



# Illicit Drug Markets, Consumer Capitalism and the Rise of Social Media: A Toxic Trap for Young People

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## Abstract

This article explores young people's involvement in illicit drug markets in England. It focuses in particular on why young people become involved in illicit drug distribution, the extent to which their involvement is predicated on adults' use of threats and violence, and how young people frame the morality of drug dealing. The article's findings are based on a unique dataset generated by a six-month period of online social media platform analysis, alongside additional data drawn from periods of observation, focus groups and interviews with young people and professionals. In short, I argue that drug prohibition, consumer capitalism, severe levels of inequality, and emerging problems associated with the rise of online social media are combining to produce a toxic trap that is dragging tens of thousands of young people into street-level drug dealing. Considered in this context, the inadequacy of the UK government's response to some of the main harms associated with illicit drug markets is clear: children and young people will continue to be coerced and exploited until either drug markets are legalized and regulated, or they have realistic opportunities to pursue lives that offer genuine meaning, decent levels of income, and levels of status and respect that are comparable to those provided by drug distribution.

## Introduction

Those soles are so thin, you must be feeling every little stone when you walk down the street!

(Nathan, 15, pupil)

My choice of footwear had become a source of great bemusement among many young people who had been excluded from mainstream education. Nathan, sporting a brand-new pair of pristinely clean, white Nike Air Max 90s, was mystified why anyone would wear a relatively inexpensive, worn-down pair of nonbranded shoes by choice. During the previous month, Nathan and I had gotten to know each other well during several visits I had made to his alternative provision (AP)—a term given to institutions tasked with educating young people who have been excluded from mainstream schools in the United Kingdom (UK).

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Despite being intelligent and driven, Nathan's behavior in school had become increasingly challenging and disruptive, a process that ultimately led to his being sent to an AP. Although the reasons for the shift in Nathan's behavior were not straightforward, his teachers highlighted his involvement in street-level drug dealing as a pivotal point in the decline.

Nathan's case was not uncommon. Several reports within the last couple of years have highlighted growing concerns surrounding young people's involvement in illicit drug markets in the UK (Home Office 2018; National Crime Agency 2017), as well as rising levels of school exclusions (House of Commons Education Committee 2018).<sup>1</sup> The number of young people dealing drugs across the UK is estimated to be somewhere in the tens of thousands, although the hidden nature of the trade means that these estimates are likely to involve a high margin of error (Britain's Teenage Drug Runners 2017; Children's Commissioner 2019).

Young people's involvement in drug distribution on this scale is concerning for a number of reasons. First, many young people are drawn into the criminal justice system every year for their involvement in drug dealing. Over the last decade, 54,217 sentences and an additional 10,361 cautions<sup>2</sup> have been imposed on young people under the age of 25 for the production, possession, or possession with intent to distribute, a controlled drug (Ministry of Justice 2018). Of those sentenced in 2017, 43% received an immediate term of custody.

Young people's involvement in illicit drug markets also increases significantly the likelihood that they will carry weapons, as well as the risk of their becoming the victim or perpetrator of serious violence (Korf et al. 2008). Moreover, involvement in drug dealing is associated with a range of additional negative consequences, such as breakdowns in familial relationships, a decline in mental well-being, and disengagement from education (Irwin-Rogers and Harding 2018; Krohn et al. 2011).

In the context of these growing concerns, this article offers timely insights into young people's involvement in illicit drug distribution in the UK. Based, in part, on an analysis of visual data drawn from online social media platforms—data that provide a unique lens into what has been a relatively hidden aspect of young people's lives to date—I argue that drug prohibition, consumer capitalism, severe levels of inequality, and emerging problems regarding young people's use of online social media are combining to produce a toxic trap that is dragging tens of thousands of young people into street-level drug distribution.

The article is structured as follows. First, I provide an outline of the methodology I employed. Next, I introduce a theoretical framework based on inequality, the rise of social media, and consumer capitalism, which I suggest is crucial for making sense of young people's involvement in drug dealing. From here, I turn to the substantive findings of the article, which are split into three main sections. The first examines young people's motivations for participating in illicit drug markets. Based on evidence from an online social media platform analysis, supported by qualitative data from focus groups and interviews, I describe how many young people seem to be utterly captivated by consumer capitalism's status symbols. Their obsession with publicly displaying the money and material

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<sup>1</sup> The term, "young people," is used throughout this article because some participants highlighted that girls as well as boys were involved in drug distribution. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of young people to which this article refers are boys and young men.

<sup>2</sup> In England and Wales, the police or Crown Prosecution Service can issue a caution (or warning) in the event of someone committing a minor crime. The person being cautioned must admit to an offense and agree to be cautioned, and can be arrested if they do not agree. While a caution is not a criminal conviction, it can be used as evidence of bad character and can show up on checks that can be made, for example, by potential employers.

possessions acquired from their involvement in drug distribution, however, serves to mask, and to some extent is driven by, a deeper sense of anxiety and insecurity that permeates these young people's lives.

In the second section of findings, I examine the extent to which young people's engagement in illicit drug markets is dependent on adults' use of threats and violence. Although serious and central in some cases, such coercion is by no means universal; for many young people, their involvement is predicated predominantly on the fast money and material rewards associated with drug distribution. In the final findings section, I explore young people's perspectives on the morality of their own involvement in illicit drug markets. Deploying a number of techniques of neutralization, young people typically sought to frame their behavior as morally defensible. The article ends with a discussion and conclusion that considers the implications of some of the article's main findings.

## Methodology

The primary data presented in this paper were generated by a six-month period of online social media analysis spanning five different platforms: Instagram, Periscope, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube. For the purposes of the online platform data collection, I distinguished between "public," "semi-public" and "private" social media accounts.<sup>3</sup> "Public accounts" refer to those in which the privacy settings allow any member of the public to view content that has been uploaded to the platform. "Semi-public" accounts are those where an account holder advertises openly the details of his or her account on a fully public platform, and the number of "followers" of the account is in excess of one thousand. Finally, "private" accounts have restricted access to their content, with details of the account not being openly advertised on other platforms; as a consequence, these accounts typically have a relatively low number of followers.

