**Introduction**

Where nightlife research has engaged with the topic of race, it has drawn attention to racial and ethnic exclusion (Böse, 2005, Talbot and Böse, 2007, Rigakos, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009). This article uncovers something different, by exploring how commercial thinking is now the driving force behind the inclusion of Black individuals at night. Situated within a white, provincial county called “Greenshire”, the research outlines how venue managers strategically host “urban nights” with drill and grime music played to attract Black night-time revellers. Where Black consumers were once declined, they are now reconfigured as a source of income accumulation on otherwise quiet weeknights. This is not to say that the persistence of racism and discrimination identified in previous nightlife research has reduced (Talbot and Böse, 2007, Talbot, 2009: 2011, Søgaard, 2014: 2017), and I draw attention to the white governing gaze through which the word choice, speech patterns, dance and dress of some Black revellers become problematised. Whilst nightclubs did not employ dress codes that excluded traditionally Black cultural forms of dress, like those identified in previous research in the US (May and Chaplain, 2008, May, 2014), door staff used their interactions with young Black men to remind them to speak, dress and dance in “acceptably white” (Bhopal, 2018: 29) ways.

This research challenges notions of the neoliberal night (Roberts 2009; Hadfield 2014; Shaw 2015), revealing the ways in which the state police govern “urban nights”. Firstly, in a bid to maintain positive relations with the police, venue managers submitted Temporary Event Notice licensing applications to the police if they wanted to host an “urban” night (see also: Author, date). In most cases, these applications were not necessary by law as they did not deviate from the venues already existing licence. Secondly, whilst the police were otherwise relatively absent from governing the night-time high street, their presence was noted on “urban” nights with some public order policing tactics employed. The research identifies the shared value systems of the police, door staff and venue managers, who interpret young Black men from London in terms of their gang affiliation. Whilst previous research evidences how door staff establish between upper and lower class Black individuals (Søgaard, 2014, May, 2014), I uncover how door staff also focus their efforts on distinguishing between “insiders” (from Greenshire) and “outsiders” (Black individuals from London, Northerners and “squaddies”).

**The literature**

Early studies of nightlife and club cultures painted a picture of the night as a hedonistic space of transgression and violence (Muggleton 2000; Bennett 2000; Hobbs et al., 2003; Winlow and Hall 2006). Within these studies, little attention was given to the exclusion, marginalisation and criminalisation that saturates night spaces. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature which draws attention to the marginalization and criminalization of subcultural forms of expression in the UK (Böse 2005; Talbot and Böse 2007; Talbot 2007), and the criminalisation of drill and grime music (Fatsis 2018, 2019; Ilan 2020). Drill music has frequently been linked to gang violence and knife crime, and in 2021 academics in the UK petitioned against a Policy Exchange Report which linked drill music to youth violence (Kingsley, 2021).

Night space is both racialized (May and Chaplin 2008; May 2014; Søgaard 2014; Søgaard 2017) and classed (Böse 2005; Measham and Hadfield 2009; Haydock 2014), with Measham and Hadfield (2009) drawing attention to the nuances within club cultures and how these are impacted by both “race” and class. Rejecting the language of PLUR “peace, love, unity and respect”, the authors reveal how informal processes such as club launches, internet promotions and dress codes work to exclude electronic dance music of Black origin and its minority ethnic and working class following from Manchester city centre nightclubs and the working-class from nightclubs in London’s West End. Deborah Talbot’s (2007) ethnographic study in “Southview”, an anonymous area in the UK, evidenced how police licensing decisions result in the censoring of alternative and racialized nights and night-time venues. Talbot (2007) found that licence holders who were interpreted by the police as co-operative would be warned of inspections before they would occur. This had a detrimental impact on Black licensees who were more likely to be interpreted by the police as uncooperative. Böse’s (2005) found that Black licensees in Manchester attracted more attention than white licensees, working to earn the support of the police by installing CCTV and turnstiles. Author (Year) also demonstrates how the state police conduct informal investigations into Temporary Event Notices (TENs) to determine the racialized nature of the night-time event which has been applied for.

Processes of gentrification have reclaimed night-time spaces, producing them as spaces for white, affluent clientele (Hae 2011; Hankins et al., 2012; Oloukoï 2018) in various global contexts. “Take Back the Night” marches have taken place in a number of geographical contexts, traditionally used to draw attention to violence against women at night. Oloukoï’s (2018) argues that these marches also reveal the ways in the night is reserved for middle-class whites in Jeppestown, South Africa. In night-time spaces, white privilege casts other racialized embodiments, practices and behaviours as deviant (Hankins et al., 2012). In some instances, Black individuals have dressed like middle class whites in order to access nightclubs in the US (May and Chaplin 2008; May 2014). Within the UK, the whiteness of provincial spaces is taken as evidence that these areas do not have a “race problem” (Agyeman and Spooner 1997). This denial of racism is problematic as the attitudes of (often white) residents in provincial areas impact racialized individuals who either reside in these spaces or visit them (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997, Neal, 2002). bell hooks (1992) argues that the racialized Other is constantly redefined and reinforced in its difference and marginality from the “white norm”. This can result in hard exclusion (Samara 2010), or more nuanced systems of belonging and non-belonging (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Tyler 2010) for people of colour in these spaces. This paper therefore extends from the narrow understanding of racism as a discriminatory act to explore the ways in which the norms of whiteness are maintained at night (Pulido, 2000).

