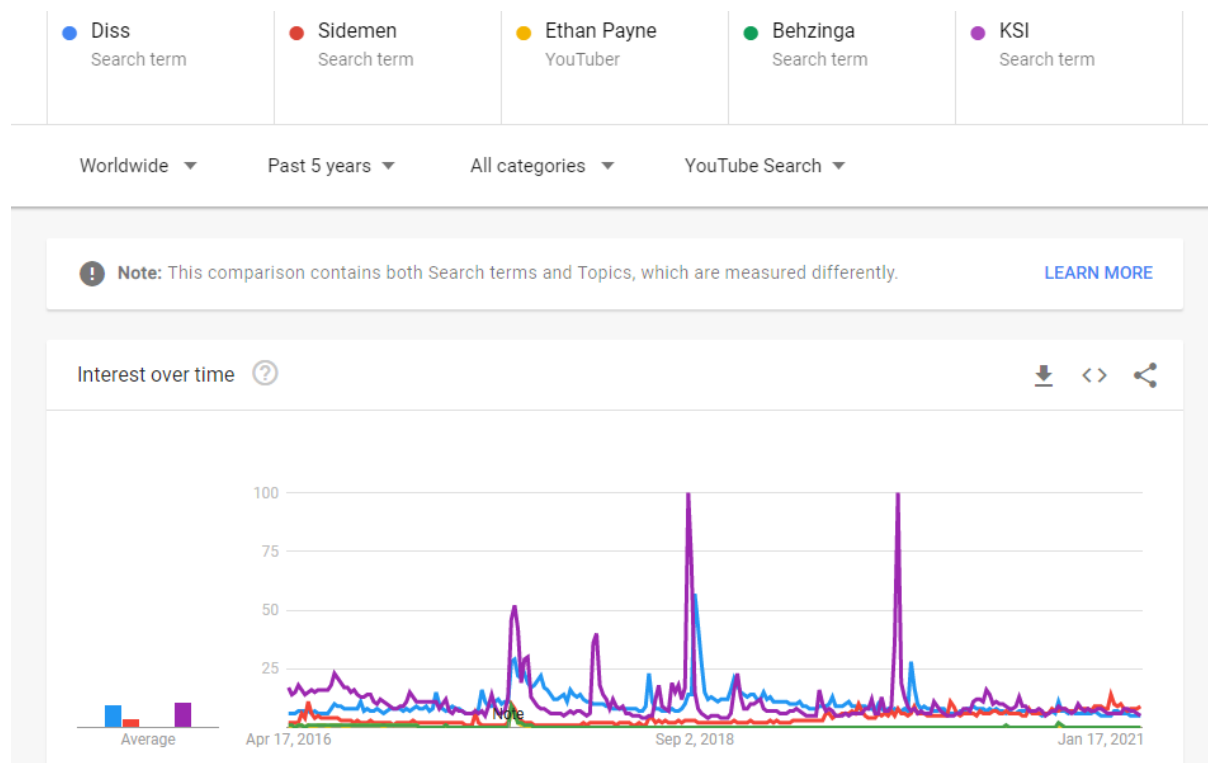


Figure 3: Graph showing the correlation of diss tracks created between KSI and the Sidemen.

The series of Sidemen diss tracks, alongside other larger channels that participated in the wider YouTube diss track culture, saw a departure from BGMedia's vulgar, and arguably unnecessary, use of extreme language. Instead, the artists' focus moves onto genuine criticisms of the recipients of the diss track. This can be observed with Behzinga's use of language in 'Drama', where he claims how outdated and bad KSI's channel is.

*You had my channels on your shoulders
Your channel's shit, washed up, you 're the oldest*

Since the trend's popularity in 2017, diss tracks have been made as a means of communication during feuds between YouTubers. One example includes a track written by UK YouTuber Randolph titled 'MANCHILD' (2018). The track was made as a response to various criticisms from KSI's brother Deji, who had taken offence to a comment made in a Sidemen video (Keem, 2019, 02:51 - 04:15). One of the comments he responds to is Deji calling him 'KSI's bitch' (2018, 02:19), which he addresses at the end of the diss track.

That's peak, bet you sleep with a night light
Aww man, did I reach too deep?
Getting bodied by me
KSI's bitch, I've been let off the leash, yeesh

This led to a series of diss tracks between Deji and Randolph, which took an unexpected turn, when Deji then targeted his own brother in his diss track titled 'Unforgivable' (2018) for 'choosing friends over family' (2020, 00:11 - 00:14). Here, Deji voices his concerns publicly with his brother, complaining about his approach with conflict management.

Like, whoa! (Whoa)
How could you block your bro? (Bro)
Even blocked your mum and dad too?
How could you be so low? (No way)

This puts forth an interesting argument about the extent that these content creators use diss tracks as a medium for conversation, and is one further explored in **'Chapter 8: Masquerade'**. Since the argument between Deji and his brother KSI, diss tracks appear as part of smaller narratives between other creators, in comparison to the trends wider use as a main narrative device in 2017.

Chapter 4: Methodological Research

As there are many facets of the diss track culture on YouTube, including its cultural and economic weight, an exploration into different methodological practices have been considered which have importance to the research intentions of this project.

4.1: Grounded Theory

Primarily this paper has adopted the grounded theory approach presented by Strauss and Corbin by 'generating theory and doing social research [as] two parts of the same process' (1994, p. 273). This research style seemed suitable with data collection of both audience's and artists' opinions influencing the outcome of the studies. Over the research period, the questions and aims of the project had developed, particularly when analysing the artists own perception of where they sit in their own culture. This ties into aspects of authenticity as a legitimizing tool for the self, noted by Moore (2002, p. 209) which will be explored **'Chapter 7:Music'**. This was a beneficial approach to research which is 'easily adapted by its originators and their students to studies of a diverse phenomena' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 275). This is of particular use as multiple approaches to data collection were required, which 'grounded theorists can utilize quantitative data or combine qualitative and quantitative techniques of analysis' (1994, p. 274).

4.2: CMC/DCOE

Whilst the research investigates an economic side of creating diss tracks on YouTube, a cultural aspect is also explored in understanding diss tracks as an artform, and the arising communications between the artists as a side product. Therefore, it is important to consider the ethnographic implications of the project as the participants' viewpoints are explored (both content creator and audience member). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Cyber Ethnography

apply to this research, particularly when exploring audience viewpoints which are presented in '**Chapter 10: Audience Reception**'. Waldron also highlights the benefits of the ethnographic research through CMC, as cyber research is conducted as hidden observers, therefore leading to a more natural engagement of conversations and ideas presented (2013, p. 95). Furthermore, tying into Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach, is a Discourse Centred Online Ethnography (DCOE) which is key when taking into consideration the participants awareness of their practices, particularly with music making. DCOE primarily focuses on 'ethnographic insights as a backdrop to the selection, analysis, and interpretation of log data, in order to illuminate relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices' (Androutsopoulos, 2008). Androutsopoulos explains the value of a DCOE approach on the internet 'not only as a research tool but also as a conceptual and methodological bridge to other research traditions' (2008). With reference to this research, DCOE will be applied in the exploration of data, primarily via interviews or vlogs which the artists have had made public online. The benefits of this practice approach are explored by Pihlaja in the following quotation.

First, it provides the researcher, through observation, with the ability to situate analysed videos in a local-historical (or history of interaction within a community) context. The researcher is then aware of the history of interaction between users, giving a perspective on why certain issues may arise within a community. Second, it foregrounds the importance of situated discourse analysis which treats discourse activity as embedded in a particular interactional context that is also changing over time (Pihlaja, 2012, p. 28).

4.3: Object Orientated Approach

An object orientated approach will be applied when discussing the drama and musical elements of the piece in order to understand how behaviours emerge and develop from key ideas. This is important in understanding the culture as Goldberg states 'an object-oriented approach to rap is not about discovering how life or experience is brought to or reflected in a sonic complex but exploring the routes and processes by which a life or experience emerges from or integrates with it' (Goldberg, 2018). This will be examined by exploring the narratives that lead or emerge from the creation of the diss tracks, and the implications they have outside of the music videos. This is most apparent in '**Chapter 8: Masquerade**'.

4.4: Data: Qualitative and Quantitative

Mentioned earlier in the benefits of grounded theory, data analysis will consist of a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Primarily, the focus will be on qualitative data as this paper aims to explore the interpersonal relationships held online between the content creators and the users. Therefore understanding the experiences and settings of both creator and user are key to understanding the psychology of the trend. However, quantitative data will be collected when exploring statistics and will be used to help verify both popularity and monetary gains.

Chapter 5: Methodology in Practice

With the prior reading into methodological practices, I applied these concepts to construct the methodology which served as the foundation of my research, presented in the next section.

5.1: Research into Source Material

I have used a variety of sources to inform my research, using a mixture of secondary sources from academics and the internet. This is important in contextualising the culture and form a background from which to draw information about the new diss culture adopted in YouTube. From the internet, I have been drawing on a variety of sources with different backgrounds, including more informative content from creators such as Trap Lore Ross and the entertainers themselves such as YouTubers Jake Paul and KSI. For individual opinion pieces (vlogs, or 'react' style videos by independents such as PewDiePie), I have scrutinised the sources thoroughly to ensure that all claims are valid, which has been done by cross referencing other source material.

5.2: Analysis of Works

Primary research serves as a key element when delving into the project's research questions. Here, the prior information gathered has been applied to YouTube videos acting as entertainment devices, to explain or elaborate on critical concepts (as opposed to opinion pieces). Then, I applied the findings to three using criteria I developed for each segment explored in this paper (**Money**, **Music**, and **Masquerade**). These tracks were selected to show contrast in culture, ideas and aims of the music; each of these tracks reference other tracks that are similarly related, to show a wider understanding of those involved in the trend.

5.3: Data Gathering and Handling

Data has been collected through a variety of different tools to provide information from different areas. Statistics have been gathered, such as trend data, viewer/subscriber count and projected incomes. Tools such as Google Trends (2014) and Social Blade (2010) were used to help gather this data. However, to understand audience motivations further, I have used a combination of YouTube Data Tools (2015) and ScrapeStorm (2018) to gather audience opinions on the trend. With these, I gathered the whole comment section of a video using YouTube Data Tools primarily, with the exception of videos containing over one million comments; YouTube Data Tools struggles to export such large quantities of data using the website. Therefore I have used ScrapeStorm to gather a smaller sample size of 500 comments, focusing on the most popular comments presented according to YouTube's algorithm.

In all, I have sampled between 3 - 5 videos per focus of trend (as mentioned earlier with the approaches from a money, parody/comical, and musical focus). The comments have been investigated at a micro and meta level (the comments individually, and any shared ideas of the comments across the whole video). To avoid authorial bias, the micro level observations were made by applying a random number generator to a tabular file format of the comments. The number generator used was RANDOM.ORG, which according to their website offers 'true random numbers... from atmospheric noise' (Haahr, 2021). The full collected sample size of each video was used, generating 10 random numbers from the total comment count size. Comments were then selected based on their opinion weight (whether the viewer conveys a coherent opinion relevant to the video). These have been displayed as quotations throughout the paper (additional data is available on request). To achieve the meta level observations, the data has been isolated to the individual comments, using unit scripting to generate a word count and provide weightings to the frequency of words. This was then inputted into word clouds to highlight key words that identify what the audience may associate mostly with the

artists. The selection of words used act as descriptors and carry meaning, having removed general connectors such as 'the' and 'it'.

Furthermore, I conducted interviews following an ethical procedure (consent forms and the possibility of anonymising sources) with smaller content creators who also acted as consumers of the diss trend. This served as a means of getting a verifiable opinion on the topic as well as helping to humanise the people behind the comments section (as comment strands need to be considered warily in case they were created by bots). Each content creator has a varied level of participation in the trends consumption and so provide us with contrasting opinions.

5.4: Acknowledged Weaknesses in Methodological Approach

Before further exploring the cultural makeup and audience reception of YouTube's diss culture, it is important to acknowledge weaknesses in the applied methodology.

The first issue arises in '**Chapter 7: Music**', and later in '**Chapter 9: Application of Theory to Diss Tracks**'. Here, a musical analysis framework is provided which allows for an understanding of the sonic makeup of diss tracks. However, the detail at which I explore the tracks is kept relatively minimal, with a somewhat limited musical vocabulary applied. In understanding the musical aspects of these diss tracks, a more in-depth and rigorous exploration of the sonic material would be beneficial, and is one that may be of interest to other researchers in the field. Despite this, a reason for keeping the musical analysis brief is due to the musical material of the tracks themselves. One could argue that these tracks act more as a practice in music production and therefore are not as rich in musical theory. Furthermore, I have aimed to contextualise diss culture and its societal importance, so musical analysis only serves as part of understanding the trend.

The main issues with the methodology lie within the analysis of audience reception. Problems arise with the selection of comments using a random number generator, as they can lead to either nonsensical comments, or comments that need contextualising as they are part of a larger comment thread. This indeed happened, which is later explored in **'Chapter 10.2: Social Comment Warriors: Full Comments'**, and so comments were shortlisted based on relevance. This introduces another problem, as human bias had entered when selecting relevant comments. This could be countered by further analysing the comments themselves and providing a larger sample of comments to the reader (comment networks which could be explored and illustrated through web tools such as Gephi (2008)). However, this proved to be quite time consuming, and so may be more beneficial as a separate thesis in exploring the audience reception to the trend. Human bias is also a factor in **'Chapter 10.1: Social Comment Warriors: Buzzwords'**, as unit scraping provided general connectors such as 'it' and 'the' as well as repeated variations on words. Providing a full list of data and selection of words considered substantial (with reasoning) would be a solution when investigating comments on a meta level. This, like the musical analysis, may be an interesting area to explore as a separate thesis.

The sample sizes are another part of the methodology that could be improved. With a correct technical understanding of the programs used, the full sample sizes of videos should be obtained. For this thesis, two of the videos with the largest comments sizes (over 1 million) were unable to be fully scraped, and as such featured much smaller sample sizes than the other videos. Furthermore, the list of content creators interviewed could be larger and more varied to get a better understanding of those who knew of the trend. Ideally, this list of content creators would also expand to feature content creators who participated in the creation of diss tracks. Sadly, interviews were unable to be obtained for this paper, and so secondary sources were used to understand the mindset of the artists and their music, such as NME's 'KSI on Logan Paul, boxing, his brother Deji, Justin Bieber, future fights, music and more' (2019).

Chapter 6: Money

Much like popular culture in the offline world, capitalism and consumerism play their part in the online world. As noted by Arthurs, 'YouTube is now characterized as a paradigmatic example of a hybrid commercial environment where user-generated content production is efficiently tied to forms of monetization' (2018, p. 7). As such, 'social media has led online user-generated content to become a prevalent consumer practice' (Audrezet, 2018, p. 557). Arthurs notes that 'from a political economy perspective, the Internet has been described as a "playground and factory" (Scholz, 2012), whereby the leisure activity of users is subsumed to capitalistic accumulation' (2018, p. 7).

6.1: SMI Value, and Reaching Audiences

An important impact of consumption on YouTube is the ability for media stars, or 'social influencers', to generate interest in products, or ideas, which can benefit companies looking to promote themselves. This ideology is observed by Kaplan and Miller, who 'consider social influence as one of the most important factors that influence attitude or opinion formations' (in Xiao et. Al, 2018, p. 193). To establish what contributes to the title of a Social Media Influencer (SMI), Jílková describes the role as 'a person who has built up a lot of followers on a social media platform such as Instagram' (2018, p. 116), and highlights that 'companies are today widely using these people as a marketing tool to reach out to their target audience in an effective way' (p. 115). This manifests as SMI Marketing, which Ferguson et al., define as 'a viral marketing approach that an online personality shapes consumers' attitude through tweets, posts, blogs, or any other formats of communication on social media' (in Xiao et. Al, 2018, p. 189). Mohr explains the impact on this topic in the following:

A hot topic today is viral marketing, which describes the phenomenon by which consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information in the form of emails, YouTube videos, and social media postings. The information is initially sent out deliberately by marketers to stimulate and capitalize on word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviours (Van der Lans et al. 2010) and encourage users to pass it on to other users, creating a potentially exponential growth in the message's visibility and effect. These characteristics parallel the traits of infectious diseases (Mohr, 2014, p. 43).

However, one of the issues presented with viral marketing on a platform such as YouTube is the 'attention economy' of the audience, which according to O'Neill is "characterized by an abundance of information that attains value depending on the attention it generates. Like the Internet more generally, it presents us with 'too much information and too few narratives that can tie it all together' (2014, p. 71). To break through potential barriers presented, Mohr presents four key factors to gaining audience attention:

- (1) content that is easily memorable (Berger and Milkman 2011; Berger and Schwartz 2011; Gladwell 2002; Porter and Golan 2006).
- (2) the structure of the underlying digital social network (Bampo et al. 2008).
- (3) word of mouth pressure, described as the behavioral characteristics of those influenced and willingness to share message (Arndt 1967).
- (4) the seeding strategy, which determines the initial set of targeted consumers (Bampo et al. 2008; Kalish, Mahajan, and Muller 1995; Libai, Muller, and Peres 2005)

(Mohr, 2014, p. 43).

However, in addition to viral marketing techniques, Jílková emphasises the importance of the audience itself, stating 'you must define your online target audience' (2018, p. 116). With regards to social media campaigns, this is considered important, with Arthurs highlighting data from Ofcom, stating 'trends in young people's media use in the United Kingdom can also be gleaned from Ofcom survey data which showed in 2016 that under-24s spent more time online than watching television' (2018, p. 5).