Although only public or semi-public accounts were included in the study for ethical reasons, it is worth highlighting that young people's norms around online privacy result in the vast majority of content being uploaded to public or semi-public accounts (Boyd 2014). All names and identifying features were removed from screenshots or replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. To further protect anonymity, a graphic artist recreated the social media screenshots displayed in the article.

To complement the data generated from my social media platform analysis, I also drew on data gathered from focus groups and interviews as part of two projects that I conducted during 2014–2016 (see Irwin-Rogers 2016; Irwin-Rogers and Harding 2018; Irwin-Rogers et al. 2018). The first project, focusing on the education of young people excluded from mainstream schools, took place in five APs across three major cities in the UK. It involved focus groups and interviews with 25 members of staff, 20 pupils, and 50 h of observation entailing numerous informal conversations. The second project, exploring young people's use of social media and serious youth violence, involved focus groups and interviews with 20 professionals (including youth workers, probation officers, police officers and specialist voluntary sector workers), and 18 young people from two major UK cities. While I did not anticipate that either of these projects would result in data on young people's involvement

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the methodology of the online platform analysis and associated ethical issues, see Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017).

in drug distribution, it became a common and recurring theme in both because of the links between illicit drug markets, exclusion from school, and violence between young people.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed fully and coded using the software program, NVivo, shortly after being conducted. I adopted an analytical approach based on adaptive theory, which involved using existing theoretical frameworks and concepts as a lens through which to make sense of the data; if the data did not “fit” these frameworks and concepts, the latter were refined or discarded (see Layder 1998).

## Theoretical Framework

To make sense of young people’s involvement in illicit drug markets in the UK, it is important to consider the pernicious combination and relationship between stark levels of socio-economic inequality, a rampant culture of hyper-competitive consumer capitalism, and the recent rise of social media.

As the seventh most unequal of the 35 countries comprising the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the UK is a highly unequal society (OECD 2018). Its capital city, London, is among its most unequal regions, with the top 10% of households amassing a wealth of £260 billion, in contrast to the bottom 10% who have debts totaling £1.3 billion (New Policy Institute 2017). In 2017, over 30% of young people in the UK lived in relative poverty (Full Fact 2018). Those living in poverty are likely to face a range of additional structural disadvantages, such as attending schools with inexperienced teachers and high rates of teacher turnover (Allen et al. 2016), living in communities with poor quality housing and a lack of social housing stock (Walker et al. 2008), and being surrounded by high levels of violence and associated trauma (Whitworth 2012).

The economic prospects of many children who are still of school age and have not yet entered the labor market are poor. While the youth (aged 16–24) unemployment rate is comparable to other developed countries at 12% (Powell 2018), this nevertheless equates to over half a million jobless young people, leaving a significant subpopulation without a decent income and without the additional attendant benefits of employment. Of those who do manage to secure work, many are forced to accept insecure, fixed-term contracts, which require grappling with irregular hours for pay that falls below the level of National Living Wage<sup>4</sup> (Hardgrove et al. 2015).

Adding further toxicity to this climate of inequality, scarce and precarious employment opportunities, and structural disadvantage, young people’s lives are flooded with a barrage of media and advertisements that champion the neoliberal ideology of capitalist competitive individualism (Linn 2004). Those working for the multinational behemoth corporation, Nike, for example, have etched their infamous slogan, “Success is earned, not given,” on the minds of many of their young target audience. Nike’s rival, Adidas, prefer the tagline, “Impossible is nothing,” while Rolex exhorts their potential consumers to purchase, “A crown for every achievement.” As competing corporations dedicate increasingly sizeable sums of money to promote their products,<sup>5</sup> young people are lulled into believing that a

<sup>4</sup> The UK National Living Wage is GBP £8.21 per hour, but applies only to citizens aged 25 years and over. Young people aged 21–24 are entitled to the National Minimum Wage of £7.70 per hour; those aged 18–20 are entitled to £6.15 per hour, and those under the age of 18 to just £4.35 per hour.

<sup>5</sup> Nike’s advertising and promotional costs, for example, increased from US\$3.03 billion in 2014 to US\$3.58 billion in 2018 (Statista 2018a, b).

human being's value and worth depends primarily on the products that he or she can afford to purchase and display. In addition, and crucially, failure to amass the money required to consume these products is taken as a direct and unequivocal sign of deficiencies on the part of the individual.

Alongside stark levels of inequality and a hyper-competitive individualist culture, new technologies have enabled the rise of pervasive forms of communication through emergent and rapidly expanding social media platforms. The rise of social media has prompted a number of criminological studies that have drawn attention to potentially criminogenic nature of communication over these platforms (Lauger and Densley 2018; Wood 2017, 2018). Linked to recent trends such as a new snapshot culture in which people photograph or make videos of their extraordinary (and mundane) events as they unfold in real life, people are increasingly recording and uploading their crimes to social media (Sandberg and Ugelvik 2017). A study examining the 2011 UK riots concluded that young people's participation was "intimately entwined" with their "will to representation" and desire to be seen by others—a desire that accounted for the barrage of photograph and video uploads to social media during the riots (Yar 2012: 254).

Stepping back from these relatively direct links to crime, social media enables young people to gaze adoringly at the lifestyles of the super-rich through the lens of smartphone devices—devices now owned by 96% of 16–24 year olds in the UK (Seabrook 1988; Statista 2018a, b). Broadcast over various social media platforms, the increasingly visible and extravagant hyper-consumption of the wealthy dwarfs and belittles the lifestyles and possessions of those in relative poverty. As the sharing of partial, single-moment insights into people's lives facilitates the creation and communication of idealized identities, global superstars, "followed" by hundreds of millions of young people online, upload a constant stream of photographs and videos that flaunt their latest luxury and designer purchases (Greenfield 2014). The level of material wealth to which young people aspire races ever higher, as the gulf between hope and reality looms large. Indeed, the increasing dominance of social media contributes to what Young (2007: 32) has described as "bulimic societies," in which "massive cultural inclusion" operates alongside systematic structural exclusion—the more that people accept a society's dominant values and feel included culturally, the greater the sense of frustration and anger when structural exclusion frustrates the realization of these values. A state of anomie consequently envelopes those to whom the institutionalized means of achieving their cherished goals appear increasingly remote and inaccessible (Merton 1938).