Situated within a white provincial context I have called “Greenshire”, this article contributes to the existing literature in numerous ways. Firstly, the research contradicts previous literature which has uncovered racial and ethnic exclusion at night (Talbot and Böse, 2007, Rigakos, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009) by revealing how commercial thinking is now the driving force behind the inclusion of Black individuals at night. The tensions which arise for policing “urban nights” in a white, provincial space are uncovered. Secondly, much of the literature on the governance of nightlife has overlooked the significance of whiteness (with the exception of May, 2014), and this research uncovers how door staff use their role to reinstate acceptable whiteness (Bhopal, 2018: 29) at the door and in the nightclub. Thirdly, I uncover the importance of markers of “insiderness” in gaining access to nightlife, with race, accent and attire acting as markers of “outsiderness”. Black individuals in particular were assessed for their “outsiderness”, due to shared beliefs regarding the potential gang membership of young Black men from London. Finally, by evidencing the autonomy of the state police over the licensing of nightlife, and the tactics utilised by the state police at “urban nights”, this research challenges long-held conceptions of the neoliberal night (Roberts 2009; Hadfield 2014; Shaw 2015).

**Methods**

The findings presented in this paper stem from my doctoral research which involved an ethnography in “Greenshire”, an anonymised provincial context in the South of England. The main aim of the research is to uncover how ideas about race and racialized minorities impact the ways in which nightlife is produced, policed, accessed and experienced. Policing is approached as beyond ‘what the police do’ (Crawford 2014: 173) and this paper engages with the viewpoints and actions of venue managers, door staff and police officers. In utilising an ethnographic approach, I immersed myself in a year-long period of fieldwork in Greenshire in 2018[[1]](#endnote-1). Over the course of the year, thirty-three night-time observations took place both on weeknights and weekend nights. These consisted of observing door staff, venue managers, police officers, street pastors, taxi-marshalls and fast-food staff police night-time venues and the night-time high street.

Observations alongside door staff and venue managers at well-known “urban nights” took place at two nightclubs which I have called *Altitude* and *Monarchy*. *Altitude* held “urban nights” on a weekly basis, whilst other night-time venues, including *Monarchy,* hosted these nights on an infrequent basis. These involved spending time observing door staff and venue managers at work, both on the door, and inside night-time venues. I observed the police govern the night-time high street on “urban nights” and attended licensing visits with police licensing officers. Throughout these observations, I made mental notes, using moments of quiet to note down small phrases or key words in a pocketbook and on returning home I used these to write up full fieldnotes.

Interviews and group discussions with thirty-six research participants also informed the study. These include sixteen interviews with police officers of varying ranks and responsibilities, ten interviews with venue managers, six interviews with door staff and four interviews with street pastors. All of the venue managers and door staff who were interviewed had experience of hosting “urban nights”. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and were broadly organised around four main themes: my research participants’ understandings of race, past interactions with racialized minorities, experience of race or diversity training and recommendations for the future policing of nightlife.

I applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the analytical framework in my analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts. CDA allows the researcher to study the ways in which social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted (van Dijk 2015: 466). Inspired by neo-Marxism and Foucault (1971), CDA approaches institutions as serving the interests of certain powerful groups and imposing their power on certain individuals (Mayr 2015: 796). By drawing upon CDA, I pay attention to how discourses maintain power, dominance and inequality between those who police and those who are policed. Traditionally, ethnographers have attempted to navigate and gain access to the “backstage” (Goffman 1990), as if the “backstage” holds some “reality” or “truth” that other settings do not. This paper takes a different approach, by exploring how structural inequalities are maintained through the value systems and thought processes of the research participants. In doing this, I uncover the ways in which the governance of racialized minorities takes place in a range of traditionally “frontstage” and “backstage” contexts, from “the door”, the dance floor, to interviews and discussions throughout the fieldwork.

**Greenshire’s nightlife and “urban nights”**

Greenshire is a wealthy county in the South of England with some pockets of deprivation. Many commuters reside in the area and take advantage of the quick transport links to London. The area is made up of a number of traditional market towns, some boast a number of private schools and acres of rural countryside whilst others are more densely populated with large shopping centres, cinema complexes and restaurants. Over 90% of residents described themselves as White British in the 2011 census[[2]](#endnote-2) (higher than the national figure of 85.4%), with a smaller percentage of residents from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds. The majority of those from Black or minority ethnic minority backgrounds are of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African origin.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The reduction in independently owned night-time venues and alternative nightlife experiences seen in the UK (Chatterton and Hollands 2002; 2003) has impacted Greenshire’s night-time scene, with most night-time venues owned by large corporate chains producing “mainstream” experiences. Some venues cater for older clientele through ‘over 21’ entry policies and higher priced drinks, whilst others encourage younger audiences through their marketing and the promotion of ‘buy one get one free’ offers on cheap drinks. Whilst there was some differentiation in the age of clientele attending each venue, on weekend nights venues tended to cater for a predominantly white, local and largely heterosexual clientele.