Arthurs also explains that the categories themselves are important in gaining traction with audiences, noting 'some new channels were able to attract a lot of attention with videos in the Comedy, Entertainment, Gaming, how to and style categories having an above-average chance of reaching the top 3%' (2018, p. 3). Himma-Kadakas et al. showed that 'the most evenly spread genres are the original music, gaming, original performance, humour sketch, parody and highlights genres, which are all represented in different groups of our sample' (2018, p. 67).

YouTubers however do not necessarily stick to one confined genre; as highlighted by Himma-Kadakas et al, who highlight that YouTubers KSI and W2S (both of whom participated in the diss culture trend) 'use a combination of the three most represented topics (humour, games and lifestyle) in our sample for their content creation' (2018, p. 67). By extension, as highlighted by Shao, by 'widening their topic scope, they can attract more attention from different virtual communities' (in Himma-Kadakas et al, 2018, p. 67). This can also help to differentiate content creators with a diverse range of content styles, as YouTubers 'remixed discursive genres and technical formats to upload authentic content for self-identifying purposes' (Khan, 2017). As such, YouTubers who may not have significant experience within a set genre may explore new forms of content, with gaming and music being popular examples.

The style of the content can also help to influence its popularity, with Kim (2012) highlighting that 'In a process of professionalization of content creators, including production support from YouTube for vloggers with more than 100,000 subscribers, the amateur aesthetics that characterized YouTube videos in the early days have become institutionalized' (in Arthurs, 2018, p. 8). Cunningham & Craig describe the aesthetics as genre narrative techniques, such as 'standardised YouTuber/vlog aesthetic, incorporating now familiar rapid-fire speech, jumpy and stylised editing, 'insider' jokes, community shout-outs and collaborations' (in Himma-Kadakas et al., 2018, p. 71).

6.2: Profiting from YouTube

One of the appealing prospects of embracing YouTube as a career is the accessibility, and the ability to create professional content for a wide audience. YouTube has been noted as a 'platform where any individual can upload content, build a personal brand and turn [Their] YouTube channel into a working place' (Kartceva, 2018, p. 10 - 11). In addition, the 'lower entry costs for niche works interact with lower distribution costs for popular content' and 'the cultural impact of YouTube depends on balance of these two forces' (George, 2014, p. 1).

The combination of successful targeting and low costs has allowed for such trends as diss culture to emerge. As mentioned, one of the earlier examples of diss culture on the platform emerged in a localised form presented on the channel 'BGMedia'. There are two factors which can be considered as instrumental to the popularity of BGMedia's content. One aspect is the material's content, which in BGMedia's case can be deduced to petty drama and vulgarity, the latter, according to Chideya serves as 'increased to appeal to the tastes of the genre's white audience' (in Armstrong, 2010, p. 343). The other element of success is the accessibility of technologies materials to create music and videos. The quick production times of each video allowed for to be released frequently and for responses to be made rapidly.



Figure 4: Dylan Brewer in 'Afghan Business', which features public backdrops and simple camera work (2016).

The responses vary from diss track creators to satirical commentators such as WillNE. This propelled the popularity through WOM pressure, as well the simplicity of the initial diss content, allowing it to be easily digestible. The effect of the commentator as a valuable asset to draw attention is further emphasised by Kartceva (2018) who mentioned it can serve both the artist's image and music product promotion via 'a reaction video, where YouTuber reacts on video MV or artist live performance' (p. 14).

Whilst the content and promotion techniques serve as paramount to the trend, 'YouTube is "both industry and user-driven" enabled by its political economy (evidenced by its dependence on advertising, promotion of industry content and commercial partnerships)' (in O'Neill, 2014, p. 13). Suhr, Tepper and Hargittai note that music today is 'largely produced, distributed and consumed via digital means' (in Airoidi et. al, 2015, p. 3). Extending on this idea, Oh and Park note that the audience is a key motivator for viewership:

Music-based social networking websites such as YouTube enable users to virally forward music content to other internet users or link the videos to another social network. In doing so, they essentially become the unofficial online marketing team for a respective music artist (Oh and Park, 2012, in Kartceva, 2018, p. 13).

The result of the marketing processes and their impact to generate interest in either the artist or product allow YouTubers to earn revenue as advocates of products. Noted by Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, content creators can 'enjoy the reputation as reliable endorsers' with companies in search for 'appropriate influencers in the social media sphere in hope of finding credible people disseminating their brand's message' (2018, p. 4). Product placement in YouTubers' videos serve to not just be a product in the background of a shot, but as 'embedded into their daily life story' and 'seem explicitly approved by influencers as real consumption choices' (Audrezet et al, 2018, p. 567).

Content creators may focus on this aspect of product promotion, and with the help of a marketing team or via their own tools, become a 'commodity celebrity' which can be 'engineered in such a way that they are represented as a form of sacred authority (Hackley et al., 2012) and consumers even credit the celebrified subject with some believed sense of divinity' (in Cocker and Cronin, 2017, p. 457). In doing so, promotion of products can extend to mainstream markets and to the YouTubers' own product lines by using their reputation to build an empire built on being a reliable and relatable individual.

However, issues arise with relying on the public reputation of a single individual. For some viewers, it may be difficult to engage with the content creator over time. A follower of Louise Pentland, a YouTube based vlogger, noted:

I find it harder to think of YouTubers as “average people sitting in front of the camera” when all of them now seem to be signed up to a major company, some have people doing all the behind the stage work taking away from the realness of their videos (Anonymous, in Cocker and Cronin, 2017, p. 465).

To the audience, being unified with a major company is equivalent to being controlled and can be seen as an opposing force of real representation, as a lack of ‘authenticity’ which is a concept later discussed in **‘Chapter 7: Music’**. If a YouTuber’s credibility and relatability is an issue, this may cause problems with revenue, and so the incentive to relate with the audience is intensified much more. This is noted by Arthurs et al.:

Revenue potential through social media activity, however, remains highly volatile and dependent on one’s capacity to develop a status and exert (real or presumed) ‘influence’ within the relevant community. Likes... views, subscriptions and comments come to represent a proxy for one’s reputation, since vloggers can leverage on this process to seek external outcomes such as sponsorship deals and advertising revenues and, for a few, paid work in the traditional media or the wider promotional ecosystem (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 8 - 9).

These concerns may act as incentives to generate interest in a content creator’s work. With diss track culture, these issues can be circumvented with the interactions between artists, both within and outside their song content, to portray a sense of realism. Leading to a boxing match in 2018, YouTubers Deji and Jake Paul created vlogs during a meeting, where they spoke about the possibility of Deji’s brother KSI fighting Jake Paul. Paul responded by giving Deji boxing gloves in a park, as seen in the two videos ‘FACE TO FACE WITH LOGAN PAUL’S LITTLE BROTHER’ (2018) and ‘I CONFRONTED KSI’S LITTLE BRO IN PERSON!!’ (2018). As mentioned, video reactions can also help to positively reinforce these relations, and ultimately lead to a wider narrative where viewers go from one video to the next. This is what Zerkaa

dubs as 'view loops' (2017, 10:06) to keep interest generated over an extended period. This idea is reinforced by Bendersky et al., who further explain that recommended videos are shaped 'by the collective behaviour of users, since the YouTube recommendation system relates similar videos mainly on the basis of the most frequent co-views' (in Airoldi, 2006, p. 2).

6.3: Money in Diss Culture

The ideas explored thus far can be applied to Jake Paul's track, 'It's Everyday Bro' (2017). In this track, various artists are named as a means to create controversy, including two other famous YouTubers, Pewdiepie and Paul's ex-girlfriend Alissa Violet. Jake Paul's brother, Logan Paul (another successful American based YouTuber), responded to the music video, which in turn led to diss tracks between the brothers such as 'Logang Sucks' and 'The Fall of Jake Paul'. This feeds into the idea of view loops as presented earlier on. In an article on Genius, Mench highlights this as an age-old practice:

Celebrity rivalries—real or imagined—have been used to sell magazines and drive clicks for years, and the Pauls' "beef" seems to be an extension of the same concept, with everyone in their orbit trying to cash in on a trending topic (Mench, 2017).

This idea of creating rivalries, whether genuine or not, has also led to increased exposure with the crossover of audiences, and consequently leads to 'more opportunities to plug brands in their videos, and ultimately more money' (Mench, 2017). As mentioned, YouTube is not only driven by the industry but also by the users' input; increased exposure to larger audiences also provides additional ad revenue from videos on the platform, with an average of '\$2,000 per one million views, meaning the "It's Everyday Bro" video alone has likely netted around \$70,000 before production costs are factored in' (Mench, 2017).

In addition to utilising rivalries to fuel the attention economy on his video, various forms of commodities are promoted in 'It's Everyday Bro', featuring standard luxury items such as Rolex and Lamborghinis, typically found in high-end music videos. Paul also promotes his own merchandise; this is seen in both the music video as he wears his 'Ohio Fried Chicken' clothing (a reference to his own Ohio birth roots) and at the end of the song with the lyric 'I said is 10 with six zeros, Always plug, merch link in bio'. This supports the idea presented by Schwemmer and Ziewiecki in being a reliable endorser as Jake Paul uses recognised, reputable brands which can therefore give him grounds to promote his own merchandise alongside, as an equally reliable commodity.



Figure 5: Jake Paul in 'It's Everyday Bro' highlighting the Lamborghini (Paul, 2017).



Figure 6: Jake Paul in 'It's Everyday Bro', promoting his merchandise (Paul, 2017).

Jake Paul is not the only artist to incorporate luxury commodities into his diss tracks. YouTuber RiceGum has also used expensive products when creating diss tracks, such as 'God Church' (2017) which features Ferraris and a Rolls Royce, and presenting wads of cash on screen, whilst simultaneously bragging about it in the lyrics.

*I was crazy but this ice made me chill out
No 20's, I need blue on my bills*



Figure 7: RiceGum in 'God Church' fanning \$100 bills as a statement of his wealth (Le, 2017).

Other songs that feature such luxuries include 'It's Every Night Sis' which directly interpolates Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' both lyrically and cinematically, featuring a Lamborghini and high-end housing. Another YouTuber who promoted such content is Zack Clayton; in his diss track against musician Danielle Bregoli titled 'How Bout Dat' (2017), shots of him can be seen travelling in Beverly Hills whilst standing on a Rolls Royce.

However, this focus on the monetary aspect of diss tracks seems to be more of a cultural norm within American YouTube diss culture. If we are to observe the UK trend occurring in parallel, the tracks focus more on the lyrical content as opposed to promoting luxury brands. In Miniminter's 'KSI'S LITTLE BROTHER' (2017) the setting is focused on the artist himself, with the backdrop being a generic car park. In Randolph's 'MANCHILD' (2018), a similar approach is adopted, again with focus on the artist and an urban backdrop used as the location setting. These tracks imply the idea of being a 'commodity celebrity' is one that is not of focus within the UK version of YouTube diss culture. Promoting brands is not the sole aim in the UK, instead the controversy and drama which ensues occurs in order cross-promote other audiences to watch their content. The idea of using urban backdrops also helps to combat the idea highlighted by Cocker and Cronin in 'taking away from the realness of their videos' (2017, p. 465) by using environments with which the audience may more readily associate. Overall, the processes used to generate viewership are prioritised in UK diss tracks, as opposed to promoting other brands.



Figure 8: Miniminter in 'KSI'S LITTLE BROTHER', which features public backdrops throughout, with a carpark being of prominent focus (Minter, 2017).

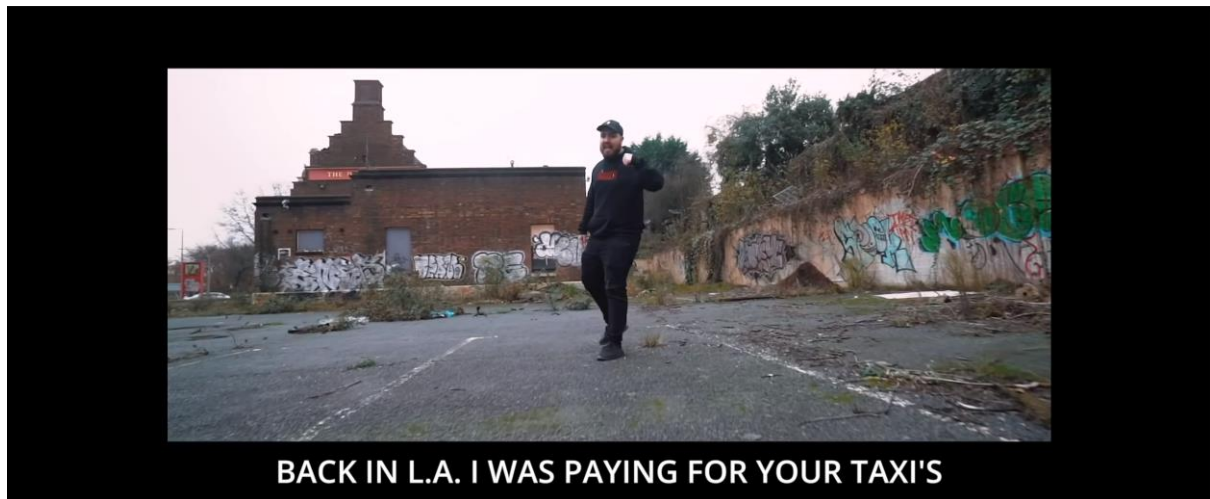


Figure 9: Randolph in 'MANCHILD', shot in a run-down urban area (Shane, 2018).

Some videos, however, ignore both mentioned aesthetics and go for a more artistic approach which neither adopt a relatable or brand friendly style. These videos can be regarded as breaking the norm and are again more focused on the lyrical content and capturing the attention economy through the use of visual memes. One such examples includes iDubbbz's 'Asian Jake Paul' (2017) which features apparently nonsensical moments which tie into a larger narrative related to his audience (therefore, emphasising a connection to his audience through 'in-jokes'). KSI's 'Ares' (2018) features him primarily on a throne in royal gowns, which act as a metaphor for his song content, but doesn't explicitly promote brands or connect with the audience, besides a few shots of himself having breakfast in bed.



Figure 10: iDubbbz in 'Asian Jake Paul', using a meme to unusually start the track (Washburn, 2017).



Figure 11: KSI in 'Ares', wearing royal garments as a metaphor in his track (Olatunji, 2018).

Even if we were to distance ourselves from the tracks made by money-centric artists, the embedding of capitalism within music, and more specifically in YouTube, is something that has been parodied, and seems to form a stereotype of the nature of YouTube and music on the platform. Whilst playing a parody of himself, comedian Liam Williams commented on this in the mockumentary 'Pls Like', mentioning that 'it's almost as if selling brands, and promoting products is all part of the artistry, it's all part of the hustle' (2017, 08:31 - 08:37).

Chapter 7: Music

The internet changes what a music genre is in the twenty first century (Born and Haworth, in Spencer, 2017).

Since it appears that money forms an important part of the trend and its reception, it is also important to verify the integrity of the music. This is best explored by investigating the musical properties held in its roots of hip hop culture, due to the lack of academic research highlighted in **'Chapter 2: Literature Review'**. By understanding musical tropes presented in both historical and contemporary hip hop, and its subgenres, we can see whether artists are attempting to engage critically with their music, or if the music they create is selected as a vehicle for further popularity and revenue. As highlighted in **'Chapter 1: Introduction'**, hip hop serves as a means of representation, honesty, and leadership (Morgan, 2001, p. 187), and an artist engaging with the musical aspects of the trend should demonstrate both respect and honesty in the creation of their music.

7.1: Lyrical Markers, and 'Keeping it Real'

Lyrical content serves to engage ideas which artists wish to discuss with their audience, whether by promoting the latest merchandise release, or to insult various targets of interest. According to Söderman & Folkestad 'rappers often create complex layers of meaning in their rhymes through the use of extended metaphors, signifying, and intertextual references to any number of other sources' (in Kruse, 2016, p. 55).

An area of contention with lyric-writing for a diss track is whether the words are genuinely from the artist or a third-party writer. If the latter is true, artists may use this as a criticism of the talent of other artists not being genuine. As Kruse (2016) states 'there is perhaps no more fundamental and no more contested principle in

hip-hop than keeping it real. Realness (i.e., authenticity) is the ultimate claim for the successful hip-hop artist and fakeness the ultimate diss' (p. 53). Such qualifiers, according to Kruse, include a cultural sense of blackness and as originating from urban areas (stereotypically related with being poor). Despite these qualifiers, Low et al. state that 'being true to oneself and representing one's place and culture are also vital aspects of keeping it real in hip-hop' (in Kruse, 2016, p. 54). Kruse adds to this by noting 'to be a rapper, producer, or DJ in hip-hop is to always be creating unique work' (p. 54).

Authenticity therefore seems to form a key aspect worth exploring, if the YouTube equivalent is to be dissected, musically and lyrically. Authenticity comes with several meanings and connotations, as Keightly notes 'in rock, the term "authentic" designates artists and music that are direct and honest and uncorrupted by commerce, trends, and derivativeness' (in Armstrong, 2004, p. 336). Dinn considers 'the notion of genre is critically important in understanding musical authenticity' but also 'that it is most important to convey personal authenticity' (2012). Moore notes that authenticity 'is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed' (2002, p. 210). Hernandez and Rees further explore this idea, suggesting that for some 'authenticity may also revolve around an awareness of tradition, which can be achieved by using appropriate costumes and lyrics' (in Wu et al., 2016, p. 443).