While social media contributes to the spread of anomie and exacerbates young people's subjective sense of insufficiency, it simultaneously plunges its users into an additional trap by promising a potential cure. Carefully crafted features of social media applications, such as "hearts," "likes" and "thumbs up," are shrewdly designed to tap into young people's neurochemistry (see Meshi et al. 2015). As the "likes" and positive comments flood in, the delivery of substantial hits of dopamine grant the user a short reprieve, secure in the knowledge that they are, at least for the time being, "popular" or "winning." These victories are, of course, shallow and short-lived. As the biochemical pacification fades, the same insecurities reemerge. Being a two way-street, most social media users are well-versed in follower etiquette, which involves being both the receiver and giver of "likes" and praise. As such, most people realize that fawning responses are likely to mask an underlying envy that acts as the platforms' fundamental fuel.

If the primary purpose of uploading content to social media is to seek reassurance from others that one's life involves the type of consumption widely admired and desired, then the converse is inescapably true: faced with a relentless barrage of envy-eliciting content

uploaded by others, the sense of falling behind or fear of missing out is amplified by time spent on social media.<sup>6</sup> Despite this futile and ultimately self-destructive game of back-and-forth, the drive to escape a gnawing sense of inferiority pushes people ever-onwards. To make matters worse, social media screen-time invariably comes at the expense of authentic, face-to-face social experience. Being a poor substitute, the former leads to the further weakening of intimate social bonds and an accompanying intensification of insecurity. Indeed, many commentators prefer the term, “antisocial media” (Woods 2016)—a reflection of its potentially toxic role in social relations and its contribution to the current crisis in young people’s mental health (Barry et al. 2017; Royal Society for Public Health 2017).

The genesis of young people’s anxieties and insecurities, however, does not lie in the growth of social media, but in the deep-rooted, brutalizing effects of capitalism’s unregulated “free markets,” extreme inequalities (noted above), and competitive individualism (Winlow and Hall 2006, 2009, 2013, 2017). Many young people are quick to learn the limits of state-support and societal concern for themselves and their families. Recent research has highlighted the potentially fatal consequences of insufficient welfare support for many at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy (Watkins et al. 2017). For those who do survive on welfare, it is often an existence devoid of dignity. From an early age, young people learn to see many of their peers not as benevolent sources of cooperation and support, but as atomized, hostile rivals against whom they will be forced to compete throughout their lives.

Capitalism’s ultimate triumph rests in its ability to pacify large swathes of those most vulnerable and exposed to abuse and exploitation, both from powerful political and business elites above, and from what Marx and Engels (1966) referred to as the “lumpenproletariat” (dangerous classes) below. In Lacanian terms, driven by a “primal fear of the void of the Real”—the pre-symbolic state of nature that exists outside of our conscious experience—solace is sought in the faux comforts of conspicuous consumption (Hall and Winlow 2015: 112; Lacan 2008). But as an objectless anxiety ripples through the social fabric, people sense that something is wrong—and indeed, fermenting under the surface of capitalism’s symbolic order, many things *are* wrong. Real and cataclysmic dangers loom large in the twenty-first century: climate change; global pandemics; the unregulated drive toward increasingly sophisticated forms of artificial intelligence and cyber disasters; and the existential threat of all-out global nuclear war (Halal and Marien 2011; Smil 2005). Post-political elites attempt to assuage people’s fears, making continual assurances that these dangers can be, indeed, are being, managed and contained within the existing system.

Faced with these terrifying threats, individuals accede to the seductive and inexhaustible distractions offered by consumer capitalism. People turn inwards, away from authentic engagement in collective political action, welcoming instead the “pseudo-pacification” of the relentless, self-destructive battles waged under socio-symbolic competition (Hall 2012; Smith and Raymen 2018; Žižek 2006). Desiring what the other desires, envy and resentment cripple the prospect of genuine, widespread and enduring good will and love for others. Eschewing the more pressing concerns of climate change or the possibility of catastrophic international warfare, people dedicate their energies to narcissistic pursuits—a bigger house, a new car, designer clothes. A “vagrant’s morality” underpins this process as people find that each new destination in the interminable pursuit of material rewards suffers

<sup>6</sup> “Fear of missing out” is such a commonly acknowledged and expressed phenomenon that it has entered the vernacular as “FOMO.”



Fig. 1 Young people displaying the money that could be made from drug distribution

from the same shortcomings as the last (Bauman 1993: 17). While all of this has substantial and far-reaching implications, it also provides a crucial context in which to make sense of young people’s involvement in drug distribution.

### Young People’s Involvement in Drug Distribution: Is it All About the Money?

Having considered the role of inequality, social media and consumer capitalism in the lives of young people today, I will now turn to the question of young people’s involvement in drug distribution. When asked why young people become involved in drug distribution, interview and focus group participants invariably highlighted the centrality of money—assertions that were supported by the online platform analysis:

The top-left screenshot of Fig. 1 shows a young person holding a stack of twenty-pound notes to his ear, symbolizing a mobile phone, with the comment, “Money motivated,” and the caption, “Trappings alive” (where “trapping” refers to any illicit means of making money, but usually drug distribution, more specifically). The bottom-left screenshot

shows a young person getting out of a luxury car, with the caption<sup>7</sup> implying that lucrative profits are more than adequate compensation for the potentially fatal risks that accompany one's participation in the illicit drug trade. The remaining four screenshots provide further examples of young people displaying openly the amount of money they purport to have attained through drug dealing: the top middle screenshot displays a young person with banknotes spread over his lap; the top right screenshot exhibits a bundle of £20 banknotes accompanied by the caption, "Good evening so far"; the bottom middle screenshot reveals a designer handbag and a handful of banknotes being dropped on the floor; and the bottom right screenshot shows a young man holding a bundle of banknotes accompanied by the caption, "Gang gang."