Over the last decade, there has been a marked number of Black students choosing to study in Greenshire in part due to a university agenda aimed at diversifying the student demographic. There has also been a growth in the popularity of Black music genres such as grime and drill, which have become increasing popular in the UK since the mid-late 2010s (Ilan, 2020). In 2019, Stormzy, a Black British grime and hip hop artist, made history as the first Black British artist to headline at the annual Glastonbury festival (Walker, 2019). This has meant that Black music genres which have historically been marginalised have now begun to enter the mainstream. Due to the increase in Black students in Greenshire, and the increased popularity of drill and grime, venue managers had begun to host “urban nights” in a bid for their venue to remain popular and as an attempt to increase income. During these nights, DJs played a mixture of drill and grime, as well as hip hop and R&B music. The clientele at “urban nights” was a mixture of Black African, African-Caribbean, mixed race and white individuals. Black individuals from London also travelled to Greenshire to attend “urban nights”, particularly when the nightclub was hosting live grime artists.

It is important to pause and reflect on the problematic use of the term “urban nights”, used by the research participants to refer to nights where Black music subcultures with differing orientations and histories are played (see Fatsis 2018; 2019 for a brief history of the origins of drill, grime, hip hop and rap). The use of this term is an expression and reproduction of certain structures of institutional racism, whereby distinct and different Black music subcultures have been problematically grouped under one heading. In addition, this language also evidences how these nights stood out as deviating from the normative white backdrop of nightlife in Greenshire. As this language was utilised by the research participants, it has been used reflexively throughout the paper.

**Hosting “urban nights”: desires and hyper-vigilance**

Throughout the fieldwork, venue managers expressed a desire to host “urban nights”. Venue managers explained that drill and grime music is becoming increasingly popular with their clientele. Hosting nights where drill and grime are played meant that venues could remain on trend whilst venue managers could benefit monetarily from the increasing Black student demographic in Greenshire. During an interview with Michael, the Marketing Manager at *Altitude* and Jason, Venue Manager at *Altitude,* they spoke positively of the commercialisation of Black music genres and the increase in non-white consumers in the nightclub:

Michael: The music we play now is commercialised, radios are playing it more frequently and at festivals you see more urban people, hip hop people, they’re headlining now. Lots of people are here for it and to be fair, if they are Black, Asian, Chinese, it doesn’t matter. I think that’s all the better to see them at the club really.

Jason: There are nightclubs now, the big commercial ones, 2000 people plus, they have an urban room, they have that urban room because it’s becoming so popular. People love our “urban” night, we get all colours and creeds coming.

Michael and Jason explained that they played a diverse range of music in their night-time venue and drew upon the existence of “urban nights” as evidence of Greenshire’s nightlife being contemporary and exciting. Michael notes the increase in “urban” and “hip hop” people, both at festivals and inside the nightclub in which he works. He draws upon a post-race rhetoric (Tate 2016) to de-emphasize the race and ethnicity of the clientele, stating ‘if they are Black, Asian, Chinese, it doesn’t matter’. Yet the racial and ethnic make-up of the audience at “urban nights” was noticeably different to weekend nights, with a significant increase in Black African and Black Caribbean youth.

The increased popularity of music associated with Black culture was also drawn upon by Michael and Jason to evidence that nightlife now caters to different racial and ethnic audiences. During his interview, Jason spoke of the change he had witnessed throughout his thirty years as a venue manager at nightclubs in the South of the UK, stating that many venues now host “urban nights” and have “urban” rooms or floors. Rebecca, the venue manager at *Monarchy* spoke of the popularity of grime artists with the student clientele:

The students, they want the association with Wiley, Loxy, Stormzy, Giggs and so on, they want us to play boys who come from where they’ve come from. i.e. working-class families who possibly live on an estate and have made something of themselves. They’ve rapped. I think Wiley said six years ago he couldn’t get a reload on his song, now he can get whatever he wants- including an MBE.

Previous literature has highlighted how commercial imperatives, articulated in ‘loss reduction strategies’ (Hadfield, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009), have resulted in racial exclusion in the night-time economy. This research evidences otherwise, by illustrating how “urban nights” are now used as a commercial imperative to help night-time venues remain popular. Despite venue managers desires to host “urban nights”, they were often held infrequently (with the exception of *Altitude,* which held them weekly) and their ability to go ahead depended almost entirely on the response of police licensing officers. Under the Licensing Act (2003), Temporary Event Notice (TEN) applications are used to govern night-time events in England and Wales. These applications are reviewed by the police force, the local council and others, in line with the licensing objectives (Author, Year). By law, TENs only need to be submitted to the police if the proposed night-time events fall outside of the remit of the venues already existing licence (see Home Office, 2011). Whilst most of the “urban nights” I observed did not require a TEN, most venue managers submitted TENs for “urban nights” in a bid to maintain good police relations (see: Author, Year). Rebecca, the venue manager at *Monarchy*, described a desire to host “urban nights” more regularly during her interview:

I was saying to my boss recently that the university could host these events but we’re a business so why allow it to go there? I said to him ‘I’m telling you; I want to do an “urban night” and if we don’t do it then someone else will, I want to do it here, it’s a business and they are an audience which are here for six months of the year. Let’s have their business, let’s get with society and build a community’.

Many venue managers had experience of police licensing officers declining their TENs applications for “urban nights”. As a consequence, some venue managers no longer attempted to host these nights at all. Others, like Rebecca, were more persistent and managed to host “urban nights” on a more irregular basis. This meant that there was little pattern to when or where “urban nights” took place. This paper draws attention to how TENs applications are used by the police force to govern and marginalize “urban nights”, contributing to the existing literature which has drawn attention to racist and discriminatory police licensing practices (Talbot 2004; 2007; 2011). This paper goes further to evidence how venue managers use “urban nights” to appeal to an increased Black student demographic, a finding which contradicts the night-life literature which has uncovered the exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities from nightlife (Hadfield, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009). As a consequence, venue managers experience a tension in their desire to host “urban nights” and a need to maintain positive police relations, in part due to power of the police in night-time licensing (Author, Year). Those who were successful in hosting “urban nights” often had to evidence how the nights would be adequately policed – a finding explored in more detail below.