Abril notes that as a musician, 'the performer and arranger composer or transcriber should be an individual who understands the culture and musical style. Either a cultural bearer or someone with an in-depth understanding' (2006, p. 41). The musician, however, may have different intentions, and so authenticity acts as a semantic to verify that the musician is making music for music's sake, as Moore writes:

It is used to determine the supposed reasons she has for working, whether her primary felt responsibility is to herself, her art, her public, or her bank balance. It is used to bestow integrity, or its lack, on a performer, such that an 'authentic' performer exhibits realism, lack of pretence, or the like (Moore, 2002, p. 211).

The latter point mentioned by Moore about bank balance also serves as a means for some audience members to clarify an artist's integrity, with those who aim for monetary gain being sell outs 'to commercial interests' (Moore, 2002, p. 213).

The importance of being authentic has been debated by scholars. For some 'the declaration that something is authentic makes it noteworthy, attests to its validity, and also can legitimize the person who determines its authenticity' (Yehuda, 2013, p. 151), whereas for others it is a lazily employed term that can 'hinder creativity and arguably limit the popular music canon' (Egan, 2008, p. 324). In application to popular music, it becomes a more difficult concept to verify, as according to Frith, 'pop music itself constructs a sense of realness and thus defines its own aesthetical value' (in Wu, 2016, p. 444). Furthermore, authenticity can be seen as a 'floating signifier' which according to Kruse 'continually changes over time... What we end up with then is the idea that there is no singular authentic in hip-hop, but that asserting to keep it real is still an essential and valued claim' (2016, p. 54).

Ultimately to satisfy claims of authenticity is to satisfy a wider audience perception; as Peterson notes 'instead, an audience confers authenticity on the object—it is a socially agreed-upon construct' (in Armstrong, 2004, p. 338).

In applying the concept of authenticity to both the lyrical content and musical works of YouTubers, it is important to understand Moore's modes of authenticities. These include:

- First Person Authenticity (Authenticity of Expression) - validation in oneself, where an artist/performer conveys "his/ her utterance is one of integrity" (2002, p. 211).
- Second Person Authenticity (Authenticity of Experience) - validation in one's experience of the material, where the "listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them" (p. 218).
- Third Person Authenticity (Authenticity of Execution) - validating community/cultural values, where a performer represents "the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance" (p. 214).

In application to hip hop, first person authenticity carries valuable weight as 'for Eminem, lyrics are the vehicle for expressing self-identity and revealing personal truths' (Armstrong, 2004, p.337). According to Armstrong (2004), 'Eminem cannot be inauthentic because he acknowledges the truth about himself' (p. 343) and as such, verifies the first form of authenticity. More importantly, when selling authenticity to an audience, external verifiers help to cement one's reputation as authentic to a genre; Armstrong applies this to Eminem again with an endorsement from Dr Dre:

Besides Dre producing Eminem, Dre testified on his behalf: "I wasn't worried that people would react against him because he's white. The hardest thugs I know think this white boy is tight" (Kenyatta 57). As Andy Cowan, editor of Hip-Hop Connection, surmises, the endorsement from Dre was key (in Armstrong, 2004, p. 338).

This adds to the verification of the third form of authenticity. These ideas can lead to a strengthening in an audience's relation to the artist, and therefore amplifying their second form authenticity. Regarding the diss track culture on YouTube, this will be investigated in the **'Chapter 9: Audience Perception'**.

7.2: Defining Musical Factors

Whilst authenticity serves as a key element in application to the lyrics and music, we need to be able to further quantify what aspects are considered as authentic in hip hop. As mentioned earlier, the lyrical content serves as an important tool, but equally so is the delivery, whether there is a 'flow' or interruptions to it through chopping up syllables, and even putting breaks in the music itself. This is highlighted by Kruse:

The flow of an instrumental groove or vocalist's lyrics, energy and excitement come from the intermittent ruptures of these flows. Flow and rupture is present when a DJ scratches a record during a rhythmic groove, when a rapper stutters and changes up the timing of their delivery... These ruptures to the music flow are moments of surprise and excitement, the moments that make us scrunch our faces and bob our heads (Kruse, 2016, p. 55).

Interruption to the music is as important as the musical content itself, according to Cole Cuchna of the Dissect podcast. In a video exploring Frank Ocean's use of the 'beat switch', where the music changes dramatically, Cuchna notes that the music may be enhanced, as 'we get order out of chaos, and the understated beauty of the new musical material is dramatically enhanced by the ugliness that preceded it' (in Shannon, 2019, 01:28 - 01:35). Without this device in changing the music and by extension, the pace of the music, 'the beat on its own it would not be as effective' (0:53 - 0:58). As highlighted by Shannon, this is down to an effect known as musical fission, which is described as 'a musically induced affect that shows close links to musical surprise' (01:40 - 01:43), where 'music taps into this very primitive system

we have which identifies emotion on the basis of a violation of expectancy' (01:51 - 01:55). Equally, Cuchna emphasised that the effectiveness of the devices connecting the switch are as important, again in reference to Frank Ocean's 'Nights' (2016). Cuchna states that 'without the middle section, the beat switch would not work' (in Shannon, 2019, 02:27 - 02:31). The importance of the beat switch extends as a narrative device in addition to a musical one, where the switch may infer emotion changes, or shifts in space and time. Cuchna explains this to be 'tell this really expansive story about a single character in a unique and creative way' (04:41 - 04:47), whilst citing other musicians who have adopted this in their music such as Stevie Wonder, Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West.

Devices such as the beat switch, when incorporated into music on YouTube, act as audible signifiers for artists engaging in critical concepts which arise in music. One such song incorporating this is American YouTube Rapper Quadeca, on his track 'Insecure' (2018), which is a diss track aimed at British YouTuber KSI after the latter critiqued him on the 'What's Good' Podcast (2018, 10:15). What makes Quadeca's use of the beat switch important is that whilst he did not produce the two beats, he acted as both the writer and mixing engineer. This is important, as it shows Quadeca engaging with the musical tropes that make up more contemporary forms of rap, as opposed to relying on another individual for making creative choices. Equally, the transition into the beat switch is one that is not jarring to a listener. This demonstrates Quadeca's considerations with mixing the music, and not thinking purely of the lyrical impact, but also acknowledging the wider impact.

In addition to such musical devices employed, the sonic makeup of the musical materials is important when developing on pre-existing styles, and as Moore explains 'particular acts and sonic gestures (of various kinds) made by particular artists are interpreted by an engaged audience as investing authenticity in those acts and gestures' (2002, p. 214). With regards to YouTube diss tracks, if an artist used a genre that was not a derivative of hip hop (i.e., trap, grime) as the base genre for the trend, and instead chose to rap to a classical piece such as Beethoven's 5th, most followers of the trend would likely deem it inauthentic (that is to say, although

it features rap, it isn't a normal diss track that engages with tropes presented in either past or contemporary hip hop). As such, when investigating the musical considerations of the diss track trend, it is important to develop a list of features that appear in each song to identify common factors, which can then be used to compare tracks with each other to see what concepts are lent or developed upon.

The following is a list of criteria we can use to analyse each track based on common features that appear, which we can refer to as CHIRMTTS (short for Context, Harmony, Instrumentation, Rhythm, Melody, Texture/Expression, Tempo and Structure). This list was developed having listened to a repertoire of different diss tracks across the trend, and can help in identifying songs which can be considered authentic. As a reference when building this criterion, some of the more popular tracks of the trend were selected from a range of different creators.

Artist	Year of Release
KSI -	
On Point	2018
Ares	2018
Two Birds One Stone	2017
RiceGum -	
God Church	2017
It's Everynight Sis	2017
I Didn't Hit Her	2017
Randolph -	
MANCHILD	2018
Victory Speech	2018
Deji -	
Unforgiveable	2018
Jake Paul -	
It's Everyday Bro	2017
Logan Paul -	
The Fall of Jake Paul	2017
Goodbye KSI	2018
Miniminter -	
KSI's Little Brother	2017

Figure 11: List of songs which formed the basis for the framework of CHIRMTTS.

<p><u>Context</u></p> <p>Lyrical content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intertextuality • Commodity Driven vs Insult Driven <p>Cinematography:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting - Rich vs Poor • Use of Memes and other References 	<p><u>Harmony</u></p> <p>Pop Chords - I, IV and V</p> <p>Non-Complex Chords</p> <p>Minimal Chord Changes - Sense of One tonality</p> <p>Root chords usually determined in bass</p>
<p><u>Instrumentation</u></p> <p>Vocals - main focus</p> <p>Synth Pads/Leads</p> <p>808 Samples - Drum Kit and Bass</p> <p>Orchestral instruments (Strings, Horns)</p> <p>World Instruments</p> <p>Producer Tags</p> <p>Vocal ad libs/samples</p> <p>Production Value - How well is it mixed?</p>	<p><u>Rhythm</u></p> <p>On Grid vs Off Grid</p> <p>Simple vs Complex</p> <p>4/4 Time Signature</p> <p>Varied Hi Hat Patterns</p> <p>Use of silence to interrupt flow</p>
<p><u>Melody</u></p> <p>Short - 1 or 2 bar melodies</p> <p>Simple - Less Focus - more on lyrical</p> <p>Sometimes on Vocals instead of Instruments</p> <p>Chants as melodic tools</p>	<p><u>Texture/Expression</u></p> <p>Monophonic - Either Vocals, or main melody</p> <p>Build in instrumental layers over time</p> <p>Set Instrument dynamic - little variation</p>
<p><u>Tempo</u></p> <p>85-130 BPM</p> <p>Changes in Beat Switch</p> <p>Moments of Free-Tempo</p>	<p><u>Structure</u></p> <p>Verse-Chorus</p> <p>A/B form - Beat Switches</p> <p>Freeform - 'Freestyle' Approach (No discernible sections - extended verse)</p> <p>Loops - Develops texturally as opposed to structurally</p>

Figure 12: CHIRMTTS table showing common factors across the diss track trend.

7.3: YouTubers in Music; Legitimate or Fake?

The preceding ideas now offer a good basis to start analysing and assessing the musical content, with the criteria provided above. Authenticity for example, strikes as strong point of contention between artists when developing diss tracks; YouTuber Ian Washburn, known better by his pseudonym iDubbbz or iDubbbzTV, criticised YouTuber RiceGum over a lack of authenticity by adopting a 'ghostwriter' to write lyrical content, criticising him in his "Content Cop" series, as well as his diss track 'Asian Jake Paul' (2017), with the following lyric:

*Ayy, you look afraid, must have seen a ghostwriter
Well, ditto, little bitch, but I'm not scared to show mine*

iDubbbz uses this as a transition for his co-writer and producer from the UK, Boyinaband, to enter the song, showing he is not afraid to acknowledge the help from external sources, unlike RiceGum. In his video 'Making the Diss Track with iDubbbz (Content Cop - Behind the Scenes)', Boyinaband further elaborates on this idea, noting that 'it feels pretty disingenuous as a musician to release something and not credit the people who did the work' (2017, 0:32 - 0:38). This point is also argued by other YouTubers such as KSI, who used the ASCAP (The American Society of Composers and Performers) Repertory to show writing credits. This acted as attempt to demonstrate RiceGum's use of ghostwriters as a form of an attack, noting that RiceGum cannot argue his music is better if he did not write it (2020, 08:08 - 08:22).

Lyrical ownership can be attacked by artists where ghostwriters are involved, and as such fail to meet Moore's first and third person authenticity by means of misrepresentation, both to the artists' self and the wider audience. The use of instrumentals can also be criticised as deceiving to an audience if not developed specifically for the artist, and can create an image that the artist is lazy or not considering the musical material carefully enough. This is illustrated in a video by

YouTube mogul PewDiePie, who believed Jake Paul took a beat from a library website (such as AudioJungle) without removing the watermark, using it unlicensed for free (2017, 01:48 - 02:25). However, this conclusion was inaccurate, as the development process of the 'It's Everyday Bro' was documented in a vlog by Jake Paul, showing producer Diego Farias (who went by the moniker YAYGO) playing the beat in a DAW (2017, 06:06). Instead, the alleged watermark was possibly the producer tag (similar to a watermark as mentioned in the list of criteria) or an unfortunately placed adlib. However, with such a criticism raised, this does raise the concern about library beats as a marker of authenticity from a third person perspective, as other artists in the trend have used publicly available beats. Such examples include Callux's 'RIP' (using Skepta's I Spy (2007)) and W2S's 'KSI Sucks' (using M.O.P's - Ante Up (2000)). Whilst one could argue that a public beat selected with ease shows lack in engagement with the cultural values linked with the music, those who have used library beats have done so selecting appropriately an instrumental fitting the style of diss tracks, whether it be old school hip hop, grime, or trap. This is witnessed in the mainstream with artists such as Jay-Z, who listened to a variety of beats before choosing the instrumental for 'Dirt Off Your Shoulder' (2015, 00:14 - 02:50). Furthermore, some artists extend this further by combining two different beats they purchased to form a cohesive transition in the music, including them previously mentioned Quadeca on his track 'Insecure'.

With the previous discussion on library music, by understanding and applying the musical facets to diss tracks as highlighted in CHIRMTTS, one actually understands more about the producer's knowledge than the titled artist. This is due to the artist seeming to engage less with the technicalities of the music. This can still be useful however in understanding the musicality of the producer, and whether the artist has considered and selected their producer well. Using CHIRMTTS, we can see producers such as US producer duo Dream Addix (who created tracks for RiceGum, utilise aspects which are iconic of related genres as part the diss trend). When observing Dream Addix's beat for 'God Church' (2017), the instrumentation is typical of a modern hip hop/trap track, featuring 808 drum samples, horn stabs and a music box-esque instrument. The melody is two bars in length and is introduced

as a monophonic sonic object, which is looped throughout the song, occasionally dropping out to focus on the horn stabs. The horn stabs act as the main harmonic element and form three chords. Even with this base level of analysis, the producers show an understanding of their genre with the use of these musical tropes. Equally, and their relationship with RiceGum is important in showing the latter attempting to be authentic with the production choices.

Another example this can apply to is UK producer Zeeshan Asad, who is known for collaborating with KSI on diss tracks and other creative projects, such as KSI and Randolph's 'New Age' album (2019). Zeeshan has documented his work process, both on his YouTube channel as 'Zeeshan' and on Instagram under the handle '_zeeshvn', with the latter showing how he builds tracks from the beginning using live video feeds (although are publicly unretrievable as of writing). If we were to examine the instrumental for 'Ares' (2018) which he produced for KSI, musical elements presented in the piece include the 808 bass and use of synth pads to create harmonic textures. Zeeshan also adopts the use of a beat switch as a musical device mentioned earlier by Cuchna. As a result, the beat switch combines more traditional hip hop with UK grime music, with a shorter repetitive melody featuring in the grime section in the latter half. However, where the beat switch occurs, this can be considered as rather abrupt, and so could be used as an example to critique the producer's abilities. Irrespective of the execution of these features found within the music, the use of devices such as the beat switch still shows the producer is engaging critically with the musical concepts provided in hip hop and its subgenres.

Whilst producers' engagement with critical concepts of the music show some YouTube rappers choose their producers carefully to design their beats, this does not apply to all on the platform. Such examples include UK artists W2S and Vikkstar, who use pre-existing beats not directly intended for the diss trend. As such, the relationship between the producer and the rapper is removed. This leads to an understanding that YouTubers are those not engaging critically with hip hop and its subgenres, instead treating the music as a device for comedy, entertainment or for monetary gains.

The previous examples present another point of interest, which is the divide in cultures between the UK and US. Whilst touched on in **'Chapter 6: Money'** in terms of stylistic focuses and motivators (with the US arguably appearing as more money-centric than the UK), reflected in the cinematography, the choice of musical styles shows that an artist may want to consider geographically what works for their audience. In the US, the subgenre of hip hop 'trap' is chosen as a popular style to work with, including the use of horn stabs, boomy drum samples and airy synths. The UK adopts styles more reminiscent of the subgenre 'grime', using punchier 808 drum samples, orchestral instruments, and more up-tempo beats. Such tracks highlighting these differences include RiceGum's 'God Church', Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' and Logan Paul's 'The Fall of Jake Paul' (2017) from the US, and Randolph's 'Victory Speech' (2018), Miniminter's 'KSI'S LITTLE BROTHER' (2018) and KSI's 'Little Boy' (2017) from the UK.

Returning to the content of Jake Paul's vlog 'You won't believe what we did...' (2017), documenting the process of the music being made becomes an interesting notion, as a means to satisfy the third person authenticity and by extension first person authenticity. This is achieved by showing the artist engaging with the work, in a professional workspace, and with other members of the production (including the beat makers and producers). Knowing the individuals in the production team also assists in understanding whether they have a grasp on the genre, its roots and other related genres. For Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' having Grammy award producer YAYGO shows an attempt to engage with the trends' historical routes in hip hop, as YAYGO understands the musical aspects present in the genre and its offsets, or as previously mentioned, the 'sonic makeup'. In an episode of Pensado's Place, YAYGO highlights rhythm as a key focus, saying 'all the best music has to have groove' (2018, 14:07). YAYGO also notes that the approach to music may vary depending on the artists personality (31:00) and that with a rap genre such as trap, 'you can spend more time being creative' with looping as opposed to dealing with physical constraints such as metal (31:30). Ultimately, for YAYGO the ingredients leading to a good track come in the recording process, where people are in the 'right environment' and all have 'a shared vision' (2016, 02:42 - 02:59). Other artists

such as iDubbbz have also documented this process as well, albeit in further depth, which more clearly illustrates the processes involved with lyric writing and the realism of the writing process. From an artist's perspective, this could be seen as verifying the second person authenticity.