Estimates of the precise amounts that can be made through drug distribution in the UK vary widely. Several youth workers recounted cases in which young people had initially been incentivized by relatively inexpensive material items, such as trainers or clothes, explaining that the money made by entry-level drug runners was broadly comparable to minimum wage jobs. Young people were keen to stress, however, that it was possible to earn much larger sums of money within a relatively short space of time, with some claiming to have made up to one thousand pounds in a single day. While these claims are likely to be exaggerated, posts uploaded to social media sent a clear message to the young people viewing them that there was ample money to be gained from the drug trade.

More common than content displaying large sums of money were images and videos showing the material items that these sums had been used to purchase (see Fig. 2).

A recurring and common theme in young people's social media posts was the attempt to distance themselves from their poverty-stricken roots. To remain poor was to remain a nobody—someone undeserving of admiration and respect. A life well-lived was one in which a young person was "born naked," but "die[d] designer." Young people were keen to highlight that despite being born with nothing in life, they were achieving the revered goal of consumer capitalism—total emersion in conspicuous consumption in clear view of others. From gold watches and diamond rings, to designer clothes and trainers that cost "a thousand quid,"<sup>8</sup> young people uploaded an incessant stream of content flaunting their newly acquired status symbols as evidence of their success. Being a "now society"—"a wanting, not a waiting society" (Bauman 1998: 31)—young people's unreserved commitment to the diktats of consumer capitalism meant barely a thought was given to deferred pleasures, delayed gratification or alternative forms of happiness beyond the acquisition of material goods.

Of course, the powerful allure of money and consumer items that can be obtained through participation in illicit drug markets is not a recent phenomenon (see Bourgois 1995; Cohen 1955; Nightingale 1993). For decades, people have risked arrest and violent victimization in order to acquire material objects that symbolize status and success. Social media has, however, enhanced both young people's awareness of the rewards on offer from drug distribution and the potential levels of social recognition that such status symbols can garner for their owners. No longer are individuals confined to eliciting the envy of their immediate peer group by flaunting their possessions in real-life

<sup>7</sup> The full caption reads: "Real Hustlers Don't Stop They Keep Goin...you can Lose Your Life But it Gon keep going... why not Risk Life when it's goin to keep goin? When You Die somebody else was Born...But At least we got to say we run up them Digits We Ran up Some MoneyX10."

<sup>8</sup> I was indeed astonished to learn that this was not an exaggeration: the Christian Louboutin trainers that some young people wore in their photographs and videos uploaded to social media retailed at over £1000.



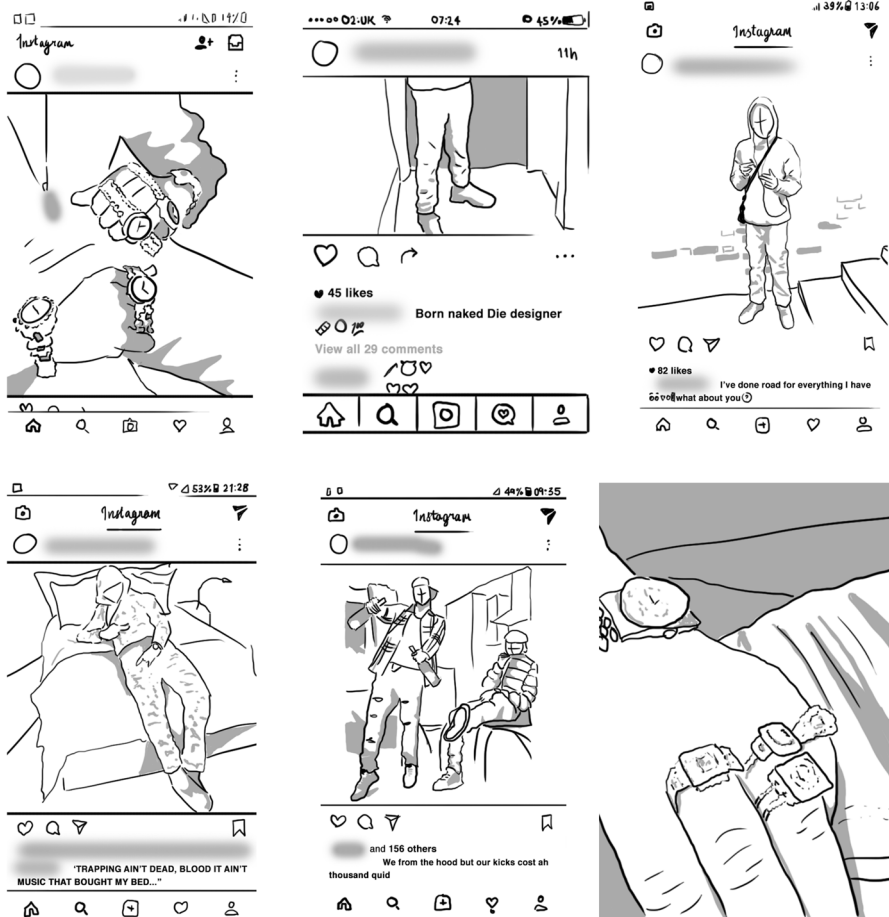


Fig. 2 Young people displaying the items acquired through drug distribution

social encounters. Social media platforms delivered young people’s uploads directly into the consciousness of vast audiences, well beyond their immediate family, friends and acquaintances.