**Managing threat and protecting the experiences of white locals**

Despite the staging of “urban nights” for Black students, there was a collective assumption that these nights needed to be closely monitored and policed due to the increased numbers of Black clientele. This viewpoint was shared by many police officers, venue managers and door staff throughout the fieldwork. Prior to “urban nights” commencing, an enhanced door team was called upon by venue managers to work the door and the dancefloor. Venue managers also operated an informal “all search” policy on “urban nights” with all night-time revellers searched on the door prior to entry. Particular attention was given to items hidden under, or within headwear, bags and pockets. In some cases, Black men were asked to remove headwear to prove that weapons and/or drugs were not concealed underneath. Puddicombe writes, “to the dominant, not having the ability to ‘see’ the whole ‘Other’ is unbearably defeating’ (2011: 5).

The heightened governance of “urban nights” was also predicated in part upon managing an assumed tension between white locals and Black consumers. Rebecca, the venue manager at *Monarchy,* states:

Here it’s very much “we slice our bread this way, we walk this way, we dance this way”. The locals are not open to anything new. Say it’s an “urban” night, the students are about and their music comes on, the locals will leave the dancefloor and be like “well what is this? It’s the type of place where everyone stops and looks and goes ‘who is that, who are they?”, it’s very, very insular, very insular indeed.

The use of the pronoun “we” insinuates a commonality between the normative night-time participant, who, in Rebecca’s words, slices their bread, walks and dances in certain ways. The use of “we” is indicative of a racialized norm, which predicates itself upon particular white, local norms of behaviour and embodiment at night. Black night-time participants, who dance and walk in certain ways, appear visible against this white, local norm. Sara Ahmed argues that the noting of racialized minorities “tells us much more about what is already in place than it does about ‘who’ arrives” (Ahmed 2007 as cited in Held 2015: 39). The presence of Black individuals in night-time venues which have traditionally been reserved for white locals results in disorientation, described as a “dissonance” or “jarring” experienced by the white individuals whose sense of place is disrupted (Puwar, 2004, p. 42). This resulted in Jason, the venue manager at *Altitude,* segregating or confining groups of Black consumers to “urban nights”:

Jason: There will be times where we’ll knock back people and won’t tell them why, but we’ll know what the reason is in our heads, you know four army lads, I’m gonna knock them back because, I’m not gonna tell them “sorry lads I’ll knock you back because you’re in the army” but I will turn around and say “not tonight lads” because you think that could be a clash. Same as if we had a student night on a Tuesday, it’s all 18, 19 year olds from the university and then we might get four Black guys turn up from the city, they will get knocked back, the reason is we don’t want…the clash. We turn around and say “lads, you wanna come to the urban night tomorrow, what are you doing, it’s the wrong night tonight”.

Interviewer: You know you said more Black people come to “urban nights”, would you potentially go to 10 white local guys that were trying to get in “actually, this isn’t going to work?”

Jason: nah, nah, nah, nah. They’d be fine, we’d let them in. You have to think, “I’ve seen these people before”.

By segregating and confining Black individuals to “urban nights”, Jason maintains the idea that weekend nights and other night-time events are not for Black consumers. Through their classification practices, venue managers and door staff reproduced stereotypes, collapsing individuals into certain categories such as ‘Blacks’, ‘whites’, ‘army/squaddies’ (see also: Sögaard, 2014). The access of Black night-time participants is assessed based upon the perceived risk that they present to the night-time venue and the experiences of the white night-time consumers inside, whose access remained unquestioned on the grounds of race. Jason speaks of the “clash” that Black men from London, as well as “army lads”, present to the ambience inside the night-time venue. In doing this, Jason presents inter-racial interaction as problematic, issuing Black night-time participants with reminders to attend on “urban nights”.

The literature has drawn attention to how white working-class groups, such as “chavs” in the UK (Hayward and Yar 2006) and “white trash” in the US (Hartigan 1997; Webster 2008) suffer stereotypes and social exclusion. The exclusion of “army lads” at *Altitude* is indicative of a “hierarchy of whiteness” (Webster 2008), where some whites are seen as “less white” than others. During observations, it was noted that venue managers support informal door policies whereby night-time participants are more likely to be denied access for the following: being Black, having Northern accents, appearing to be labourers (noted through scruffy attire and/or dirty hands) and being in the army. In the UK, army recruitment schemes often target boys from working-class backgrounds in an effort to turn them into “productive” members of society (see: Basham, 2016). “Army lads’, “Blacks”, “Northerners” and labourers not only shared in their class attributes but also their “outsiderness”, being located in Greenshire temporarily for work or study. Door staff believed that those who were not from Greenshire needed to be more heavily vetted as they were more likely to cause trouble. This meant they spent time detecting “outsiders” at the door, paying attention to the night time participant’s race, ethnicity, accent and dress. Race was a marker of “outsiderness” and Black individuals were asked for their IDs so that door staff could determine whether they were from Greenshire or London. Those registered to a London address were more likely to be turned away from night-time venues due to assumptions about the potential gang affiliations of Black individuals from metropolitan contexts.