The previous examples present two conflicting ideas. Firstly, YouTubers engaging in the trend can be seen more as performers, engaging in lyric writing with professional assistance. This does verify an attempt to understand the wider rap culture, as where a YouTuber may lack knowledge, this is assisted by a musician who is either 'a culture bearer or an individual with an in-depth understanding' (Carlos, 2006, p. 41). YouTubers may authenticate themselves by using musicians as tools to enable their learning, whether the musicians help with both lyrical writing and/or producing the music. Equally, YouTubers may assume full control of lyric writing but still create content that seems out of touch with the wider hip hop culture from which it stemmed. This can be seen through external verifiers in mainstream rap such as Post Malone, who described Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' as having '14 year old lyrics' (in H3H3, 2017, 4:07). This is also verified by Paul himself, who stated that he 'can't rap' (2017, 12:10) and that he used language tool rhymezone to help him with writing lyrics, stating 'if you want to be a shitty rapper, go to rhymezone.com' (12:36). Malone also went on to say that the lyrical content as well as Paul's approach when interacting with artists was 'disrespectful' by unnecessarily calling out creators (2017,12:19). As a result, these criticisms act against the legitimacy of Jake Paul's music as being authentic.

Another criticism of authenticity in Jake Paul's music could also be attributed to his race. Kruse mentioned that qualifiers of hip hop can include a cultural sense of blackness and being poor. Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' acts as a counter to this; the artist himself is a white American who promotes a luxurious lifestyle in his music video. However, Kruse's qualifier would not be applicable to YouTube's wider diss track culture, with pioneers of the trend being mostly white, occasionally featuring artists from different ethnic backgrounds. Whilst this could be argued as appropriation of the hip hop genre, it can be argued that race as part of hip hop's

culture has become what Kruse noted as a 'floating signifier' (2016, p. 54), with the YouTubers' lyrical content being of a far greater importance to the diss track culture. Race may not be the only 'floating signifier' however, with other traditional aspects of hip hop challenged such as authenticity and keeping a sense of 'realness'. The common practice of celebrities on the platform utilising a professional aesthetic with good cinematography would be normally considered as inauthentic in the world of hip hop. Despite this, as more artists on the platform engage with the trend's professional aesthetics, they help create their own authenticity, counter to what was initially conceived as authentic. As a result, YouTubers create a product that could be perceived as authentically inauthentic. YouTube further shapes and redefines what a culture may have once been in the offline world, adhering to the ethos held by Born and Haworth (in Spencer, 2017), presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Returning to authentic markings of artists through external verifiers, whilst they may act against artists and their reputation, they may also work in favour of artists on YouTube to legitimise their work. The most notable example of this is YouTuber KSI and his connections with UK independent rapper Sway DaSafo. DaSafo is highlighted as a credible rapper by those in the industry including Trap Lore Ross, who explained KSI's history with music in 'KSI's Ghostwriter Exposed'. It is noted that DaSafo charted in the UK top 40 whilst still being an independent in the pre-web 2.0 era. Whilst Trap Lore Ross explains the history of KSI's earlier low quality 'banter raps' (2019, 01:59 - 02:05) which were reminiscent of 'high energy shout rap' similar to DMX (02:20 - 02:26). He then notes KSI's introduction to Sway on the track 'No Sleep' (2013) which was KSI's 'first legitimate collaboration' (2019, 04:53 - 04:59) with another artist. This served as a turning point for KSI to engage in creating serious, non-parodical music. KSI also reinforces the positive effect Sway had on his lyric writing and demonstrates a first-person authenticity by acknowledging the divide in musical talent, noting that 'he's a rapper, I'm a YouTuber' (in Sloth, 2016, 01:27 - 01:30).

KSI shows a wider understanding of the hip hop culture and the musical tropes of the genre and its offshoots. In an interview with NME, KSI demonstrates a genuine interest in his musical career, citing inspirations such as 'Rick Ross' (2019, 01:08 - 01:18) and having his own criteria for releasing music, noting his aims to create 'good content, stuff I'm proud of' (05:28 - 05:32). For KSI, creating music is the priority, as opposed to the financial gains, stating in the interview that 'if I don't like you, I'm not doing a track with you' (14:49), before explaining his take on his success.

One of the reasons why I've been so successful is because I don't care about the numbers I don't care about the comments I don't care about all the stuff that doesn't matter, what matters is what you enjoy doing and that's why I'm always happy with everything I do because I'm doing everything for me (KSI, 2019, 21:58 - 22:18).

Chapter 8: Masquerade

YouTube does not merely serve as a platform to market and monopolise on one's content, but as a means of interaction between artists. One of the ways this can manifest is in drama or 'beef' between content creators, which can be referred to as a 'Masquerade'; not only are the disputes made a show, the artists may also have hidden motives behind a layer of dramatization.

As important as both monetary incentives and musical values are to diss culture, drama and narrative form the crucial backbone of the trend. As stated in its origins with flyting 'the power to hurt was regarded as an important function of poetry' (Bawcutt, 1983, p. 5). This approach of artform acts as counter to other cultural constructs such as Peace, Love, Unity, Respect (PLUR), an ideology that is synonymous with rave culture and 'typified by notions of inclusion, acceptance, communality, and a celebration of difference' (Measham and Hadfield, in Maloney, 2018, p. 231). Whilst apparently working against forces of PLUR, this power to hurt may in fact be considered important as it acts as a unifying tool, which a sense of unity can be obtained through superiority as a sardonic in-joke (Spencer, 2019). To see whether this idea of unification is true in application to YouTube's diss culture, an exploration is needed in what constitutes as drama on the platform.

8.1: This Is Content

Drama appears as fundamentally embedded in the YouTube Landscape that naturally occurs via discourse between creators. This dialogue between artists may prove as a tool to bring in viewership, as Rotman and Preece note.

In YouTube, shared experiences may range from positive occurrences such as face-to-face meetings, to 'The YouTube drama' – disagreements and conflicts that arise between users, resulting in mutual 'video-fights': "When you get a YouTube account and you get to be a part of communities and groups within, there comes the inevitable drama, which drives the group to reaction... and there are people that thrive on the drama" (Rotman and Preece, 2014, p. 328).

This point is also reiterated by scholars as such as Pihlaja, who notes:

As on many Internet sites, interaction on YouTube often features confrontational, antagonistic exchanges among users, and YouTube comments threads in particular are known for their offensive content. The term 'drama'... appears often as an emic label for a phenomenon 'that emerge[s] when a flurry of video posts clusters around an internal "controversy" and/or antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers (Pihlaja, 2012, p. 12).

This statement is true when we apply it to the YouTube landscape now, with channels dedicated to reporting drama such as 'Drama Alert' by YouTuber Keemstar. With drama acting as a means of content, YouTubers who successfully capitalise on trending topics involving cultural drama on the platform can increase interest, and by extension, earn increased revenue when discussing the content.

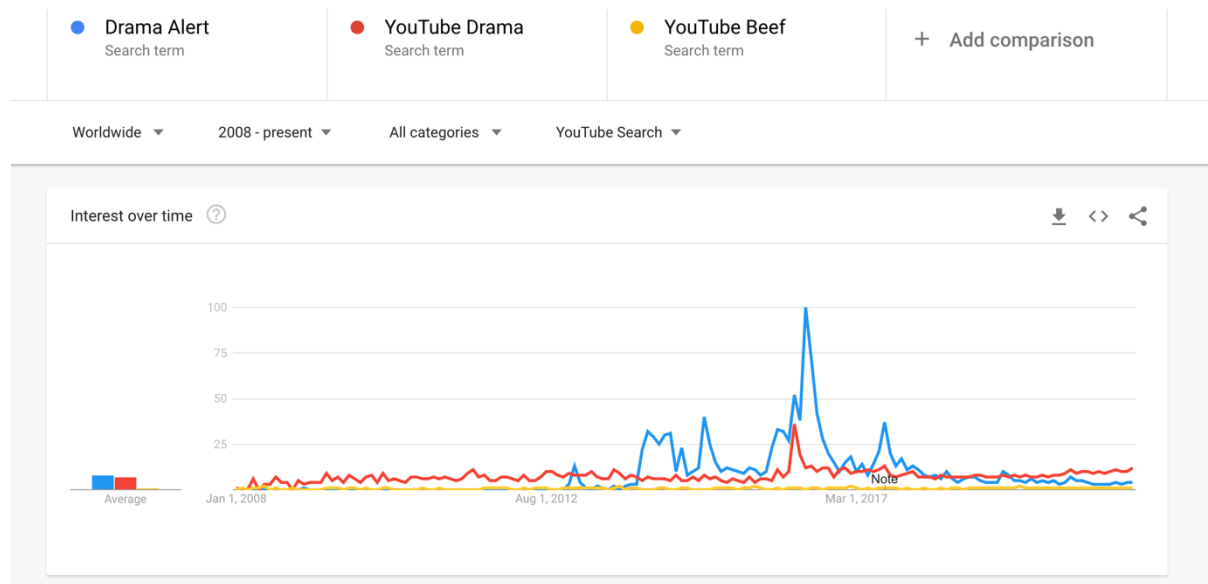


Figure 13: Graph showing interest on YouTube with drama and channel 'Drama Alert'.

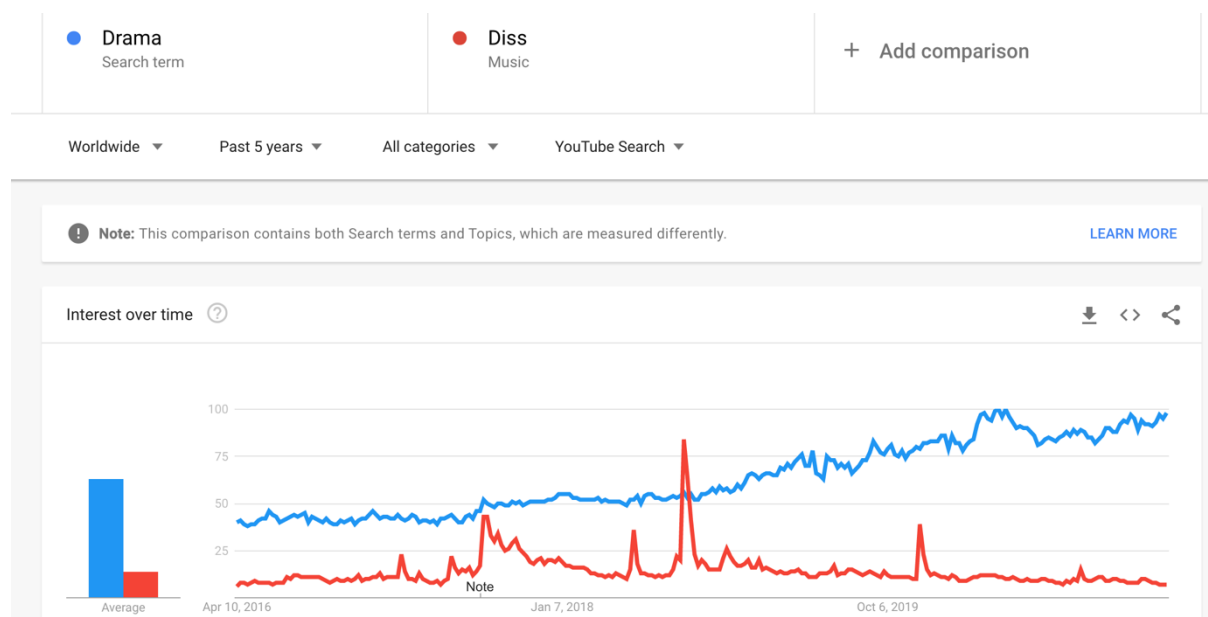


Figure 14 : Graph illustrating the interest of drama and diss as search terms.

Pihlaja also notes the fundamental importance of drama in the YouTube landscape:

'Drama' plays a key role in YouTube interaction by giving users subject matter for videos, affording them with creative ways to insult one another, and providing a chance for users to support or oppose others. Drama videos are often made quickly in response to other users with little production or planning and are also often removed within days or even hours of being posted (Pihlaja, 2012, p. 14).

In addition to being a means to create content, drama occurring on the platform can help to form narratives between other individuals on the platform. As noted by Musolff, 'sometimes participants' metaphors fit into a narrative, construct a metaphorical story, or connect into a larger, coherent 'metaphor scenario' (in Pihlaja, 2012, p. 61), where the metaphors are used in diss tracks as a means of representation. How a narrative develops with YouTube drama can be dependent on how the artist positions themselves in diss tracks, or 'drama' as a larger concept moving into reactions or vlogs. As according to Pihlaja, this can arise, with 'one speaker taking a dominant position in the conversation and forcing others into positions they would not have taken for themselves' (2012, p. 31), which we see in YouTube as putting others down with lyrical choices and by initiating drama between other YouTubers.

8.2: Clarification of Diss

In order to dissect the drama that appears on YouTube and more specifically diss tracks, it is useful to apply the works of Pihlaja to the content. Pihlaja presents two lists as important when analysing drama, from the works of Culpeper and Hardaker; the former presents a series of norms which may influence a person's expectations on impoliteness. However, for studying YouTube discourse and drama, we will focus on Hardaker's list.

Norm Type	Resulting Totality
Cultural	Individual's experience of culture
Personal	Individual's social experience
Situational	Individual's experience of particular situation in a culture
Co-Textual	Individual's experience of particular interaction in a situation in a culture

Figure 15 : Culpeper's List of cultural experience (in Pihlaja, 2012, p. 43).

Impoliteness	Definition
Ritual/Mock Impoliteness	Offensive way of being friendly, using ritualized results that are clearly untrue
Non-Malicious Impoliteness	Utterances performed without malice, but the speaker may anticipate causing offence
Rudeness/ Failed politeness	Unintentional absence of polite behaviour
Failed (Malicious Impoliteness)	Intended impoliteness not correctly interpreted by listener
Thwarted Impoliteness	Intended impoliteness, which is thwarted by listener, as it doesn't offend or cause no action
Malicious Impoliteness	Intended impoliteness carried out to cause offense to listener

Figure 16 : Hardaker's List of impoliteness (in Pihlaja, 2012, p. 44).

Hardaker's list presents us with forms of impoliteness we can apply to the diss culture on YouTube. This is useful when investigating the intent of the diss tracks, whether it is music fuelled by genuine discontent, or music created with the means to generate money off videos. Diss tracks are presented in a YouTube environment where drama is a means of content creation, as stated by Pihlaja, as well as YouTuber Zerkaa mentioned in the **'Chapter 6: Money'** creating view loops to generate views. However, genuine animosity has been observed between YouTubers as a direct result of, or exaggerated by, the diss track content. These observations are made more quantifiable via external sources such as vlogs or press conferences.

Using the mentioned lists as a basis for further thought, I propose three categories of this drama; Genuine Drama (caused by Malicious Impoliteness), Simulated Drama (appearing as Malicious Impoliteness, but in reality, is Thwarted; this can have other motivations linked to monetary gains) and Fake Drama (as a result of Ritual/Mock Impoliteness, or Non-Malicious Impoliteness with the intent to increase revenue).

Primarily, diss tracks observed in this trend serve one of two dramas, either Simulated Drama, or Fake Drama. For example, diss tracks against the Paul brothers suggest Ritual/Mock Impoliteness, as neither exhibited animosity for an extended period, even going so far to make more music videos spanning from the initial 'drama' such as 'I love you bro' (2017) and create vlog content such as 'Jake & Logan Paul Therapy Session (Hosted by Danielle Bregoli)'. It is also in this therapy session Jake highlights the fact that he is 'an actor' (2017, 11:59), and although this in response to his brother noting that Jake is emotionally driven, it can be perceived as an indication the drama was a façade. Others such as Zerkaa have also theorised it could have been a marketing ploy as mentioned earlier in the paper, noting that by combining the power of both network 'the Jake Paulers and the Logang, you're putting two audiences [together] like bang' (2017, 10:38 - 10:42). Zerkaa also drew this observation shortly before a string of diss tracks were released between YouTube group Sidemen and YouTuber KSI, suggesting they may have employed

this technique to increase viewership, especially since commentators like WillNE, who noted in his video 'Youtube 2017... (Youtuber Diss Tracks)', that the climate of YouTube in the UK was not a successful one during 2017 (2017, 00:44 - 00:56). However, members have of the Sidemen insisted the drama had an element of truth, with KSI clarifying his version of events, presented in a semi-satirical way in 'WAS THE SIDEMEN BEEF FAKE?' (2017). Ultimately, what should be clarified as an example of Fake Drama is the presence of material suggesting to an audience member that the content is obviously faked.

An extension on the idea of Fake Drama is 'baiting' to lure a response from other YouTubers and therefore stimulate a narrative based on minor call outs. This has been recognised by YouTubers such as iDubbbz, who when critiquing RiceGum, noted 'he is constantly baiting out who the next diss track is going to be on' (2017, 23:01 - 23:04). This can be spotted in other content such as Zack Clayton's 'How Bout Dat' (2017), where he creates a diss track at musician Danielle Bregoli because of a petty remark attacking his hairstyle, regarding it as 'a pineapple head' (2017, 00:07). Mench also applies this theory to Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' hypothesising an 'extremely calculated way to drum up internet controversy' (2017). This approach to creating controversy is ratified in the mainstream media, with artists such as Eminem noting that his lyrics 'aren't personal attacks' (in Ross, 2019, 05:38), equating the process to 'picking names out of a hat' (05:50).