The attraction of drug distribution as a means of acquiring fast money must be set in the context of the lack of legitimate employment opportunities capable of providing people with respect and reasonable remuneration. The social media analysis uncovered one example of a young man who tried to give up his life as a drug runner by working part-time in a supermarket. He was spotted by members of a rival gang, who took photographs and videos of him stacking supermarket shelves in his work attire before uploading them to social media. The purpose was to ridicule and humiliate the young man by contrasting some of his recent photographs, which boasted of a lucrative gangster lifestyle, with his current position as a low-paid supermarket employee. Within a matter of weeks, the young man had quit the job and was back running drugs in his local area. One young interviewee illustrated the perspective adopted by many other young people during the research:

There's no way I'm leaving my house at five in the morning to work for someone for six pounds an hour—what am I, some kind of slave or something? I could go on-road and come back with a grand in my pocket; new creps [trainers] and new tracksuit, and you want me to go out at 5am? Naa mate, ain't happening.  
(Mark, 15, pupil)

A prospect as repugnant to many young people as minimum wage work was that of 1 day having to sign on and receive welfare benefits. Particularly for young men, the stigma attached to receiving welfare “handouts” seemed immense—a sign of one’s personal weakness and failure to achieve the standards met by the majority of others (Bauman 2003). With low-paid work and benefits both unthinkable options, participation in illicit drug markets was often perceived to be the only feasible alternative.

Recent research on organized crime narratives in Scotland highlights a similar picture (Densley et al. 2018). In the context of high levels of ontological security—generated by the dual combination of economic deprivation and a lack of recognition (Young 2007)—drug dealing delivered a double form of salvation. First, by generating fast money, involvement in drug distribution could serve to mask the humiliation of economic deprivation. Second, engaging in a widely perceived hypermasculine and risky activity promised to bestow a degree of “street capital” on young people (at least among their peers), which went some way to compensating for an otherwise severe lack of status and respect in wider society (Harding 2014).

As noted at the outset, many of the young people I interviewed had been excluded from mainstream schools—institutions that are often an integral source of orientation for children during the pivotal stages of identity formation (Crutchfield 2014). In England, 7720 pupils were excluded permanently from mainstream schools and 381,865 were subject to fixed-term exclusions in 2016–2017 (Department for Education 2018). Some have highlighted that these figures are likely to represent a significant underestimation of the problem, as statistics indicate there are over five times the number of pupils being educated outside of mainstream education than the number officially reported as being permanently excluded each year (Institute for Public Policy Research 2017). Rejected from mainstream education and with bleak prospects of employment, many young people lack any sense of being needed by those around them (Sennett 1998). In this context, the desire of some teenagers to help the only people who did seem to need them was palpable. While much of the money made through illicit drug distribution was spent on conspicuous consumption, many young people felt an obligation to support their families financially, which often consisted of a single mother dependent on welfare:

For some young people, they literally are the head of the household from a very young age, and their mum will call them the head of the household. And so, you've got another issue that there is some family pressure there. But if you asked the mums, they don't want their children to go out and drug deal, but underlying, that's what these young people are being made to feel—that they are the man of the house.  
(Lisa, Youth Worker)

The pressure to provide for their mothers and siblings undoubtedly weighed heavily on the minds of many of the young people involved in drug distribution. Their commitment to supporting others around them, however, typically appeared limited to their immediate family members. In one video uploaded to social media, a young man running drugs in his local area recited the lyrics from a recently released music track:

It's mad how we want out the hood, but the feds still want to stop us;  
I mean they want us all locked, they don't want to see us live proper.  
(SBTV 2017).

Escaping or “wanting out” of communities plagued by poverty and unemployment is a common feature of many of the songs uploaded to popular YouTube music channels. As Winlow and Hall (2006) found in their ethnographic research in the north of England, systems of mutual obligation and the goal of fighting to improve one's community through collective political action have seemingly been abandoned, replaced by the narcissistic desire to differentiate oneself from the mass of low-paid or workless, failed consumers.

## Adults Exploiting Young People: Physical Coercion or Seductive Materialism?

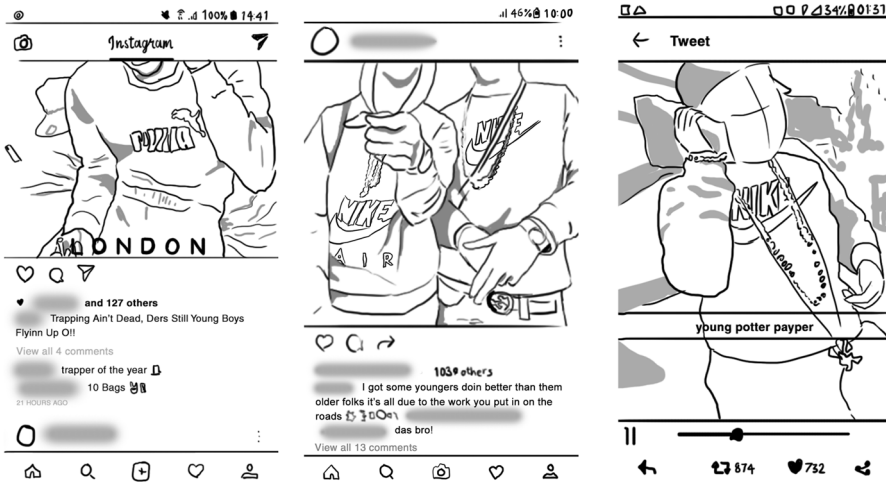
It is worth noting that the contemporary political response to young people's involvement in drug distribution has been to frame it as a process of adults exploiting children, often through the use of physical violence or threats thereof (see HC Deb 05 September 2018). Politicians have been keen to place a particular emphasis on young people's vulnerabilities, commonly accompanied by references to the recent “Rochdale grooming scandal,” in which professionals cited young girls' supposedly poor decision-making as the driving factor behind their sexual abuse, as opposed to their exploitation by predatory adults (Bell 2018). For example, in a debate on drug dealing in the UK Parliament in January 2018, Ann Coffey MP, referred to “the growing extent of the exploitation of children and young people and the shocking levels of violence, intimidation and coercion used” (HC Deb 17 January 2018, c336).