Access to night-time venues is therefore informed by ideas of race and class, as well as ideas of place and belonging. Zygmunt Bauman (2015) shares that a sense of community is integral to a sense of security. The risk-averse nature of venue managers and door staff means that they actively try to create a sense of familiarity inside the nightclub, with fear projected onto those seen as a threat to the community. Whiteness produced a sense of familiarity, with acceptably white (Bhopal, 2018) consumers less likely to be assessed for their “outsiderness”. The night-time literature has revealed the hyper masculine characteristics associated with door work, such as toughness and “muscle” (Monaghan 2002; Hobbs et al., 2003). Some Black men, labourers and “army lads” appeared more muscular than some door staff and their bodies were read in terms of the potential threat they presented both to the venue, and those that work there. Whilst Black women were subjected to the same intensive searches on the door, they were not explicitly problematised in conversations with door staff or venue managers. Their gender meant they were less likely to be read as a threat or attached to pre-existing stereotypes of the male gang member. In some instances, door staff called upon street pastors or friends to deal with their drunkenness, interpreting their behaviour in terms of their ‘excess’ (see also: Skeggs, 2005).

**Door staff: producing white, local and cultural modes of acceptability**

Contrary to existing research, which has drawn attention to the ways in which commercial imperatives fuel the exclusion of Black and ethnic minority consumers (Hadfield, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009), this paper presents a novel finding in evidencing how commercial thinking is now the driving force behind venues hosting “urban nights”. Black individuals are no longer a risk to profit accumulation but are a potential source of profit-making for venues – with “urban nights” strategically used as part of venue manager’s efforts to remain popular amongst the mainstream. Hosting “urban nights” enhances the venues popularity and caters to the increasing Black student demographic in Greenshire who are presumed to want to attend these nights. At the same time, the presence of Black individuals in a traditionally white space disorientates those who reside there and/or those who have a responsibility for policing night-time venues. This section explores how door staff are left responsible for managing the assumed increased risk present on “urban nights”.

Much of the night-time literature has revealed the importance of the “door” for the assessment of night-time participants (Hobbs et al., 2003; O’Brien, 2009; Preiser 2016), with recent literature drawing attention to the ways in which race is intrinsic to social sorting practices and exclusion at the door (Rigakos 2008; Measham and Hadfield, 2009; Søgaard 2014; Søgaard 2017). I build upon this literature to draw attention to the white gaze of door staff and the impact this has on the governance of Black consumers. I interrogate the contradictions present in the staging of “urban nights” ‘for’ Black night-time consumers, whilst these individuals are reminded that their access in one of continual negotiation. There are particular modes of dress and bodily comportment that Black individuals can have, or present themselves to have, which increase their access to “urban nights” in Greenshire (see also: May, 2014). The ways in which these modes are informed by white, local norms of acceptability and the impact this has both on the governance of both the door *and* inside the nightclub is explored.

***Body language, speech patterns and word choice***

Throughout the fieldwork, door staff problematised young Black men for having an “attitude”. Kenny shares:

Kenny: They’re much more street, much more gangster than a Saturday night. If they turn up being rude to me, I’ll be rude back, at the end of the day respect works both ways, so if you can’t turn up somewhere, all you’ve got to say is “evening”. If you turn up *(Kenny walks with his arms out wide to the side of his body and leans in the opposite direction in a ‘bowling’ fashion, and states in a low voice “I wanna come in”),* if you have that attitude at the front door, then what’s that attitude going to be when someone bumps into you in the club? As a door man, you don’t get to sit there and think about it for an hour, you have to make the decision. I see it mostly from the Blacks, because I don’t know if it’s a gangster thing, but we definitely see it more from them… the attitude.

Interviewer: how would you describe that attitude?

Kenny: it’s body language and sayings, a lot of their sayings I don’t understand, they might have a different meaning for something that I have a meaning for, so if they’re saying something I’ll say ‘boys, I don’t know what you mean, so you either tell me what’s going on, because I need to know what’s going on, lets chill, relax’. It’s their attitude, its nothing to do with their skin colour. It doesn’t matter who turns up but if you turn up and you’ve got attitude already, before you’ve even got in the venue, why?

Kenny problematizes the body language, word choice and linguistic style of Black men, stating these are indicative of an “attitude”. Kenny draws upon discursive de-racialization techniques (Augoustinos 2007: 133), omitting the importance of the race of night-time participants, stating these have “nothing to do with their skin colour”. However, when forms of embodiment and behaviour differ from the white, local normative benchmark, they are attached to the pre-existing institutionalized mental model (van Dijk 1993: 99) of Black male gang membership (Williams 2015; Williams and Clarke 2016). Teun van Dijk (1993) explains that institutionalized mental models refer to socially shared mental representations and knowledge, seen in shared social scripts as well as general opinions, attitudes and ideological systems which organise attitudes (such as sexism and racism). Throughout the fieldwork, the police, door staff and venue managers shared a mental model of young Black metropolitan male gang membership and viewed Black men through a white gaze, assessing them for differences in their body language, word choice and speech patterns. Whilst this assessment also took place outside of the night-time economy (and was primarily upheld by the state police), it had impacts on Black men who were more likely to be turned away from accessing some night-time venues on these grounds. On other occasions, the speech and bodily movements of some Black men, depicted by Kenny above, were read as rude and disrespectful of authority and evidence that they needed to be “kept an eye on” once inside the venue.