Simulated Drama is content seemingly serving to create a fictional narrative of genuine dislike towards another content creator, but it may also serve to benefit both content creators by attracting opposing markets, and therefore expanding viewership, mentioned earlier in '**Chapter 6: Money**'. This may be even more applicable to the Sidemen diss tracks since there are claims of the drama being real, which implies that even if it were falsified, they wish to hide it under the appearance of being genuine. What appears more apparently as Simulated Drama are situations leading up to climatic narrative events; in application to YouTube, examples of this include boxing matches, where diss tracks help to reinforce the narrative of rivalry. KSI and Logan Paul (as well as both artists' younger brothers) participated in such

drama when promoting their boxing match in 2018, with diss tracks made during the lead up. From the UK, KSI released 'On Point' (2018) and Deji released 'Wasteman' (2018), and from the US, Logan Paul released 'Goodbye KSI' (2018) and Jake Paul released 'Champion' (2018). The popularity and interest of these tracks can be evidenced by via Google Trends, and by cross referencing graphs with different search trends.

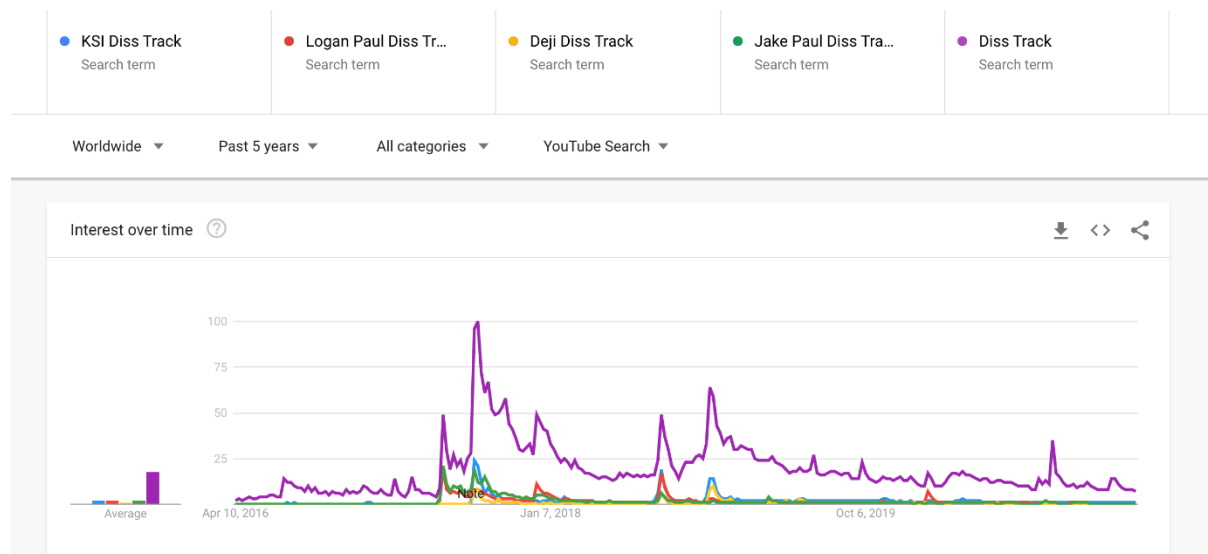


Figure 17: Graph showing the release of diss tracks between the title card fighters in KSI vs. Logan Paul, compared to the peaks in diss track as a search term.

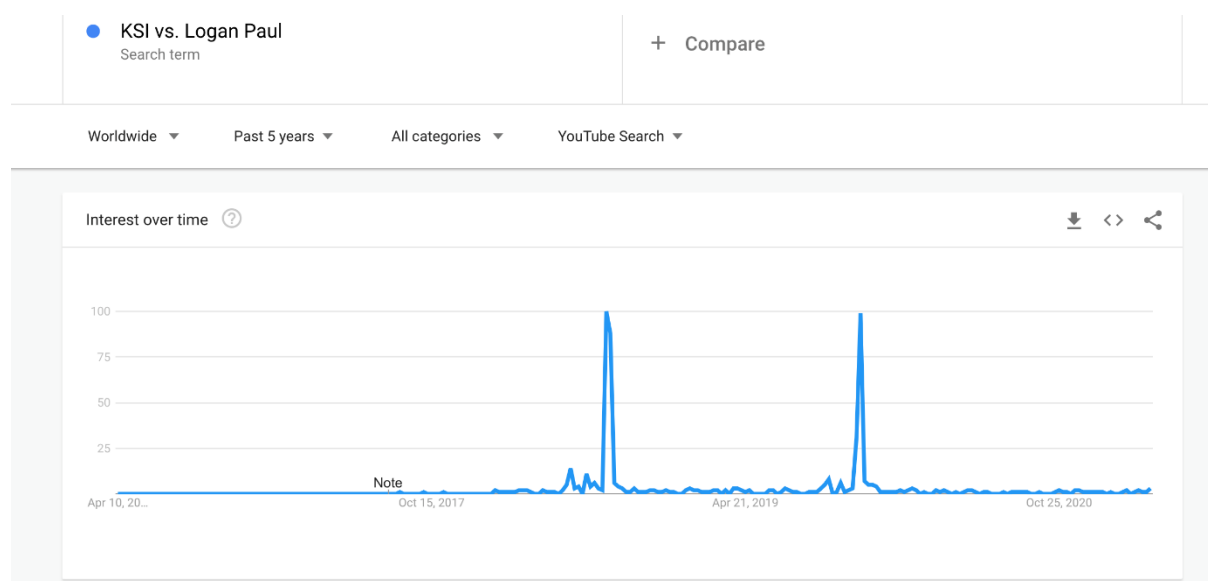


Figure 18: Graph of interest in KSI vs. Logan Paul event, separate from diss tracks.

Whilst these dramas help to reinforce narratives and create revenue through an expansive, unending story, Genuine Drama also occurs on the platform, with consequences impacting on the actions of the creators. One of the biggest illustrations of this trend was between KSI and his brother Deji, who debated whether KSI treated his brother fairly and with respect over the years. This stemmed from one of KSI's friends Randolph making a joke on a 'Sideman Sunday' video calling out Deji as a dead YouTube Channel (in Keem, 2019, 02:51 - 04:15. Deji then responded with a diss track aimed at Randolph titled 'Ran' (2018), whilst using private banking information from KSI's account. Annoyed at the lack of support from his brother when having a feud against his friend, Deji released several videos explaining he felt mistreated by his brother as he grew up, before releasing 'Unforgiveable' (2018), featuring several other artists. The drama came to an end when KSI released a 2-hour video titled 'Ending It All' (2019) on his main channel, which aimed to answer and provide context to points made by Deji. One of the main messages resonating throughout the video was that KSI considered this private and wished not to continue debating online with his brother, which comes across to the audience as a serious remark in the midst of a heated family argument. Since then, Deji has removed several videos, including the diss track 'Unforgivable' from his YouTube page.

There are crossovers with these types of drama however, where artists may employ aspects of impoliteness from each category. For example, iDubbbz fits in this category with his song 'Asian Jake Paul' where one could argue he demonstrates the use of both Simulated and Genuine Drama. Preceding the release of the diss track saw iDubbbz create a video essay titled 'Content Cop: Jake Paul' deconstructing RiceGum's content, comically critiquing his work. This was then followed up with another video called 'Content Deputy: AJP' which was a response to RiceGum's response video. In these videos, iDubbbz shows genuine contempt for RiceGum, with comments such as 'I'm not here to be friends with you' (2017, 02:35) as well as 'I don't want your props, you can shove your props straight up your rice hole because I think you are a garbage human being and I want nothing to do with you' (02:17 - 02:24). At the same time, one could make an argument that

aspects of ritual/mock impoliteness exist as the video features satirical skits throughout. iDubbbz has explained his Content Cop series is not to cause serious damage, admitting that 'above all, I want to make the videos entertaining' (in H3H3, 2017, 01:23 - 01:25).

8.3: Wavering Realities in YouTube

Problems can arise from an audience perspective in distinguishing what is and is not real. Unless there is evidence which can highlight or suggest that the content is inherently fake, then there are no reliable sources to go to without directly confronting the artists, who may not respond if it were to contradict their image of authenticity, as highlighted in **Music**.

An extension of this issue is whether artists portray themselves accurately on the platform, as this can undermine drama and make any form of drama inherently 'fake'. To deem whether an artist is fake or genuine requires a study of their content, both on and off camera. As an example, Jake Paul presents a very energetic, boastful character on camera which is reflected in his demeanour and editing style (fast camera movement, jump cuts), similar to the way he presents himself in his music videos, such as the high energy chants in the chorus of 'It's Everyday Bro'. However, Jake Paul has also admitted to being a 'troll' which is defined in the Collins English Dictionary as 'deliberately try to upset.. or start an argument, especially by posting offensive or unkind things on the internet', as seen in True Geordie's Podcast (2019, 01:10). For Jake, posting content is a means to antagonise, debate, and receive publicity for his actions, which may serve to further his revenue, something highlighted as key for him in '**Chapter 6: Money**'. This behaviour is further emphasised in stand offs with content creators who show a contrast to Jake's theatrics, for example, between Paul and Deji during the build up to their boxing match. Having exchanged messages, both Deji and Jake Paul met at a park, where the former expected to have a conversation about KSI's offer to box, bringing a small camera on which he filmed. At the same time, Paul brought boxing gloves and

offered to box Deji, with an external camera man filming with professional equipment. The two videos, titled 'FACE TO FACE WITH LOGAN PAUL'S LITTLE BROTHER' (2018) and 'I CONFRONTED KSI'S LITTLE BRO IN PERSON!!' (2018) show two contrasting editing styles, with the former using simple jump cuts, and the latter using a combination of flashy transitions, fast camera work and sound effects which benefit Jake by making him appear more dominant. Jake also uses this meeting as an opportunity to promote his brand in the conflict, by giving Deji 'Jake Paul' merchandise. However, in Deji's video, without the additional editing, this translation of dominance is lost and lends a different meaning to Jake's attitude. This allows for different interpretations of authenticity as discussed in '**Chapter 7: Music**', with the American approach having a flashier, brand-friendly style as opposed to the UK approach which is seen as closer to hip hop in 'keeping it real'.

What may be an interaction with Jake Paul online may be with a personality that is constructed and not the genuine edifice of Jake Paul. However, the lines become blurred even for Jake Paul, who struggles with self-identity and has publicly asked 'what is Jake Paul right now?' (2020, 01:15). In a sense, Jake Paul suffers from the postmodernist condition, and is a simulacrum of himself. The concept originates from Baudrillard (in Denzin, 1986), where the truth is 'concealed'; he has become a copy of a copy of himself to the point where reality is indistinguishable from his image. If this applies to an individual on the platform, can the audience believe in any of the content proposed in diss tracks, or can people overlook the potential 'fakeness' for the sake of entertainment? If the latter is true, then this contradicts the importance of authenticity and its role in the music as presented in the previous section.

Chapter 9: Application of Theory to Diss Tracks

The previous chapters have been useful for providing an understanding of what encompasses diss track culture, with musical references to contextualise the points made across the three chapters **Money, Music** and **Masquerade**. To see how a single track can encompass the three main ideas presented in this paper, three key tracks from the trend have been analysed. These tracks are compared against a criteria developed with suitable references to **Money, Music** and **Masquerade**.

Money	Music	Masquerade
Observations of potential revenue generators: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are luxury goods or other commodities promoted in track?• Are the artists selling/promoting their own brands?• What are the crossover potentials?	Application of CHIRMTTS and ideas of authenticity: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there professional musicians involved?• Do the artists exhibit musical knowledge or wiliness to understand it?• Are there musical markers suitable for the trend?	Application of Hardaker's List and Felix's 3 Dramas: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the dramatic intentions of the tracks?• Is the drama an entertainment vehicle or real?

This extends upon the criteria proposed in the music section of this paper, by adding in aspects related to the other two sections. Examining whether a song is littered with product promotion as highlighted in '**Chapter 6: Money**', or whether the dramatic elements in the song could be classed by my proposed drama types such as "Genuine Drama" can help to clarify what this trend is about. Has this investigation been into a commercialised form of music where the aims are solely to generate views and revenue, or is this a serious musical artform calling back to old hip hop values of being authentic and demonstrating bravado?

9.1: Jake Paul - It's Everyday Bro

We begin by analysing one of the most popular tracks in this trend, "It's Everyday Bro" by Jake Paul. Paul was known previously for featuring on Disney show Bizaardvark, as well as his own channel on social network Vine (known for its six second video format). As previously mentioned in this paper, 'It's Everyday Bro' was a project which aimed to complete a track and music video in the span of one day, noted in Pauls vlog 'You won't believe what we did...'. As a diss track, this song does not focus an attack on one particular artist, but various content creators, including Pewdiepie and Paul's ex-girlfriend Alicia Violet, as well as social media groups Magcon and Digitour.

9.1.1: Money

The observations made so far have highlighted several different aspects pointing to Pauls main interest (in particular to this diss track) being a monetary focus. This includes both the song content, where he brags about his monetary gains and owning luxury commodities such as Rolexes, as well as promoting his own merchandise which can be seen throughout the video. We can apply this wealth-driven interest to areas such as cinematography, where the overall quality of shots appears to be professionally filmed (as opposed to independent styles presented such as BGMedia), with creative angles adopted using tools such as drones. The dramatic elements of this piece, including the use of calling out other content creators and artists, serves to further verify the songs intentions, as this creates cross promotion if the artist named is expected to respond. In this instance, both Alissa Violet and Pewdiepie, as named targets, responded to the content, with the latter subjecting the content to his audience consisting of approximately 55 million subscribers at the time the video was made. In turn, this exposed Jake Paul to a larger audience which allowed for the song to earn its viral status, verifying the effect of WOM pressure presented by Mohr earlier as 'consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information' (2014, p. 43). This cross promotion of artists/content creators extends to the featured artists of the track, which features

different YouTubers as part of Team 10, such as Nick Crompton and Tessa Brookes. This also applies to external factors relating to Paul's track, such as when the song was charting, and Paul tweeted to mainstream rap artist Kendrick Lamar 'Sorry Kendrick!! @kendricklamar I'll let you have your spot back when the Jake Paulers are done' (2017), which drew attention from other artists belonging in the mainstream such as Post Malone, who stated that it was 'disrespectful' (in H3H3. 2017, 12:18).

An aspect not yet addressed, which furthers the suggestion of a monetary driven focus, are Paul's own interpolations of 'It's Everyday Bro', which adopt the same, if not a similar beat to the original track. 'It's Christmas Day Bro' And 'Its Everyday Bro [feat. Gucci Mane]' can be seen as near clones of the original song, with the former using an almost identical song structure and therefore suggests that 'It's Everyday Bro' served as a template from which Paul could adjust the lyrics to be seasonal. The simplicity and virality of the original tune adhere to ideas presented earlier Berger et al. (in Mohr, 2014, p. 43) and act to further the popularity of the newer tunes and allow content creators to further respond to each new iteration of the song. The lack of changing the content, combined with Paul's original intent to create a song and music video in a day, indicate the time invested in these tracks are minimal and that the art comes second.

9.1.2: Music

Whilst this paper has explored Jake Paul's focus on monetary aspects, it is important to consider the musical characteristics to see how engaged Paul is with the art itself, before deciding whether money is his sole focus. Here, we can apply the principles found in CHIRMTTS to see what facets can be observed in Jake Pauls 'It's Everyday Bro'. As one of the main songs to kickstart the YouTube celebrity rendition of diss track culture, the track does have the unique benefit of setting new tropes as a pioneer of the diss culture, but it is still important to compare with other songs on the platform.

The song, as typical of all diss tracks in this trend, begins with a solo instrumental from an airy synth, alongside adlibs from Jake Paul. The track builds into the song with a snare riser that descends in pitch, before introducing other sonic signifiers such as the 808 bass and drum samples. Combined with the plucked and airy synth, the sonic soundscape provided becomes recognisable as a trap beat similar to Chief Keef's 'Love Sosa' (2012), and gives the track its geographical marker as an American styled subgenre of hip hop. This is similar to other tracks such as RiceGum's 'God Church' and Zack Clayton's 'How Bout Dat'. Musical friction occurs throughout the piece by providing breaks in the song and giving moments of silences before reintroducing the beat. These silences also appear to be a moment of free tempo but are in fact still in 4/4 like the rest of the song. The song also follows a standard verse-chorus approach to the music, with the choruses featuring only the vocal chant from Jake Paul and the main melodic line of 4 bars. This section features the most dynamic change present in the vocals, as the remaining parts of the song are mostly limited in dynamic range, with the exception of a fade out at the end of the song.

Despite the song featuring a Grammy award winning artist and producer YAYGO, adhering to the American geographical marker of using music stylistic of trap and giving the music authenticity through the endorsement via a musician, the musicality is let down by the lyrical content and the time invested into the song creation. In the vlog 'You won't believe what we did...', YAYGO presents a beat which appears to be instantly selected by Jake Paul without considering other beats the producer may have made. This may be down to how the vlog is edited, but the effect of this edit lends an implication that Paul does not show as deep of an investment into the music in a way other rappers may, such as the earlier mentioned clip of Jay-Z selecting his beat from Timbaland for 'Dirt Off Your Shoulder'.