The danger of politicians seeking to shift blame from the young drug runner to the older, but typically still young, “violent and coercive gang leader,” is that it continues to place blame on individuals, while downplaying the importance of underlying structural factors that facilitate and drive activity in illicit drug markets at all levels. It is naïve to think that young people will turn their backs on drug distribution if only we could prevent gang leaders from trapping their “unwilling victims” through processes of violence, intimidation and coercion. Indeed, while it is certainly the case that young people involved in street-level drug distribution are, by definition, vulnerable and invariably exploited by adults, even Ann Coffey MP, who promotes the “violence, intimidation and coercion” narrative, has recognized that:

Vulnerable young people often feel there is nothing else for them on the horizon except what the drug dealer might offer. Poverty, poor housing, unemployment and living in a high crime neighbourhood creates the conditions for county lines to flourish (HC Deb 17 January 2018, c337).

It is clear that such structural factors will create the space for adults to attract young people to engage in drug distribution, often without the need to resort to intimidation and violence. Indeed, when I discussed the possibility that threats and coercion are required to force young people into dealing drugs, many looked perplexed and refuted this explanation:

Some of the stuff I hear you lot say, yo, it's fascinating! I recently got asked the question, ‘Have you ever been forced to join a gang?’ [Laughs]. I said, ‘Have you ever been forced to join teaching?’. It don't make sense, the question you're asking me. I know some people who have been asked [by adults dealing drugs] like, ‘Yo, you



**Fig. 3** Enticing young people's involvement in drug distribution over social media

want to roll with us?', and they've said, 'Yo listen, naa man, I'm gonna play football'. And they've said, 'Yo, you do that man, you do that – you lot are young man, you lot play your football'. And that's what people don't see from the outside.  
(John, 15, pupil)

Data from interviews, focus groups and social media platforms provided a plethora of evidence that young people are enticed into involvement in drug distribution because of its association with fast money and material rewards. The possibility and allure of such rewards is amplified in an age of social media (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney 2017; National Crime Agency 2017). Those occupying more senior positions in the drug distribution hierarchy often made efforts to glamorize their own lifestyles, portraying idealized images to young people that implied drug running was a glamorous and lucrative activity, provided they were prepared to work hard (see Fig. 3).

In the social media post on the left-hand side of Fig. 3, a young person who looks to be in his mid-twenties, claims that, "Trapping Ain't Dead," with younger boys rapidly making their way up the drug distribution hierarchy. The middle post shows two people of a similar age, highlighting that some of the young drug runners working for them are making more than "older folks," and, deploying a tagline echoing Nike's slogan, "Success is earned, not given," making the claim that "it's all due to the work you put in on the roads."

In reality, those with several years of drug dealing experience typically exploited young individuals, passing on the highest risks and compensating younger boys with disproportionately smaller financial rewards. In this sense, those involved in drug distribution had internalized the exploitative logic of capitalist competitive individualism, emulating the predatory behavior of many powerful business elites and politicians (Hall and Winlow 2015). The platform analysis revealed one instance (see the screenshot on the right-hand side of Fig. 3) of a pre-pubescent child sat on top of a luxury car, wearing a large gold chain and holding a stack of money, surrounded by a group of teenagers involved in drug distribution. This video had been shared 874 times within a couple of hours of it being uploaded to Twitter, meaning that it would have been viewed by tens of thousands of impressionable children and young people.

As claimed by many politicians at the outset of this section, there are, no doubt, numerous cases of adults involved in the drug trade threatening and committing acts of violence against young people to coerce them into drug distribution. This may apply particularly in the case of “county lines”—a process by which inner-city gangs are seeking to expand their activities into drug markets in surrounding, smaller towns and cities (National Crime Agency 2017). While the exploitation of young people should not be downplayed, it would be a distortion of reality to view all young people’s involvement in the drug trade as being contingent on threats and physical coercion. In the context of severe socioeconomic inequality and poverty, alongside the stranglehold that consumer capitalist ideology has on young minds, the allure of money and material rewards is more than sufficient to motivate most young people’s involvement in drug distribution.

### The Morality of Drug Distribution: Young People’s Perspectives

By applying a range of what Sykes and Matza (1957) termed “techniques of neutralization,” many young people sought to frame their involvement in illicit drug distribution in a way that minimized its dissonance with the values extolled by wider society. First, they engaged in a “denial of harm or injury” by contrasting drug offenses with other types of crime, such as violent or sexual offenses, that have clear victims. In this sense, their arguments reflected libertarian ideals regarding the fundamental rights of people to buy, sell or ingest whatever substances they desire, without the prospect of criminalization (Polsby 1998). Indeed, some studies have highlighted how the vast majority of drug users do not see their own use as problematic or as causing harm to others (e.g., Hayes 2015). Young people’s perspectives revealed a commitment to what Bauman (2007: 29) has described as the “consumer spirit,” which involves a general resentment of regulatory measures or restrictions imposed on people’s freedom of choice. The point here is not to enter into a thorny debate about the potential harms of taking or distributing substances that are currently illicit, but to highlight that the young people involved in drug distribution often perceive prohibitionist laws, as opposed to their own behavior, as morally defunct.

While young people regarded unprovoked violence in a broad sense as wrong, it was seen as an inevitable aspect of drug markets because the legal means of regulation and dispute resolution open to businesses competing in permitted markets were not an option. For this reason, young people involved in drug distribution would often band together in groups that “had one another’s backs”:

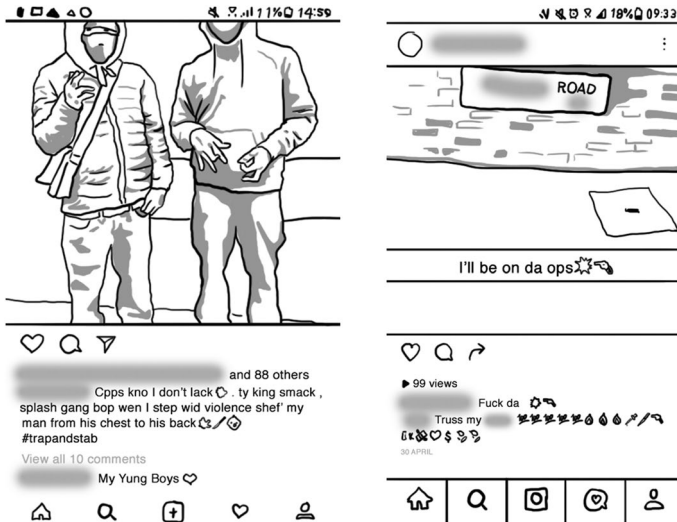
Interviewer: Is it easier to deal [drugs] if you’re involved in a gang?