Door staff spoke of the need to be efficient in making decisions about night-time participants at the door (Hobbs et al., 2003, Winlow and Hall, 2006) and this led to the reproduction of stereotypes through racist classification practices (Søgaard, 2014). Toby, the head of door staff at *Altitude*, states:

You have to make a judgement on that front door, and I always say you have 3 seconds to make it, you look at someone and you have 3 seconds before you say something, whether that’s you’re not coming in or not, you have to make that judgement call. You’re there to perform a really brief risk assessment and it doesn’t matter who they are really, if you think they’re gonna cause trouble then don’t let them in, because from our point of view it’s much easier to stop the trouble on the front door rather than think you’ll take the risk and let them in and then you’ve got a big fight inside.

Decisions to provide night-time participants with access had to be made speedily to keep night club queues moving. The literature evidences how the door is a crucial place in setting the tone for inside the venue, with door staff drawing upon a “safety first” attitude in their decisions (Hobbs et al., 2003: 121). In the quote above, Toby speaks of a “brief risk assessment” which is made on the door, similar to Thomas Søgaard (2017) who found door staff tested ethnic minority night-time participants for their “attitude”. During the fieldwork, door staff were more attentive to the body language of Black consumers, problematising Black men who ‘bowled’ (Urban Dictionary, 2011) and noticing a lack of eye contact and hand gestures such as fist bumping. Door staff also paid attention to their word choice and speech patterns, remaining suspicious about Black consumers who used words which they were unaware of.

Young Black men who used words and speech patterns which door staff did not understand (some words noted during observations included: dis, snatched, shade and feds) would suffer from a number of further “tests” in a bid to gain access to the venue. Door staff would ask a series of questions, asking them where they had travelled from, where they had been before and who they were out with in a bid to keep them at the door where they could further assess them for indicators of potential deviancy. Their answers to these questions were also incredibly important. If the Black individual indicated that they were from London themselves, or were out with a group of Black individuals from London, then they were more likely to be declined access to the venue due to beliefs regarding the potential gang affiliations of Black individuals from the city. Whilst May (2014) and May and Chaplin (2008) found that Black individuals who dress like whites are more likely to be afforded access to night-time venues in the US, this research goes further to evidence how their embodiments and word choices are incredibly important in dissipating suspicions of door staff and affording them access.

Throughout the fieldwork, Black individuals would sometimes challenge the door team and accuse them of racism. Toby, the head of the door team at *Altitude*, drew attention to his ‘multicultural door team’ when this happened. Toby states:

You’ll be there and you’ll show them. The door team at Altitude consist of door men who are Polish, Romanian, Nigerian and South African. It’s a very multicultural door team and you’ll point that out to them. If you’re throwing them out or refusing them service, then you’re a racist.

The majority of the door teams governing night-time venues were white and British. There were a small number of ethnic minority men who governed the doors who were predominantly white – these included men from Poland, Lithuania and Romania. Black door staff were more likely to be called upon to govern “urban nights”, with these nights governed by a mixture of white British, Black and ethnic minority door staff. There was an informal understanding that Black door staff would deal with disputes raised by ethnic minority clientele in a bid to reduce accusations of racism. Door staff therefore prepared themselves for accusations of racism on “urban nights”, with the visible diversity of the door team working these nights used as evidence that the practices employed by door staff are not racist. Despite the differing ethnicities and nationalities of door staff, “urban nights” experienced hyper-vigilant policing techniques which were upheld by door staff irrespective of their race, ethnicity or nationality. Most door staff shared racist and discriminatory viewpoints, describing Black individuals in terms of their deviancy and “attitude”. I argue therefore that ethnic minority door staff adhere to ‘whiteliness’ (Reddy 1998), sharing a social and political view akin to the white, local door staff that they worked alongside. Reddy writes:

Learning “whiteliness” is how various immigrant groups initially defined as ‘other’ by the white majority… become white. Whiteliness is learned and can therefore be unlearned, it can be engaged in by people who are not white and rejected by those who are (Reddy, 1998, p. 1).

***Dress***

Previous literature has drawn attention to the ways in which dress codes are used to exclude Black night-time participants from venues in the US (May and Chaplin 2008; May 2014). In Greenshire, dress codes did not explicitly discriminate against Black inspired styles of dress as venues aimed to appear welcoming to all. This research contributes to the literature by evidencing how racialized forms of dress are informally governed by door staff, who used their interactions with young Black men to reaffirm heteronormative and white ways of dressing at night. Toby shares:

It’s very popular for males to wear their trousers hanging down below their bum, which is more in Black and minority ethnic groups, so that’s kind of the thing now. A lot of people seem to do it don’t they I think, but in America I thought in prison that means that you are that way inclined doesn’t it? I point it out to some of them sometimes… and they’re like ‘nah, nah, it’s part of my image’, I’m like (rolls eyes) ‘okay’.

During observations, door staff made homophobic “jokes” with Black men wearing low-rise jeans, stating that this meant they were “that way inclined”. Door staff would ensure Black men had pulled their jeans up before allowing them entry to night-time venues, with the night-time participant often lowering their jeans once they were inside the nightclub. Some door staff would enter the nightclub and ask Black men to pull their trousers up as an indicator of respect. Black men were also more likely than their white counterparts to wear tracksuits, with door staff often declining their access due to the venue’s dress code policy. Black men frequently replied to these incidents by outlining the brand and expense spent on the tracksuit, appealing to economic forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) to gain access to the club. However, their race masked any indicators of economic capital and they were reminded that to gain entry they needed to dress smartly.