As previously confirmed, Jake Paul used online language tool rhymezone to assist in creating the lyrics, and this can be seen to impact the music negatively. Occasionally, the flows in the vocal lines are impacted by trying to deliver lyrics containing too many syllables and as a result the delivery from Paul becomes disjointed. An example includes his first verse:

*Yeah, I'm talking about you, you beggin' for attention
Talking shit on Twitter too but you still hit my phone last night
It was 4:52 and I got the text to prove
And all the recordings too, don't make me tell them the truth*

The problem in the above verse arises at the first line, the third and fourth line, where the delivery creates a sextuplet feel, which does not connect well from the quaver patterns usually delivered throughout the song and therefore feels disjointed. Commentators such as Pewdiepie have highlighted this as a problem saying that 'his flow is all off' (2017, 03:46 - 03:49). Furthermore, using rhymezone has allowed Paul to create near non-sensical lines which are only justified through external sources such as vlogs. One such example of nonsensical lyrics includes the following:

And I just dropped some new merch, and it's selling like a god church

In 'Jake & Logan Paul Therapy Session (Hosted by Danielle Bregoli)' Jake Paul clarified that the lyric in his mind was read as 'it's selling like a god, church' to separate the two words and provide the metaphor that his merchandise is selling at godly levels, as opposed to 'god church' being a sentence which grammatically does not work.

Despite these musical flaws in the track, Jake Paul has used them as a means of driving the songs' ability to be circulated via a polarised audience sharing their opinions through WOM. H3H3 compared the tracks success to other viral music with poor reception, noting it was 'amazingly bad' and akin to Rebecca Black's

'Friday' (H3H3, 2017, 12:57 - 13:03). Moreover, Jake Paul has taken the criticisms of his song, such as Pewdiepie's mocking of the phrase 'god church' (2017, 06:09 - 06:33) and used it to further promote his merchandise, creating a 'LIKE A GOD CHURCH' shirt which featured in 'Jake & Logan Paul Therapy Session (Hosted by Danielle Bregoli)'.

9.1.3: Masquerade

As mentioned previously, for Jake Paul drama serves as a vehicle to drive the audience's attention economy to his content by baiting artists into responding. Therefore, most of the drama stemming from 'It's Everyday Bro' can be assumed to be some form of either 'Fake Drama' or 'Simulated Drama', the former being applied to his Pewdiepie callout and the latter formed as a result of his brother responding with 'The Fall of Jake Paul'. This helped to drive view loops as theorised by Zerkaa (2017,10:06). 'Fake Drama' can be applied to other works of his such as his diss track on UK YouTuber Joe Weller in his video 'Jake Paul KNOCKED OUT Joe Weller.. (FULL FIGHT)' (2019), where Weller features in the music video in what appears to be a joke. This suggests that diss tracks originating from Paul fail to have a sense of reality to the lyrical content, and therefore a lack of authenticity by deceiving the audience. However, some tracks made against him may suggest 'Genuine Drama', such as 'It's Everynight Sis' (2017) by American YouTuber RiceGum, where the use of language appears a 'Malicious Impoliteness'; equally, this could be RiceGum applying Jake Paul's process of baiting names to increase publicity and therefore revenue.

9.1.4: Summary

With the three main criteria applied to Paul's track, money still seems to reign as his prime focus, as all aspects seem geared towards increasing revenue. From baiting names to gain publicity, promoting merchandise in an ad friendly environment, to using music as a template to create a series of the same song which receives consistently widespread negative reception as a means of boosting virality, the diss track culture is a way to expand Jake Paul's audience and therefore revenue, by expanding from his initial YouTube foray as a vlogger into a content creator with a wider topic scope. This reflects the works of Shao, 'by widening their topic scope, they can attract more attention from different virtual communities' (In Himma-Kadakas et al, 2018, p. 67).

9.2: KSI - Ares

In the United Kingdom, one of the biggest proprietors of the UK diss culture was KSI, a gaming YouTuber-turned-rapper who found a wider audience through his music making. This began seriously in 2015 with his debut single 'Lamborghini' (2015). Before this, KSI was known for his FIFA gaming videos, and comedic skits featured on his YouTube channel. KSI was first involved with music making on his channel around 2012, collaborating with fellow UK YouTuber Randolph, on a series of what American YouTuber Trap Lore Ross dubs as 'football banter raps' (2019, 2:02). Towards the end of 2013, KSI had his first major collaboration on the track 'No Sleep' (2013) with UK rapper Sway DaSafo, an independent who managed to win a MOBO award for best hip hop act in 2005 without support of a label or having released an album.

Ares is one of many diss tracks released by KSI, who in the past has released an EP dedicated to the diss culture targeting several other content creators. Ares differs from the other tracks presented in this chapter, as it is a response to US YouTuber Quadeca's diss track 'Insecure' (2018), as opposed to an initiating diss track. This arose from KSI bragging about himself as better than Quadeca on the 'What's Good?' Podcast (2018, 10:15).

9.2.1: Money

As with most videos stylistic of the overall trend on YouTube, 'Ares' adopts professional cinematography, adhering to the culture's cinematic norms. Looking at the music video, the content features some materialistic elements. One of the scenes feature a backdrop of what appears to be a mansion, and some of the shots show branded clothing, with at least one item of clothing being merchandise belonging to KSI's joint venture with social media group 'Sidemen'. The mansion scenes also feature royal garments and a crown, but this seems to serve more of a metaphorical statement than a monetary one, as these were most likely props. Lyrically, the song content is not focused on commodities, which departs from some

of his earlier songs such as 'Lamborghini'. Instead, monetary revenue comes from the cross-promotion behaviours that feature in this track. Not only does the track continue the narrative between KSI and Quadeca, and therefore 'construct a metaphorical story, or connect into a larger, coherent 'metaphor scenario' (Musolff, in Pihlaja, 2012, p. 61), but KSI uses this attention given from this narrative to name two other American artists, Dax and Crypt. This name-baiting allows for potential further responses and/or interpolations and plays into pre-existing conversations with KSI and the other artists, as this track also follows on from Dax's 'KILLSHOT' (2018). In turn, this leads to a wider network exposure through crossing audiences and playing into Zerkaa's theorised concept of 'video loops'. As a result, the narrative serves as the key selling point of the music.

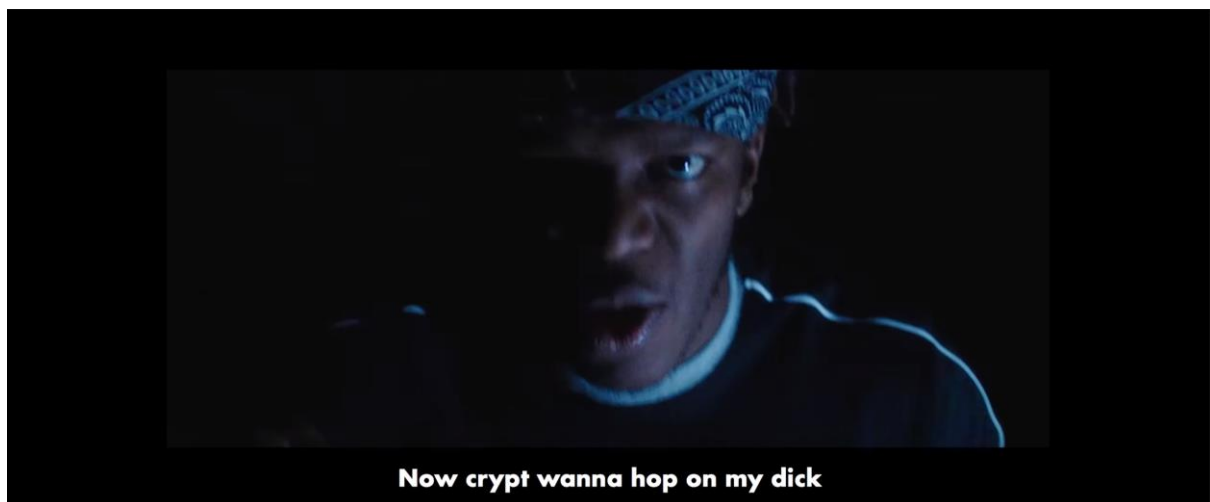


Figure 19: KSI name baiting at the end of 'Ares' (Olatunji, 2018).

9.2.2: Masquerade

Whilst drama serves as a key point for marketing the song, it also acts as a means to generate 'subject matter for videos' (Pihlaja, 2012, p. 14). When looking at past interactions between KSI and Quadeca, the initial feud was caused by KSI bragging that he was better than Quadeca on the 'What's Good?' Podcast (2018, 10:15), which prompted Quadeca to make the diss track against KSI. KSI's language in the podcast appears to be closer to Non-Malicious Impoliteness with comments about Quadeca such as 'awkward' (10:23 - 10:26) and offers an opportunity for Quadeca

to make the initial diss track, thus starting the narrative loop. The same can be said for the lyrics; whilst delivered with Malicious Impoliteness, the extent of the severity of the diss' from both Quadeca and KSI is less than some of the other examples presented. When reaching the end of this narrative, it appears the drama falls into the category of 'Simulated Drama'. The language and interactions surrounding the diss tracks show aspects of intentional insults, but it is in Quadeca's video 'Confronting KSI about the diss tracks...' that the drama seems inconsequential, with KSI and Quadeca shaking hands and joking about having a fight (2019, 01:45 - 01:58). Furthermore, with both artists having created video reactions to each other's songs with KSI in 'Reacting to Quadeca's INSECURE Diss Track' (2018) and Quadeca in 'Quadeca reacts to KSI "Ares" Diss Track' (2021), both demonstrate a combination of 'Failed Malicious Impoliteness' and 'Thwarted Impoliteness' where they either fail to understand the diss content or are simply not offended, and as such reinforces the idea of this being a simulated narrative.

9.2.3: Music

Even though money and drama play a part in the development and delivery of the music, the music itself appears to be of great importance to KSI. For 'Ares', KSI used Manchester based producer Zeeshan for creating the music. Zeeshan graduated from the University of Arts London and has previously produced instrumentals for KSI including the 'New Age' album (2019), with one track titled 'Red Alert' (2019) featuring on the game 'Watch Dogs: Legion' (2020). In 'Ares', Zeeshan adopts musical devices that show a deeper understanding of hip hop culture, primarily the use of a beat switch. This causes musical friction and works with the change of narrative in lyrics presented by KSI (here, he swaps from the focus on Quadeca to artists Dax and Crypt). However, whilst there is the use of a beat switch as both a musical and narrative tool, the swap is quite abrasive as we go directly from one beat to the other. This does not take into consideration the use of connecting tools, as highlighted by Cuchna when referring to Frank Ocean's 'Night's', as 'without the middle section, the beat switch would not work' (in Shannon, 2019, 02:27 - 02:31).

It could therefore be argued that whilst Zeeshan understands the use of the beat switch serving as an important device, the applications of the beat switch and how he delivers it in the music shows a developing understanding of such musical devices. Interestingly, Zeeshan does not strictly use sonic markers that are geographically from one location and uses elements reminiscent of American trap and UK grime. Towards the beginning, sonic markers including horn stabs as a harmonic element and a longer 2 bar melody which is present on strings act as signifiers of trap music, albeit this is mixed with more traditional hip hop aspects such as a slower tempo of 95 bpm and the bass acting as more of a performative tool with pitch bends. Towards the end after the beat switch, there is a use of a faster tempo and a short 1 bar melody on the horns acting as signifiers more reminiscent of grime music such as Skepta's 'Shutdown' (2015). Despite these two contrasting styles, the piece remains unified through other sonic elements such as the 808 bass and drum samples.

As with other diss tracks in the trend, the lyrics prove to be of crucial importance, especially to KSI. For example, lyrical ownership serves as an important feature to KSI, who has previously dissed others such as RiceGum for having a ghostwriter (2020, 15:38 - 15:45). KSI attests his ownership of his lyrics, firstly noting he was gradually writing his own content in an interview with Sloth (2015, 01:35 - 01:46). Later he reassures his ownership when dissed by Quadecca in 'Insecure', noting 'I write everything' (2018, 07:33 - 07:34). When looking at the lyrical content, KSI uses a variety of pop culture and intertextual references to weaponize his lyrics in a relatable way. One example includes the use of Quadecca's previous song titles to reconstruct their meaning:

Please don't speak again, hold up with your venting
Ain't it wonderful that I'm out here reinventing your career?

Quadeca's referenced songs here include 'Idontwannaspeakagain' (2017), 'Hold Up' (2017), 'Venting' (2017) and 'Wonderful' (2017), which KSI exploits to redefine the meanings and use it to elevate his character by ultimately stating that Quadeca should be quiet and thankful KSI is 'reinventing' his career. This adheres to Morgan's idea that hip hop is 'constructed around the exploitation and subversion... of language' (2001, p. 187).

The vocal delivery of KSI's lyrics also serve as an important musical factor, changing the tonal qualities to reinforce words where suitable. An example of this where KSI goes from a quiet and calm mannerism to a louder, punchier delivery at 1:10 to emphasise the aggression the lyrics:

*Fuck your grade five, you don't need to lie
Glad I made you better 'cause your other shit was dry*

Paired with Zeeshan's use of musical half time and bass heavy approach to this section, the beginning of the lyric 'Fuck your grade five' becomes more impactful as it becomes a statement within the music. In comparison to other diss tracks such as Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro', this shows a more performative use of the voice by providing dynamic range and change in tonal inflections, as opposed to a more consistent, shouty approach.

9.2.4: Summary

KSI demonstrates music to be at the forefront of his writing process. KSI is equally open with what he prioritizes, noting in NME that his main aim is to create 'good content, stuff I'm proud of' (2019, 05:28 - 05:32). This statement serves to further his authenticity with music writing, which in turn is reinforced with other statements he has made in the past. On Charlie Sloth's show, when talking about Sway's involvement with his lyric writing, KSI admitted that he has 'helped' him (2015, 01:06), before noting 'he's an actual rapper, I'm a YouTuber' (01:27 - 01:30). This aligns with views by Armstrong that 'Eminem cannot be inauthentic because he acknowledges the truth about himself' (2004, p. 343). In the same way, KSI acknowledges the truth about himself, further noting that 'With everything I do, I'm real' (in Sloth, 2015, 01:19) and by extension, his music exhibits authenticity in both the production and its meaning to KSI.

9.3: iDubbbz - Asian Jake Paul

The final piece presented in this track analysis is a diss track created by American YouTube comedian iDubbbz, who released his only diss track against YouTuber RiceGum. This formed as a part of a video essay, iDubbbz created critiquing RiceGum's content, using the theme of the 'Seven Deadly Sins'. As with other episodes of his 'Content Cop' series, iDubbbz parodies a specific aspect of his targets personality or content. Therefore, iDubbbz chose RiceGum's diss track-styled approach to summarise the latter's content, as well as serving a conclusion to iDubbbz's video essay.

Unlike the previous tracks analysed in this chapter, iDubbbz had no previous musical knowledge or engagement with rapping and specifically the diss track culture, noting 'I've played around in GarageBand with simple looping things' (in Boyinaband, 2017, 01:14 - 01:18). This presents an interesting case study and raises the question of whether anyone can partake in the trend, provided they are surrounded by the relevant people. In this case, iDubbbz collaborates with British YouTuber Boyinaband, in order to execute a convincing piece appropriate of the diss track culture.

9.3.1: Music

When approaching the creation of the diss track, we see documented in UK YouTuber and musician Boyinaband's video that the music itself was provided by an external source. Due to time constraints, they opted to use a premade instrumental by Kustom Beats. Whilst ordinarily this could be seen as a signifier of not engaging properly with the musical themes, Boyinaband clarified he would normally create the music, and still highlighted the value of the music when developing the lyrical content. Boyinaband explained his writing process, stating 'I would say it's easier to start with the beat, so you don't write lyrics too wordy for the beat' (2017, 01:28 - 01:32). This idea is also reflected in the music chosen so the lyrics serve as a standout feature. The use of a simple 2 bar melody, horn stabs,

minimal change in musical texture and the trap-styled drum samples that serve as the main instrumentation throughout allow for less distractions from the vocal delivery. The song also serves as a geographic marker for iDubbbz, by using a trap-styled beat much like the other American YouTubers. The track also follows the convention of an adlib over a single musical element in the beginning of the track.

In 'Asian Jake Paul', the musicianship does not necessarily derive from the music directly, but how the lyrics interplay with the musical material. Boyinaband highlights how he and iDubbbz played with concepts such as the use of internal rhymes, vocal inflections and considering the syllabic content of the words to change the feel of the vocal delivery. Equally, the words' impact are of value, with iDubbbz wanting to parody RiceGum's use of bold statements such as being broke as an introduction. iDubbbz therefore suggested using a statement such as 'I was gay, but now I'm straight, but now I'm back to being gay now' (09:39 – 09:53). Boyinaband's video emphasises the importance of the voice as an instrument. This is reflected in the music, which overall features a good quality of vocal production in addition to using tools that shape the sound of the voice (some elements for example feature either a vocoder or pitch shifted voice as a variation to the main voice line).

9.3.2: Money

In addition to being considerate with the musical material, iDubbbz adopts some of the cultural tropes related with the diss trend from America, specifically parodying RiceGum's focus on the monetary aspect. Several shots presented throughout show iDubbbz with other content creators throwing money about carelessly, similar to how RiceGum flashes his money in 'God Church' (2017). Furthermore, iDubbbz and the other content creators wear a branded jumper 'Sheep' as a spoof of luxury clothing brand 'Supreme'. Whilst acting as a parodic element, iDubbbz also sold the branded clothing on his spreadshirt website, thus generating additional revenue outside of music sales, showing money as a contributing factor to creating

his work. This is further evidenced by collaborating with other content creators in both his video and his music, featuring YouTubers such as Anisaj, H3H3, Jacksfilms, Ali the Cabbage and Pewdiepie. In addition, the behind-the-scenes video shows musical collaborators including Boyinaband, and references Dan Bull and Kustom Beats. This wide pool of YouTubers participating allows for cross promotion across their own channels. This increases the audience reach through WOM strategies and the likelihood to become viral. As the subject of the content RiceGum also serves to further the virality of the musical material, with iDubbbz selecting a popular YouTuber on the platform, who can be considered as one of the main artists who popularised the diss track culture.