Nathan: A lot, yes. Because it can mean that you can handle yourself. It can mean that people don’t really want to snake [betray] you because they know you’re not just a normal drug dealer; you got a posse, people behind you: ‘If I don’t get my money at that time, I’m going to get the youngers to come on to you’, you know what I’m saying?

(Liam, 16, pupil)

Young people uploaded posts threatening rival gangs, usually referred to as “opps” (short for “opposition”), who typically lived in neighboring areas (see Fig. 4).

The screenshot on the left of Fig. 4 shows two young people involved in drug distribution threatening violence against their rivals with a hashtag denoting their involvement in drug dealing and serious violence. The screenshot on the right was uploaded by a young



**Fig. 4** Posturing and threatening young people in rival gangs

person who had entered an area associated with his rivals and, again, threatened violence through a provocative statement accompanied by a picture of a gun being fired. Such forms of aggressive signaling and young people's post hoc rationalizations mirrored the defensive justifications of violence highlighted by other recent research conducted in the North of England (Ellis 2015; Ellis et al. 2017). Young people were, however, keen to draw a sharp distinction between violence against their "opps," which, in some circumstances, was considered necessary and justified, and violence against "civilians" (members of the public), which was seen as immoral and, therefore, to be avoided. Indeed, this clear line between legitimate and illegitimate targets of violence was reflected in the denigration that a young person would receive over social media if it became known that that person had attacked someone who was not involved in life "on road."

A second technique of neutralization involved "condemnation of the condemners" or, as McCorkle and Korn (1954: 88) put it, "rejection of the rejecters." The online platform analysis revealed the police to be a regular target of vitriol (see Fig. 5).

The screenshot on the left of Fig. 5 shows a sizeable sum of money and drugs that had been taken from a young person involved in drug distribution. A comment on the photograph accused the police of "f\*\*\*[ing] up the game for everyone else." The screenshot on the right was taken from a video that showed a locally prominent young person involved in drug distribution being arrested and detained by the police. It contained the comment, "KMT" (kiss my teeth), and had been viewed over 59,000 times. Young people viewed the police as "deviants in disguise," not only enforcing unjust laws, but doing so in ways that impacted disproportionately marginalized communities.

In summary, young people typically sought to frame their own behavior as morally defensible: they attempted to place limits on the scope of violent behavior, attacking only those involved in rival gangs, while engaging in what they regarded as a victimless activity—supplying people with goods that they desired. They perceived themselves as being locked in a relentless battle against an enemy (the police), who were seen as immoral agents of state control, enforcing unjust laws in an unjust manner.

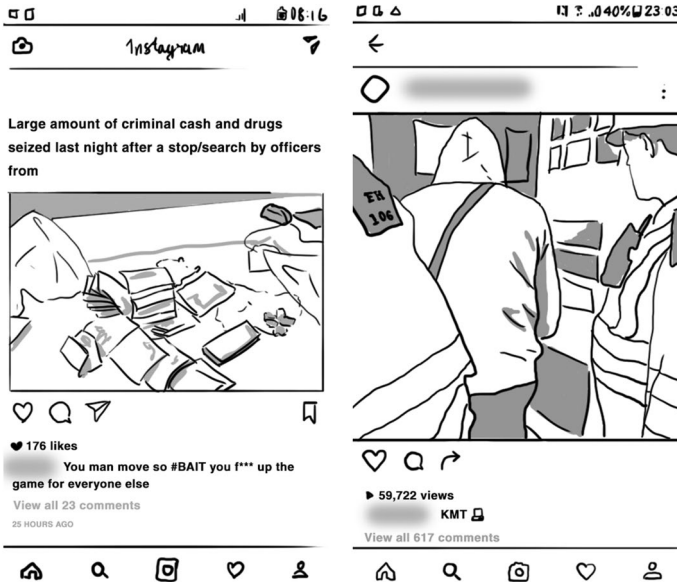


Fig. 5 Denigrating the police for the enforcement of drug laws

**Discussion**

Tens of thousands of young people are involved in drug distribution across the UK. This article has attempted to make sense of some key questions around this phenomenon: Why do young people become involved in drug distribution? To what extent is their involvement predicated on adults’ use of threats and violent coercion? How do young people frame the morality of their engagement in drug distribution?

At a proximate level of explanation, the main driver of young people’s involvement in illicit drug markets is the potential to make fast money and engage in conspicuous consumption. This was clear from the focus group and interview discussions with young people and professionals, and the data generated by the social media platform analysis. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon: capitalist consumerism has long encouraged people to prioritize relationships with objects over subjects (Žižek 2006). It is a phenomenon, however, that has been intensified by social media. With smartphones at people’s fingertips, soliciting the envy of others is no longer the preserve of celebrities, broadcast to the masses through mainstream media. Social media platforms enable their users to collapse space and time at the click of a button, and my research uncovered a continual stream of uploads, many of which show young people flaunting their newly acquired status symbols. As the desired, envy-eliciting images and videos flash on the screens of thousands or tens of thousands of other young platform users, this virtual communicative space rewards uploaders with an abundance of external validation.