***Dance styles***

Despite venue managers reminding Black individuals to attend “urban nights”, once at the door, these individuals were assessed for their accent, word choices, body language and dress. I argue that Black night-time participants are assessed at the door for their ability to perform in acceptably white ways (Bhopal 2018), even on “urban nights” which are inspired by Black music cultures. This sometimes resulted in Black individuals changing their dress, body language or word choice at the door in a bid to gain access to the venue. This section reveals how those who enter the venue hold on to aspects of their Blackness once inside, through the dance styles displayed and the music played. On “urban nights”, the styles of dance displayed by night-time participants was different to those performed on weeknights. Some night-time participants popped, locked and break danced, displaying dance styles traditionally associated with UK drill music (see: DRILLR TV 2018; Urban Dictionary 2019). Black night-time participants were observed drawing upon these dance styles more regularly, with some white night-time participants also exhibiting similar styles on the dance floor. The dance styles displayed on “urban nights” were interpreted by door staff as more likely to lead to the escalation of violence inside the venue, due to the physical contact with others and the perceived aggressiveness of the dance style.

During observations, Black revellers who were dancing using their full body were told to “calm down” by door staff, sometimes resulting in challenges from the night-time participant who would ask door staff to leave them alone and state they were doing nothing wrong. This meant that door staff provoked the behaviour which the Black night-time participant/s were initially suspected of (Young 2007 as cited in Hall et al., 1978: 41) and they were asked to leave the night-time venue. In some instances, door staff walked through large groups of Black revellers displaying UK drill dance styles in an attempt to disperse them. This is evidence of ‘compulsory integration’ (Søgaard, 2014, p. 47) tactics utilised by door staff, who worked to prevent Black-night time revellers from dancing in large groups with other Black individuals. This finding presents a critique of previous night-time literature which has been focused on the exclusion of ethnic minorities (Hadfield, 2008, Measham and Hadfield, 2009) by revealing how access to venues is one of continual negotiation for Black night-time consumers throughout their night. Black consumers were reminded to dance less expressively and in smaller groups and were either threatened with being, or were, kicked out of the venue due to concerns that violence would break out. Whilst some white-night-time participants exhibited the same dance styles, these did not arouse the same level of concern in door staff. Whiteness provided an invisibility which meant that white night-time consumers benefitted from dancing in ways that they wanted to.

The above three sections have drawn attention to the tensions which arise from venues hosting “urban nights” “for” Black consumers, whilst their performances and embodiments of Blackness are closely monitored by door staff. Black revellers are policed for forms of embodiment, speech, performances and practices which are not characteristically white and local and their access to, and enjoyment of, nightlife is one of negotiation and re-negotiation throughout the night.

**“We were overrun, we were outnumbered, it was scary”**

Much of the recent nightlife literature has tended to engage with the perspectives and actions of door staff and venue managers (Rigakos, 2008, May and Chaplain, 2008, May 2014; Søgaard 2014; Søgaard 2017), whilst police perspectives and governance of racialized night-time events remain relatively unexplored. This section interrogates the police perception of “urban nights” and reveals the ways in these are governed by the police themselves. This research critiques the idea of the neoliberal night (Roberts 2009; Hadfield 2014; Shaw 2015) by drawing attention to the power of the state police over night-time licensing, resulting in the marginalisation of “urban” nights (Author, Year). Police officers had noted the increase in Black individuals in the night-time economy and the increase in venues hosting “urban nights”. Scott, a police licensing officer, reveals:

We have a higher proportion of the Black community now in the night-time economy than we did when I first joined the job thirteen years ago. More venues are putting on events that cater for the Black community and the demographic of the university is much higher black and ethnic minority than it ever was.

“Urban nights” were noted in terms of their difference from weekend nights, described as much busier and more violent. The following discussion with police constables is revealing of this:

Lisa: When they come down for urban nights, they’ve got their own little groups of say, not just three mates but fifteen or twenty. It won’t be two people fighting and shaking hands… it’ll be groups of fifteen and twenty all getting involved.

Julie: They draw a much bigger crowd, a very big crowd, you’ve got people coming from the city, from the student campuses, because it’s a big night. Suddenly the town is full of people and it’s a big risk because you’ve got the risk of escalated violence and mob mentality.

In a similar vein to door staff and venue managers, police officers also linked “urban nights” to gang culture. Door staff, venue managers and police officers shared the mental model (van Dijk 1993: 99) of young Black male metropolitan gang membership, with young Black men often interpreted in terms of their potential gang affiliation. Police licensing officers oversaw the licensing of night-time events and many told venue managers that they needed to manage the “gang” risk present on “urban nights”. Adam, a police sergeant in charge of licensing decisions, reveals:

We definitely say to venue managers what measures are you going to put in place for that event? Can we do anything policing wise to support that “urban” night? But we wouldn’t start asking about the ethnicity of the audience or performer…

Previous research has evidenced the power the state police have in licensing decisions in the UK (Author, Year), and venue managers showed an increased awareness of abiding by police rules in a bid to retain their licence. Police officers denied the significance of the racialized make-up of these night-time events in their assessment of risk, drawing upon police intelligence on “gangs” to legitimise the increased governance of “urban nights”. Police intelligence was presented as objective, factual and unable to be racist or discriminatory. Yet the literature has drawn attention to the ways in which police intelligence is used to ascribe the “gang” label to groups of ethnic minority young men, “defining out” violence by white youth (Williams 2015; Williams and Clarke 2016).