Figure 20: Shot of 'Asian Jake Paul' where iDubbbz parodies the flashy approach to cinematography that others like RiceGum adopt (Washburn, 2017).

9.3.3: Masquerade

What appears to be the main focus of iDubbbz content is the dramatic elements involved, and the diss track he created is uniquely contextualised in his Content Cop episode on RiceGum, titled 'Content Cop - Jake Paul'. The origins of both the diss track and the Content Cop appear to come from RiceGum publicly speaking about the possibility of a Content Cop made on him. This can be seen as an attempt to stave off criticism by downplaying the effect it would have on his content and career. As mentioned earlier in **'Chapter 8: Masquerade'**, this acts as a bait to try and get

increased viewership from the cross promotion a Content Cop should bring. However, instead of publicly naming him as the focus of the content, iDubbbz uses a misleading title and thumbnail to prevent RiceGum from having 'the satisfaction of having his name in the title or his face in the thumbnail' (2017, 02:12 - 02:15).

9.3.4: Summary

Overall, the language presented in this Content Cop suggests the content isn't purely a device for increasing viewership and revenue, but a tool to exact Malicious Impoliteness. This is due to an apparent dislike for RiceGum, which can be classed as 'Genuine Drama'. Throughout the video statements such as 'this bit of mucus' and 'obnoxious arrogant asshole' indicate strong hostility from iDubbbz, going as far to say 'you have nothing to be boastful about you fucking moron' (2017, 25:15 - 25:18). This is further clarified in his Content Deputy spinoff, as a response to RiceGum saying 'I'm not here to be friends with you' (2017, 02:35) as well as 'I don't want your props, you can shove your props straight up your rice hole because I think you are a garbage human being and I want nothing to do with you' (02:17 - 02:24). For iDubbbz, this 'Malicious Impoliteness' serves a purpose beyond offense, in order to publicly criticise RiceGum and hold him accountable for any public wrongdoings he has committed, noting that 'he has this disregard for what he can be criticised for' (03:33 - 03:35). This statement aligns with his ethos on the Content Cop creation process, noting the content created should 'have a purpose or point behind it' (in H3H3, 2020, 03:08 - 03:10).

Despite this, entertainment seems to be a key aspect in iDubbbz work. The aims are not just to be intentionally confrontational with other content creators, but to create fun to watch content for the audience. In a podcast with H3H3, iDubbbz noted that with the Content Cop series, it was 'fun to be creative' (in H3H3, 2017, 02:25) and 'above all, I want to make the videos entertaining' (01:23 - 01:25). However, whether the content is received as such is ultimately out of his control, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 10: Analysing Audience Reception

The three key aspects discussed thus far serve as fundamentals for both producing and understanding the content which is part of this online culture. However, as mentioned in **'Chapter 6: Money'**, 'YouTube is "both industry and user-driven" enabled by its political economy' (O'Neill, 2014, p. 13). It is therefore important to consider the consumers' view, and their role in the dissemination of information coming from YouTube. The importance has been highlighted by various scholars, including Rotman, who noted that users were 'almost unanimous' in feeling that YouTube is 'a community that serves as a platform for communication and interaction rather than a broadcasting application' (Rotman, 2010, p. 330). This is also reflected in the works of Cocker and Cronin:

A resounding message that emerged early in our analysis is the collectively felt sentiment that it is the followers themselves who are not just the recipients, but the custodians, of their favourite YouTubers' personalities. Without followers' continued and active social deconstruction and endorsement of their authorial intent, simulacra and self-presentation, YouTubers' personalities could never be realized and confirmed, thus forever negating the presence and operation of charisma (Cocker and Cronin, 2017, p. 461).

We can investigate the popularity of the diss tracks over time with the use of Google Trends. This allows us to see how the audience engaged with the culture, as either active consumers or part time partakers.

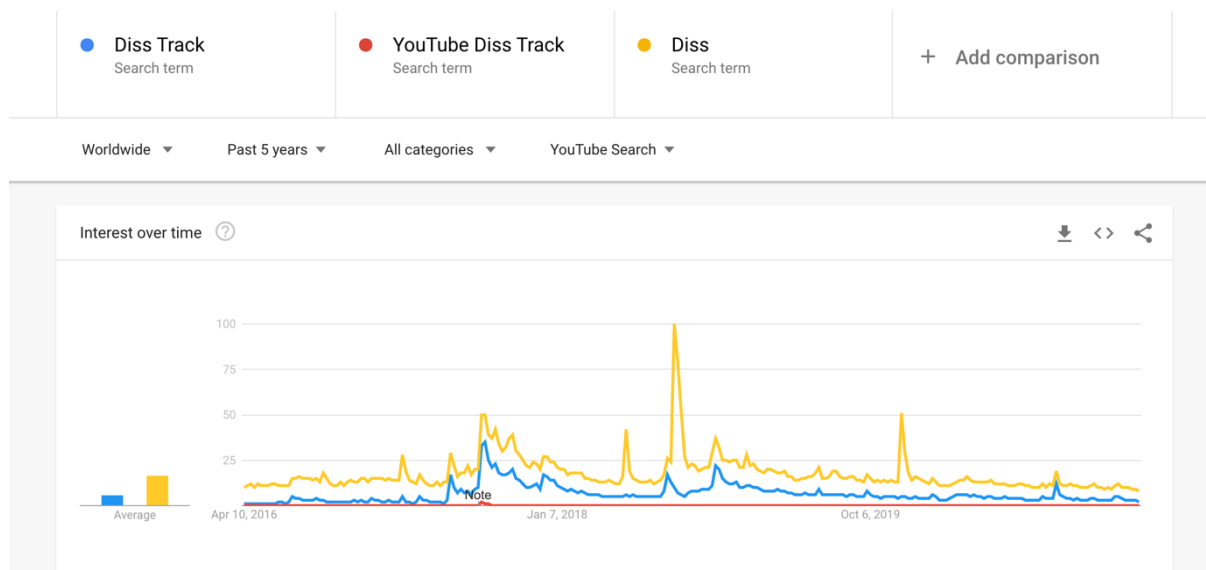


Figure 21: Graph illustrating diss culture's interest via YouTube searches spanning the past 5 years.

In this graph, we can see the largest period with above average interest was from August 6th to December 17th 2017. Two other prominent peaks include May-June 2018, and early September 2018, which appear to be more isolated events. This indicates that diss tracks as part of a cultural movement were most popular during the latter half of 2017.

In addition to the interest measured by Google Trends, YouTube presents us with a like and dislike count, which can be used to measure the overall reception of content. Using the examples presented in the track review, we can observe the ratio of likes/dislikes as a shorthand view of what audience members think of the trend.

Artist / Song	Likes/Dislikes Ratio
Jake Paul / It's Everyday Bro	3,081,536 : 5,253,302
KSI / Ares	617,788 : 134,936
iDubbzbz / Asian Jake Paul	2,171,407 : 237,040
W2S / KSI Sucks	1,592,875 : 212,179
RiceGum / Frick Da Police	1,148,819 : 1,360,055.

Figure 22: List of tracks in the diss trend and their like/dislike ratio.

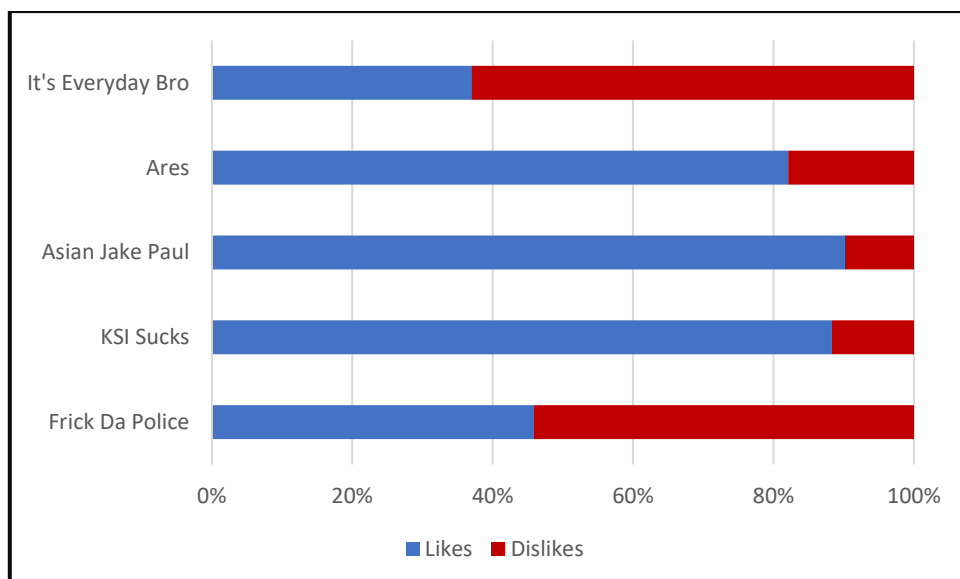


Figure 23: Graph showing the like/dislike ratio of Figure 22 in percentages.

For example, Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro' has a more negatively weighted reception, as demonstrated in Figure 22 and Figure 23. KSI's 'Ares' is shown to be more positively received than some of the other tracks, and the same for iDubbbz's 'Asian Jake Paul' with a ratio likes to dislikes. Other videos in the trend may reinforce both the positive and negative receptions of the tracks, with W2S's 'KSI Sucks' (2017) having a like/dislike ratio of 1,592,875 : 212,179, and RiceGum's 'Frick Da Police' (2017) having a mixed reception with a near 50:50 ratio.

Whilst these graphs can prove useful in seeing the engagement from viewers, it does not provide information on how they view the trend.

10.1: Social Comment Warriors: Buzzwords

One way of gauging the audience perception and overall popularity of the trend is to look at the comments section. Here, viewers can interact and share their opinion with the content creator and other audience participants. In **'Chapter 5: Methodology in Practice'**, I laid out a framework for investigating the comments section using external tools. First, comments needed to be extracted in bulk from videos, which has been done using a comment scraper designed by Rieder (2015). This was mostly successful, but occasionally faltered when dealing with larger comment scrapes, and so an alternative was used called ScrapeStorm (for videos with over one million comments such as Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro'). However, this proved equally problematic as it was a paid service with limited data exports. This meant for the larger videos, smaller sample sizes were used based on the top-rated comments, according to YouTube.



p.91



p.92

Examining the world cloud overall, reception appears mixed, much like 'It's Everyday Bro', but leans to a more positive reception. Descriptors such as 'fire', 'won', 'amazing', 'nice' and 'love' show audience members engaging positively with the track. Negative descriptors still feature, with words used such as 'shit', 'stop', 'trash' and 'irrelevant'. These also extend to abbreviated words such as 'stfu' (meaning shut the fuck up), and 'wtf' (what the fuck). Featured words also show contextual understanding of the platform and references found in pop culture, including 'eminem', 'dax', 'subs' 'fifa' and 'bandana' (the latter a reference to KSI's trademark look). Words can show an understanding of other elements of the diss track trend, with the use of words such as 'drama', 'views', 'fake' and 'ghostwriter'. Interestingly, a more traditional understanding of the trend is also seen to have translated into viewers vocabulary, using words such as 'battle', 'war', 'destroyed' and 'lost' that highlight competitive aspects found in rap battles. The words evidenced demonstrate that people find this as a form of entertainment as opposed to fuelled drama, with words and abbreviations such as 'lol' (laugh out loud), 'joke', 'funny', and 'salty' (meaning the other party is annoyed).

Although these word clouds provide us with interesting key words that can help to understand the audience perception and engagement of the trend, there are various issues presented with the word clouds highlighting individual words. A weighting issue proved to be a significant problem, with certain keywords used in a much larger frequency than others. This led to two adjustments to the word clouds; the largest keywords (which also happened to be artist names) were excluded and the heavier weighted words had their amount reduced to allow for other more important descriptors to be seen. The following demonstrates the problem with word weightings.



Figure 26: Original weightings of the words in 'It's Everyday Bro' and 'Ares', left to right

Another issue presented was the context of individual words, as without directly cross referencing the high volume of scraped comments, words have the potential to carry a different meaning when paired with other words. Such examples of words that can be used in a variety of ways include 'pretty', 'mad' and 'finally'. Words can also be ambiguous, carrying very little meaning by themselves, such as 'bruh', 'ok', and 'ratio'.

The previous issues can lead into the problem of word classification. The question then arises, at what point does a word become valuable to be classed as a descriptor? Despite thoroughly checking the list to deem which words are appropriate, this approach did potentially allow for the potential of authorial bias to appear when deducing what was a sensible inclusion of a word in the word cloud. However, this could be developed upon over time, by having an agreed criterion of words discussed with multiple researchers who understand the context, abbreviations and slang of diss track culture.

10.2: Social Comment Warriors: Full Comments

This is where an investigation of comments at a micro level is beneficial, as full comments can be observed to provide a more thorough contextual understanding of the audience thoughts. For this paper, a random number generator was used, from the website RANDOM.ORG, which according to their website offers 'true random numbers... from atmospheric noise' (Haahr, 2021). From this, a range was set to include the total comment pool scraped from the videos. After this, the generator yielded a number within the set range, and was done so 10 times to provide a sample pool which can then be viewed without authorial bias. However, selection of comments is needed here as comments have the potential to be irrelevant to the video or prove to be incomprehensible. Figure 27 features the following songs which has their comments section scraped.

Artist	Year of Release
iDubbbz - Asian Jake Paul	2017
KSI - Ares	2018
Tanner Fox- We Do It Best	2017
Randolph - MANCHILD	2018
Quadeca - Insecure	2018
Jake Paul - It's Everyday Bro	2017
Diss God - Team 10 & Jake Paul Diss Track	2017

Figure 27: List of artists and songs used to scrape the videos comment sections.

Across this wider sample videos, the opinions continued to vary. Comments can show support for their creators' side in the online feuds, with user Denzel Attard saying 'Fuck ksi' on W2S' track. This can happen even when audience members dislike the song content, with user Multi saying 'dude the auto tune hurts my head but still love you tanner lmao' in reference to Tanner Fox's track.

Users may also focus on whether they enjoy the song content. Positive remarks range from as generic statements, such as user Shyam Mrunal saying 'This shit was fire, I fck with it yo' on Randolph's track, and user Alfredo Fuentes saying 'Fucking firee nice diss man' on Diss God's track. They may also be more specific on what they enjoy and show critical understanding in their enjoyment of the track by highlighting certain aspects they enjoy. An example includes user Cam McGrandle, who writes 'From 1:33 it was actually fire' on W2S' song, as well as user Aditya Chandaliya focusing on the lyrical aspects saying 'Ya really didn't have to kill him like that tho. That was BRUTAL' on Quadeca's track.

Negative remarks work in a similar way, ranging from general viewpoints to specific features the audience does not like. General viewpoints include comments such as user Trash k saying 'You just took a big fat L' on Tanner Fox's track, and user Sarah Brittney saying 'Brb gonna go poke my ears out' on KSI's song. More specific comments showing a more detailed understanding can be seen such as user My Stummy Hurt with 'Your voice makes it sound less hard hitting' on Randolph's song, and user The Explosive Gamer saying 'His flow ls shiit' on Quadeca's track.

10.3: Face-to-Face: Interviews with YouTubers

Whilst these methods are useful for gaining insight into the audience's perspective, further understanding can be reached through more traditional methods of gathering data and opinions, such as interviews. As part of the research into diss track culture, three interviews were conducted with YouTubers who had a musical education. These YouTubers were small (less than 1,000 subscribers) and acted as consumers when engaging with the diss track trend. Each of the YouTubers has a different knowledge of the trend, varying from base knowledge to a more in depth understanding of the culture overall. These YouTubers' names are anonymised and so will be referenced by their participant number.

A main focus of each interview was the impact of the diss trend, with participants 1 and 3 noting how it permeated YouTube's landscape to the degree that there was little variation of content recommended, besides diss tracks. Participant 1 stated 'it's not hard to not see it, if it's not over YouTube then it's all over twitter. ... When someone with two to three million followers creates a diss track, it's basically broadcasted everywhere, even in news articles' (Personal Communication, 2021). Participant 3 noted 'at the time you came onto YouTube, all there was, were diss tracks, the main youtubers were writing diss track after diss track. It was so overwhelming' (2021). For participants 2 and 3, the main narratives they followed involved the KSI vs Logan Paul boxing match and the diss tracks surrounding them. Participant 2 described his interest, saying 'there is something slightly exciting about seeing two people who genuinely don't like each other go at it' (2021).

Each participant had varying opinions on the trend. For participant 2, the enjoyment came from more comedic diss tracks, citing the Steven Tries F2 diss track as one of entertainment. However, participants 1 and 3 were less keen on the trend, both noting they used the internet as a tool for escapism, whereas the online drama brings a bit of reality back. Participant 3 noted that they found it 'all pointless drama' (2021). However, all the participants shared one opinion, that the artists using a diss

track format could make for uncomfortable viewing, with participant 2 noting when the content appeared real and serious, it could be 'cringe' (2021).