Considered in this context, the idea that adults depend on threats and violence to coerce young people into involvement in illicit drug markets is less plausible. Extreme and deplorable violence undoubtedly occurs under certain circumstances and by no means should the exploitation and vulnerability of young people who get caught up in drug distribution be downplayed. But it is the material rewards associated with engagement in drug distribution

that provide the primary means of influence and manipulation. Indeed, the data reveal numerous examples of young people being incentivized into drug market participation through the promise of fast money and the status this entails. Through various techniques of neutralization, young people attempt to justify their involvement in drug distribution—from framing it as a victimless activity distinct from other behaviors defined as crimes, to explaining away the violence that afflict many “players in the game,” to shifting the target of censure from themselves onto others, such as the police, who are branded as discriminatory enforcers of unjust laws.

Emersed in capitalism’s symbolic order and lacking the resources and recognition that accompany their position on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, many young people suffer from living in “bulimic societies” that simultaneously raise their aspirations and desires to meteoric levels, while providing scant legitimate opportunities for success (Young 2003: 32). To borrow from Merton (1938: 676), young people are adopting the role of “innovators” as they embrace fully society’s fetishization of money, but that they substitute the institutionalized means of attaining it with the alternative of illicit drug distribution. While business and political elites commonly game the system by advancing their own interests at the expense of serious harm to others (Tombs and Whyte 2015), some (predominantly poor) young people, who have often grown up surrounded by abusive relationships and difficult circumstances, succumb to the temptations of participation in illicit drug markets. Although their participation far from guarantees success, it does, at least, offer an opportunity to stave off the impending humiliation of certain defeat.

To understand and make sense of young people’s behavior, however, is not to justify or sugarcoat reality. The young people observed in the current study were engaged in a predatory activity that further immiserated an already vulnerable segment of the UK’s population. The delight shown by some young people upon the discovery of a new cluster of crack addicts that they could—and would—soon exploit and treat as mere objects from which to extract money was indicative of a pervasive lack of concern for the suffering of others. Indeed, many young people’s behavior appeared to reflect a commitment to what Hall (2012) has referred to as the realm of “special liberty,” in which young people pursued their individualistic desires without regard for the well-being of others around them. Young people’s engagement in illicit drug distribution cannot, therefore, be taken as a marker of noble resistance against unjust social conditions (c.f. Ferrell 2019), nor does it constitute any meaningful rejection of, or threat to, capitalism’s symbolic order. Instead, it provides further evidence of capitalism’s extraordinary ability to pacify and assimilate those who suffer most under its exploitative apparatus.

## Conclusion

In one of my final periods of observation in the APs near the end of the summer term, a teacher decided to hold the last lesson of the day in a local park under the shade of an oak tree. Nathan and I walked together, but as concrete pavement met grass, he hesitated and then refused to go any further. Although keen to participate in the lesson, Nathan was concerned that his pristinely clean pair of white Nike Air Max 90s might become tarnished by the earth’s soil. He protested for several minutes, making the case for conducting the lesson in a non-grassy location. The teacher refused to bend to Nathan’s demands. Clearly torn



and increasingly frustrated, Nathan eventually chose to exclude himself from the lesson and began to walk home.

While Nathan had been excluded from his previous school for aggressive behavior, he was one of the sharpest and most motivated pupils in the AP. This was not a case of a young person rebelling against authority, willing and content to miss out on his education. Nathan understood clearly the importance of achieving the grades necessary to go to university to study business and lead a “legit” lifestyle. The process of being excluded from mainstream education, however, had ripped into his already damaged sense of self-worth, which was now intimately dependent on the material items he owned and displayed to others. Indeed, the risk of Nathan staining his immaculate white trainers was too much for his fragile self-esteem to bear. After negotiating the perils involved in street-level drug dealing and putting himself in the position of being able to acquire and flaunt consumer capitalism’s much revered status symbols, Nathan’s desperate desire to portray a flawless image to the world overshadowed any long-term considerations of the potential value of that afternoon’s lesson. Far from being a genuinely confident, hardened deviant, Nathan was, at his core, a vulnerable, anxious, and tragically insecure teenager.

There are thousands more teenagers like Nathan living in the UK. Prohibitionist drug laws, vast inequalities, consumer capitalism, and the relatively new phenomenon of online social media are combining to generate a noxious trap enveloping many of these young people. One of the most obvious and feasible options to reduce the harms associated with this snare would be to revisit and reform our prohibitionist drug laws that have generated a £7 billion illicit drug market in the UK alone. Drug policy, however, is a complicated issue, and an in-depth discussion of these complexities is well beyond the scope of this article (see Gray 2010; Hari 2015; Werb et al. 2011; Wodak 2014; Woods 2016).

In the meantime, so long as those with the power to legalize and regulate drug markets refuse to act, young people will not stop dealing illicit drugs until they have realistic opportunities to pursue lives that offer genuine meaning, decent levels of income, and levels of status and respect that are comparable to those they can obtain through their involvement in drug distribution. While looming advances in information technology and biotechnology make it exceedingly difficult to predict young people’s futures, the rise of increasingly sophisticated forms of robotics and artificial intelligence are likely to add further precarity to the lives of many. Short-term economic exploitation might give way to an even more daunting and demoralizing prospect—long-term labor market irrelevance (Harari 2018).

In the face of such challenges, the UK Government’s recent Serious Youth Violence strategy, which purports to tackle the harms associated with drug markets primarily through a criminal justice crackdown on those involved in distribution, appears woefully inadequate and narrow in its diagnosis of the problem (see Home Office 2018). A criminal justice enforcement-based response to drug markets will not produce its desired effects because it fails to appreciate the powerful allure of the fast money and status associated with illicit drug markets, rooted in the toxic combination of drug prohibition, vast inequalities, consumer capitalism and the increasingly influential role of online social media in young people’s lives. So long as this pernicious combination persists, ramping up criminal justice responses in a myopic and naïve attempt at deterrence will do little more than drag increasing numbers of young people into the remit of law enforcement agencies, further swelling an already bloated, ineffective and wasteful criminal justice system.

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