One incident of policing an “urban” night remained firm in the minds of police officers and was used to reinforce the collective police mindset that the police needed to closely monitor “urban nights”. On this night, the police had been called by fast food workers and residents who complained of the large number of Black individuals in the night-time high street. Darren, the police sergeant in charge, shared the following during his interview:

It was after an “urban night”, there were groups of Black males and females, all sort of early, mid-twenties, white people too, they were going up to McDonald’s, pushing through the doors and they only had four door staff on McDonald’s. We were looking at offences of affray, potential violence, people were just pushing through and threatening the staff in there. We had to shut the store. I was being ignored completely. Here, verbal communication and presence alone is [usually] enough to get people to go ‘okay, we’ll do this or that’ but people weren’t listening. They’d come from the city and I have friends who police there, they say people don’t listen, it’s different there. We police by consent here and it’s quite alien for Greenshire to suddenly go ‘well no one is listening to us or doing anything at all’. I had my entire team there which is unheard of. We started employing basic public order tactics which is serious, we had firearms coming too and a dog handler came down for us. *We were overrun, we were outnumbered, it was scary.*

Large numbers of Black individuals were interpreted as a threat to the general order and security of nightlife, resulting in Darren calling upon police officers from numerous towns to manage the perceived threat. The academic literature has drawn attention to the significance of police storytelling in animating the danger of policing (Punch 1979; Billington et al., 1991; Chan 1996). Throughout the fieldwork, the McDonalds incident became a ‘trope’ which was shared amongst police officers, reaffirming the police view that Black revellers and “urban nights” are a threat to the order of Greenshire. Darren’s pattern of talk, initially describing night-time participants as Black, followed by “white people too” is indicative of his increased awareness around the language of race. However, these white night-time participants quickly become invisible, and threat and deviance is attached only to the Black night-time participants. They are described as different because they “don’t listen” (Darren’s words), with Darren indicating that policing approaches in metropolitan contexts are different from Greenshire’s approach of policing by consent.

Henri Lefebvre argues that spaces are “determined by what may not take place there” (2002: 224). Within police accounts of this “urban night”, Black night-time participants were essentialised as disrespectful of authority and pushing their luck in interactions with the police and were constructed as better suited to London, the city in which they were perceived to have come from. London is produced as a Black space, against the invisible white, local cultural norm of Greenshire. Hankins, Cochran and Derickson write, “racialized places serve to maintain hegemonic conceptualizations of whiteness by constantly constructing the feared non-white place and reciprocal identity, to which the idealized white space (and identity) can be juxtaposed” (2012: 383). This had real effects for the way in which night-time revellers were policed on this night, with public order tactics drawn upon to manage the perceived threat of Black individuals. Whilst a small number of arrests were made, these were for minor offences and did not result in convictions. Tate (2016) argues racisms’ invisible touch often leaves a mark through contact and the stirring of emotion, demonstrated in particular when Darren describes this incident as “scary”. Tate writes, “what is interesting about the use of fear is that it reproduces the *white* self as under threat, the victim who has been affectively and materially touched by the need to keep the touch of the Black other at a distance” (2016: 81).

**Final reflections**

This paper presents several novel findings. Whilst drill music continues to be criminalised in the UK (Fatsis 2019; Ilan, 2020), this research uncovers the ambivalence towards night-time events where drill, grime, rap and hip hop are played. Venue managers express desire to host “urban nights”, whilst at the same time operating informal door policies which segregate Black night-time consumers to these nights. The impact of this ambivalence on door staff, who are entrusted as the main gatekeepers of the night-time venue, is outlined in this paper. I also extend upon previous work which explores the policing of racialized venues and licensees in city spaces (Rigakos 2008, Talbot and Böse, 2007, Talbot, 2007; 2011, May, 2014, Søgaard, 2014; 2017) to provide a space to think about how those who govern the night respond to an increase in Black consumers in a white, provincial space. Revealing of the collective mindset through which young Black men from London are interpreted in terms of their deviancy, this research did not intend to look at the differences between those with a responsibility for governance. Instead, this paper exposes the shared value system of the deviancy of young Black men from city centres, upheld by governing actors of different ethnic backgrounds – challenging the notion that white spaces do not have a “race problem” (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997) and that the diversification of staff leads to a reduction in racism.

At present, an increased number of universities in the UK are driving recruitment policies to encourage a more “diverse” student base (AdvanceHE, 2020), with more students of colour attending university than ever before (UCAS, 2020). Black individuals experience a tension, on the one hand being encouraged to attend university and “urban” nights, whilst on the other, suffering hyper-vigilant and discriminatory policing practices. By speaking with these individuals, we would be informed about the diverse ways in which nightlife is experienced and would be provided with an insight into the ways in which governance is navigated. It is clear that the intertwinement of race and gender informs policing practice. It is primarily young Black men who are problematised by those who govern nightlife and the ways in which gender intertwines with race in police understandings of deviancy is an area for future exploration.

**Notes**

1. Please note this research has been given ethical clearance from the University of Westminster, reference number ETH1617-0571. The police force, the participants and venues contained within have been anonymised using pseudonyms and all participants have given informed consent to take part in the research. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The data provided has been taken from the most recent census in 2011. More in-depth socio-demographic details cannot be provided in order to ensure the research area remains anonymous. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The racial categorisation and language used is a reflection of the same language used in the 2011 census for England and Wales.

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