The participants were each shown the pieces analysed in the track review section of this paper. For the first two diss tracks (Jake Paul's 'It's Everyday Bro', and KSI's 'Ares'), the opinions across all the participants remained mostly consistent, with a stronger liking for the KSI diss track than Jake Paul's. With 'It's Everyday Bro', the reactions were negative, with Participant 2 criticising elements such as the inconsistent rhythms in Jake Paul's opening verse, describing it as 'juvenile' (2021). Participant 3 highlights the music as problematic, saying it 'is a bit too invasive' (2021). For KSI's 'Ares', the musicality was praised, with Participant 1 admiring the lyrical content, noting 'the flows, sounds and beat switches up' (2021). Participant 3 also conveyed a similar view, stating it was 'impressive that it sounded like an improvisation. That's a talent, personally' (2021). Participant 2 not only praised the lyrics, but how they work with the music, noting 'the end is rather early grime style, but he flows aggressively, with that sort of beat, the beat the lyrics and the style all marry up' (2021).

The reception for the iDubbzbz track varied, with participant 3 describing it as 'kinda meme-y... bonkers lyrics and loads of swearing. It doesn't come across as witty and clever' (2021). Participant 2 explored this comical nature further:

It's all quite silly and the flows are mismatched and wacky, but the beat is wacky as well, and they've managed to make the whole thing fairly coherent... It's not the best track in the world, it's not as musical as the KSI one, but I don't think it's trying to be (Personal Communication, 2021).

Participant 1 also shared a similar opinion to participant 2, attesting that the artists attempt to understand where they are within the culture, noting 'it is also self-aware, it's not going to be top 10, it's a bit of a shit-post at the expense of someone else' (2021).

When asked about the dramatization, opinions varied whether it was real or not. Participant 1 believed most of the diss tracks were 'faked for publicity on both halves' (2021), whereas Participant 2 questioned whether there was 'potentially some scripting' (2021). Participant 3 believed otherwise, noting 'I'd say they were being genuine, but it is embellished, an embellished truth' (2021).

Overall, when asked about the intentions of the artists involved in diss track culture, all participants shared a unified view that the core focus was money and popularity. For Participant 1, the 'diss trend is for egotistical personalities going at one another to help each other succeed and get more money' (2021). However, Participant 2 justified the intentions as clever:

I think the whole thing is quite smart, YouTube has increasingly been more to do with algorithms and views and subscriber counts, and this battle for the top, it's almost like everyone is trying to stay relevant. With diss tracks, people know drama gets clicks, and they are exploiting it... They are making a video that will reach two sets of fan bases (Personal Communication, 2021).

Participant 3 shared this viewpoint, highlighting that 'It was a trend like all these things on YouTube', but acknowledged for artists such as KSI, greater importance lies within the creation of music, noting that 'the music is their passion' (2021).

10.4: A Summary: Contradictions?

With a combination of the comments at both meta and micro level, alongside the interviews, the overall audience reception appears to be one that is mixed. Audience members use a mixture of impactful words and statements to reflect whether they believe the trend to be a form of entertainment they enjoy, or whether the content creators are creating low quality content compared with its roots. For example, from the interviews, Participant 1 believed in the latter, stating 'you'll have someone who's never touched an instrument or microphone in their entire life, and they say "I can write a diss track"' (2021).

If the opinions are varied, the question arises as to why the trend is one that is popular. The answer, according to Silvia, is down to the fact 'people enjoy culturally familiar media entertainment because they can competently and successfully comprehend the entertainment without placing much stress on their cognitive resources' (in Baek, 2015, p. 733). Furthermore, as discussed in **'Chapter 6: Money'**, audiences interact with different artists and communities, with the songs acting as collaborative tools between artists (whether intentional or a side effect). For content creators who may have already have large followings, the effect of diss tracks has seen to create viral content both fanbases share. Noted by Zerkaa, what drives such high numbers is down to 'putting two audiences [together] like bang' (2017, 10:38 - 10:42).

Chapter 11: Conclusion

This thesis posed five questions to answer, which have been explored by delving into concepts that make up the diss track trend: **Money**, **Music** and **Masquerade**. The paper explored the historical roots from flyting, to early hip hop, and later it's adoption on YouTube; firstly, as an isolated culture in UK's Blackpool Grime Media, and later as an international culture featuring UK and US artists. This allowed for a grounded understanding of the diss trend before delving into the main concepts contributing to its success.

11.1: The Body of YouTube Diss: Money, Music, Masquerade

'Chapter 6: Money' explored how YouTubers capitalise on a platform that features free viewing in an ad-friendly environment. YouTubers, acting as influencers to their audiences, can use outside sources such as brands, including their own, to promote commercial goods in their videos and music. The most notable YouTuber that does this is Jake Paul, featuring commodities such as Lamborghinis and Rolaxes in both the video and music of 'It's Everyday Bro', as well as his own merchandise line. Furthermore, financial success is driven by interest and viewer engagement, created in an environment which capitalises on the attention economy of their audience. To keep audience engagement, diss tracks act as a means to cross-promote other channels and allow audiences to mix and engage with each other. Furthermore, the narratives developed prior to, or as a result of, the diss tracks create complex storylines which drive viewers to watch more videos and understand the sequence of events, which YouTuber Zerkaa dubs as 'view loops' (2017,10:06).

'Chapter 7: Music' explored which aspects were important in the trend and investigated how far a YouTuber may engage critically with the music making process. Concepts such as authenticity were explored, citing Moore's list of authenticities to understand whether the artists were genuine in their involvement. Other ideas presented focused on musical element. Such devices include the beat switch presented by Cuchna as important sonic tools to create music suitably representative of modern hip hop. These tools, combined with a developed chart called CHRIMTSS, allowed the observation of YouTubers engaging with the musicality of the trend, as opposed to just the financial aspects. Some artists showed less of an interest in understanding the music, with artists such as RiceGum having used ghostwriters. However, others do consider the musical importance, with YouTubers such as iDubbbz collaborating with a musician when developing their work. Other YouTubers highlight this as a focus of their content creation, with KSI enjoying the creative process in producing diss tracks. The producers were investigated to show their understanding of the musical tropes of hip hop and the sub-genres they work with. Examples include Zeeshan and Dream Addix, who understand the genres they work with. Overall, YouTubers were seen to have engaged more in the lyric writing as opposed to the production of the beat, but this does not disqualify YouTubers from engaging in the understanding of instrumentals. One example included Quadeca, who acted as the producer for his track 'Insecure', suitably stitching together two beats he did not produce.

'Chapter 8: Masquerade' explored how drama on the platform contributed to the trend as a necessity for developing content, with Pihlaja noting that this offers 'creative ways to insult one another, and providing a chance for users to support or oppose others' (2012, p. 14). Hardaker and Culpeper's lists were examined, with the former being of greater importance in classifying the drama types. In turn, this allowed for the exploration into the nature of drama on YouTube as either real or falsified, with three main categorisations: Genuine Drama, Simulated Drama and Fake Drama. YouTubers interactions were found across all three, but the most popular seeming to be Simulated or Fake Drama. However, classifying the drama types brought up the issue of accurately placing a drama narrative into a category,

as YouTubers may portray themselves as different personalities from who they really are. This can skew the audience perception of the artist, and in some cases lead to further issues with the artist being a simulacrum of themselves, such as Jake Paul.

Having observed these areas and investigated tracks that notably represent a certain aspect of the trend, it appears to have been one that at heart was driven by financial success. The interplay of dramatic elements with audience crossovers allowed for expansive narratives to form, whether real or falsified, which has been observed by YouTuber Zerkaa as a series of 'view loops' (2017,10:06). This in turn generates interest in a content creator, leading to increased revenue. Furthermore, having seen YouTube contributors with little or no musical background shows that a wider engagement of the culture ultimately meant the diss track trend was indeed, just a trend, a reflection of the current style and landscape of YouTube was at the time. The apparent ease in creating these diss tracks allows for quicker responses to be made to the initial content creators, in either a reaction or diss format, and can be considered as a form of factory-made music due to the immediacy created when an initial diss track is released.

This ready-made success mirrors that of a more mainstream market found with production companies in the 1980's - 1990's such as Pete Waterman Entertainment (PWE, previously PWL), with industry practitioners such as Harding labelling the practices as 'manufactured pop... in the 1990's' (2019, p. 11). Behaviours of the manufactured pop presented in Harding's *'Pop Music Production: Manufactured Pop and BoyBands of The 1990s'* include the manufacturing and grooming of artists by music managers to 'meet the demand' (p. 13), and artists reducing conflict with the management who are 'basically running their careers' (p. 69). Such behaviours present themselves similarly in YouTube's diss track culture, with online personalities such as RiceGum becoming utilised by music producers in the studio. Another mirror between the observations of Harding and YouTube's diss culture is the characterisation of music as something sounding 'really conveyer belt production-wise' (Lindsay, in Harding, p. 12).

This is not to say that music is not considered, and contrary to the prior notes on money as a driving force, music allows for certain content creators to find a new creative output. YouTubers such as KSI and Randolph have used the trends to either refine their writing process or promote their musical talent. This, in turn, has allowed them to gain attention and verification from external verifiers, such as Sway DaSafo in his endorsement of KSI. Of equal importance to the rappers on YouTube are also the producers who create the instrumentals and writers who assist in the development of the YouTube artists. These producers technical understanding of both lyrical and musical features, such as the beat switch and internal rhymes, allow for the full musical potential to permeate the diss tracks for those who take the music seriously.

11.2: A Mixed Audience

This thesis also sought a wider understanding of the reception of the trend, using analytical tools to learn of the audience's views. What is presented is a mixture of opinions that vary from compelling support of the audience's creators, to intense language showing others' displeasure of the trend. Keywords that consistently appear include 'good', 'shit', 'trash' and 'like'. However, keywords alone are not enough as they should be paired with sentences that provide context; 'fuck' may be considered a negative word. However, when the audience may use it in a positive form, such as user Alfredo Fuentes saying 'Fucking firee nice diss man'.

With the mixture in reception to the culture, the main question remained in why diss tracks were popular, which resulted in two notable findings. Firstly, the importance of cross promotion with YouTuber audiences, with ideas presented such as WOM pressure, memes and driving attention economy through constant interaction. Secondly, the simplicity, or rather cultural familiarity of the music, may have allowed for an easier adoption by audiences. This was highlighted by Silvia, noting that 'people enjoy culturally familiar media entertainment because they can competently and successfully comprehend the entertainment without placing much

stress on their cognitive resources' (in Baek, 2015, p. 733). Using genres that were derivative of hip hop has allowed for audiences to more readily relate to the content that the YouTubers published. This is emphasised when looking at what sub genres were used, with British YouTubers adopting grime which has closer geographical ties to the capital of London, and American YouTubers using Trap which has geographical relations to Southern State areas such as Atlanta.

11.3: Future Implications

Despite the success of these tracks, YouTube is proving to be a harder platform for new artists and cultures to break through, seemingly being gatekept by more notable content creators such as Jake Paul and KSI. According to George 'we find that YouTube displaces more than promotes local culture' (2014, p. 2). One way to view this is to compare different music types on Google Trends, where diss as a search term struggles to compete against terms such as pop music.

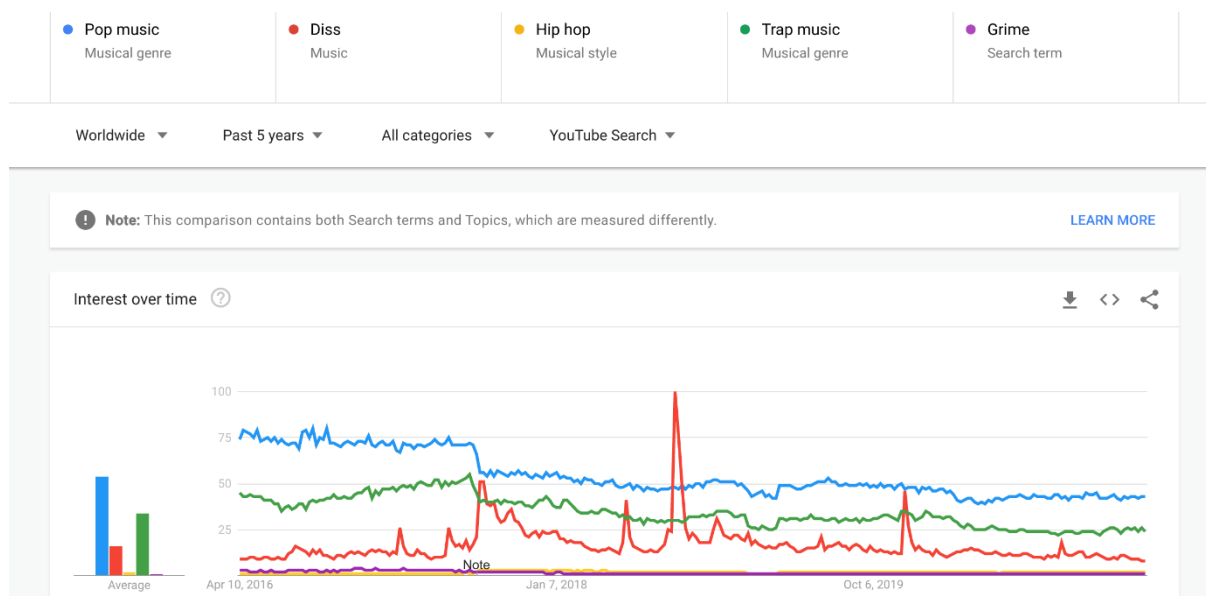


Figure 28: Graph showing a selection of musical genres over the 5-year period when diss track culture developed on YouTube.

Furthermore, content creators appear to struggle with making the promoted sections of YouTube, going against channels that have a presence within mainstream media such as television. This is highlighted by Callux in Zerkaa's 'Homegrown Podcast', where he references competition from such channels including James Corden (2017, 08:55 - 09:10). Concerns expressed from content creators such as Callux show a problem with how YouTube promotes channels, which suggests that mainstream programs are more likely to reach trending pages than independent creators, which is likely due to the revenue potential of these channels. The shift in YouTube's support from independents is highlighted by Zerkaa, noting 'YouTube is no longer this place where you are gonna broadcast yourself... it's now going to become this dog-eat-dog business world where we are all essentially a TV network' (2017, 08:13 - 08:26).

Even though independent content creators attempt to combat these problems of being displaced, music following the diss culture trend may not be able to thrive under YouTube's recent guidelines. Since an older video of prominent YouTuber Pewdiepie resurfaced in 2017, where two kids held a sign that said 'Death to all Jews', YouTube have previously and continue to be 'aggressively demonetizing videos that might be problematic' (Alexander, 2019). According to the *BBC*, the following policies on YouTube can lead to banned videos.

- Contained explicit threats of violence
- bullied somebody about their appearance
- revealed somebody's personal information
- encouraged viewers to harass an individual
- "veiled" or implied threats of violence, such as saying "you better watch out"
- simulated violence towards an individual
- malicious insults based on protected attributes such as race, gender expression or sexual orientation

(BBC, 2019).

The *BBC* also noted that 'video-makers who consistently break the rules will have their ability to earn advertising revenue restricted, and may have videos deleted or their channel closed' (2019). These rules which apply to everyone 'including politicians and popular YouTube stars' (2019) may prove to not only limit new talent attempting to enter the trend, but also end diss culture as presented in this paper, including the more violent use of lyrics as noted in BGMedia's approach to diss tracks. However, the *BBC* also noted that there were exemptions in the newer policies introduced, which include 'scripted satire, stand-up comedy, or music' (2019). Whilst this suggests that diss tracks may continue, there is still uncertainty for YouTubers attempting to emerge in the trend with the threat of demonetisation, which serves as one of the main avenues for making money. Other implications of demonetisation could potentially lead to fewer sponsorships, as effectively YouTube would be deeming the content non-brand friendly, which may further hurt the artist and prove financially non-beneficial, which as highlighted in this paper serves as a key motivator for the trend itself.

With the above concerns, a new content creator may struggle at engaging with the trend without the support, both financially and from established content creators that can allow them to have the exposure for a successful diss track. However, there is still no certainty of such videos remaining on the site with YouTube's own policies and could still potentially lead to a termination of the YouTubers account.

As from 2021, data from Google Trends, paired with the stricter rules of YouTube's guidelines, suggest that diss tracks on YouTube may not see an immediate return. Interest in the topic via YouTube searches appear to be at one of the lowest over the past 10 years, with small peaks in interest only appearing from the most recent major spike in December 2019 onwards, as can be seen in both Figure 21 and Figure 28. Before that, the last major spike occurred in September 2018, which was the largest following a dip in interest from the most consistently active period in 2017. This suggests that currently, diss tracks are more likely to occur in volatile, brief periods, so it is still possible for a YouTuber to post a diss track and garner interest.

Whilst YouTubers have the potential to still release diss tracks, the trend has effectively acted as a snapshot of music by independents on YouTube, with its longest period of interest happening between August and December of 2017. Whilst a popular trend in the US, for the UK, diss track culture acted to revitalise viewership for the current year, as highlighted by YouTuber WillNE (2017, 00:36 - 00:50).

11.4: A Final Review: A Past Impactful Opportunity

Regardless of where diss track culture is currently headed, its impact should be noted for driving the careers and popularity of YouTubers. Whilst not actively creating music as much as he has in the past, Jake Paul has managed to continue to release music and expand his career, diversifying into professional boxing, with his most recent fight featuring MMA wrestler and Olympic Athlete Ben Askren. KSI continues to post YouTube videos to his second channel but has also collaborated with mainstream musicians such as Anne-Marie, Craig David and Yungblud, achieving numerous accolades including his debut album charting at number 2, below English pop rock band The 1975. KSI has also managed to reach platinum sales on his record with Nathan Dawe 'Lighter' in the summer of 2020.

Despite the mixed reception from when artists have partaken in the diss track trend on YouTube, some have managed to use this phenomenon to further their careers with great success, all as independents who released content for free on their YouTube channels.

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