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"I hope Boris Johnson watches Top Boy": a synthetic

and critical analysis of popular culture

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1. Acknowledgements

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"I hope Boris Johnson watches Top Boy": a synthetic and critical analysis of popular culture

2. Abstract

The 'black urban crime' genre has grown in popularity over the past two decades though its exploration in the UK is limited. *Top Boy* first appeared on our screens on Channel 4 in 2011 and returned in 2013 before being axed until its 2019 Netflix revival. This dissertation offers a synthetic and critical analysis of the representation of young black males in popular culture, drawing upon the cultural verisimilitude of the series and its vivid illustration of the issues facing the UK today. Understanding the representations in *Top Boy* allows media audiences to reconstruct their own social meanings around black youth and street culture, affirmation that the series will spark policy debates for years to come.

3. Introduction

"The mediated criminalization of popular culture exists, of course, as but one of many media processes that construct the meanings of crime and crime control".

(Ferrell, 1999: 406)

There has been a significant growth of criminological interest in the media (Rafter & Brown, 2011), a social space enabling the construction of media understandings of crime, allowing audiences of popular culture to think differently about the world they live in (Wakeman, 2014). Media and television in particular are powerful in constructing understandings (ibid), highlighted by a surge in attention focused around crime representations in the media and emphasising the importance of further development of this area of research to the discipline of criminology. Despite the relatively recent growth in criminological interest in media representation, further explorations of 'popular criminologies' are imperative (Rafter, 2007), this dissertation will explore the construction of mediated crime images in Netflix's *Top Boy*. Aside from Malik and Nwonka's (2017) work on *Top Boy* and cultural verisimilitude, there has been little cultural criminological focus on this black urban crime drama. This is somewhat surprising given the current UK climate and its social issues in

relation to drugs, gangs and street violence that plague the streets; issues that are illustrated so explicitly in the show.

This dissertation will see popular criminology and cultural criminology intertwine to assess the significance of criminal and deviant representations of young black males and their criminalisation by dominant ideological illustrates in the media, particularly in TV and film. Recognising *Top Boy* as a significant entity of popular criminology is imperative, understanding the importance of grime artists as main actors in the series reinforces this and is particularly relevant as Dave (who plays Modie) discusses his belief that the prime minister is racist in his music, reinforcing Ashley Walter's desire for Boris Johnson to watch *Top Boy.* This dissertation offers a critical analysis of ideological media representations as it depicts how the series brings to attention the racist political agenda that so often criminalises black youth, highlighting the necessity of reform to improve conditions for ethnic minority youth growing up in gang saturated areas. In the literature review section of this research, issues related to gang hierarchies, masculinities, child criminal exploitation and the reasons in which young people become involved in gangs are discussed as issues that are central to gang culture and are particularly relevant issues that are prevalent in the UK and necessary for discussion in analysing fictional media representations of such issues.

This dissertation will offer both a synthetic and critical analysis of Netflix's *Top Boy* whilst inferring its cultural verisimilitude in relation to the representation of current UK issues around the problematic gang and street culture that is seemingly becoming increasingly prevalent. In the discussion section, I will focus initially on the synthetic representation of young black males through analysing the themes of gangs and violence. Style, illegitimate means of achieving universally accepted goals and values, the increased risk of child crime involvement in typically gang saturated areas, county lines and intra-gang hierarchies are discussed in terms of the reinforcement of the criminalisation of young black boys and their culture in discussing *gangs*, conformist to the dominant ideological illustration of this social group as disproportionately involved in gang crime and violence.

Contributing to the synthetic analysis of *Top Boy*, the theme of *violence* is discussed in this dissertation as intergang rivalries and competition, as well as the concept of revenge that runs so explicitly through both the fictional series and the reality of gang culture. Emphasising the cultural verisimilitude of the representations in *Top Boy*, Bennett focuses much attention on the use of knives and firearms, weapons that have become prominent on the streets of the UK, particularly over the last decade. As a counterargument to the synthetic representation of young black males in popular culture, I will thoroughly discuss the theme of *black males, love and families* that occurs throughout the series. *Top Boy* re-humanises the often-dehumanised black male through illustrating those involved in gangs as loving parents, sons and friends, a stark contrast to their often animalistic and predatory portrayal in representations of severe violence and conflict.

Arguing whether the representations in *Top Boy* reinforce ideological stereotypes and ideas about young black males and gang involvement, this dissertation will infer its potential to contribute to policy debates and reform in terms of drugs, gang involvement and intergang violence and strategies that can be enforced as potentially preventative measures. On the other hand, *Top Boy* challenges the criminalisation of these young people through the representation of familial relationships. Although there are competing interpretations of the representations in this popular criminology, this work will consistently reiterate that the issues represented in the series are reflective of issues that are facing the streets of the UK in East London and beyond.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Criminology, media and representations

Despite the interrelationship of crime and media being prevalent for years (Carrabine, 2008), prior to this decade, much criminological attention focused on news media and the reporting of factual events. More recently, researchers from cultural criminology and popular criminology have enhanced the prevalence of 'popular culture', media representations and its effect on media audiences (see Raymen, 2018; Wakeman, 2014). Many forms of media have come to play a

significant part in the cultural representation of crime and criminal or deviant subcultures,

reinforcing the importance of media constructions in understanding the meaning media audiences

give to fictional representations (Ferrell, 1999).

Media representations of crime became significant in the 1970s when Cohen (1972) developed his

concept of 'moral panics', a concept that holds authority in traditional criminological theory. For

decades since, black males have been disproportionately 'constructed' as criminal and deviant,

resulting in marginalisation and public fear (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Derived from labelling

theory (Becker, 1963), young black men are labelled as criminal through ideological symbolisation

and crime constructions, more often through factual news media reporting but through various

forms of media (Cohen, 1980). As such, images of black males constructed in the media offer little

other than perceptions of a problematic social group that contribute little more to society than

criminal activity and social uncertainty. Traditional theory offers a limited capacity in understanding

the meaning of crime through media representation. Cultural criminology recognises the ambiguity

of representations in popular culture and acknowledges that such representations allow audiences

to reconstruct their own understanding of the world they inhabit (Wakeman, 2014) and shape their

own social reality (Gamson et al, 1992).

Cultural criminology offers more focus on crime constructions in popular culture (Ferrell, 1999: 396)

and offers a progressive approach in identifying criminal representations in *Top Boy,* an area that has

propagated since its establishment in the 1980s as a form of entertainment. Projecting elements of

cultural studies (ibid) into the contemporary criminological analysis of the show contributes

interpretations of TV drama in relation to crime and crime control not explored by traditional

criminology. Representations in *Top Boy* infer a problematic culture internalised by ethnic minority

young people in particular, this can be interpreted as contributing to the identification of their

disproportionate deprivation and criminalisation rather than existing solely to reproduce dominant

ideologies that seek to marginalise this group (Golding & Murdock, 1979). Combing insights of

cultural studies and sociological constructionist theories (Best, 1999) in investigating representations of youth and violence in *Top Boy*, mediated crime imagery and the concept of 'symbolic interaction' (ibid) are imperative in understanding fictional media representations of *real* social issues. As the popular culture allows media audiences to reconstruct their own meanings of crime based on representations, it should be acknowledged that crime itself is a social construction (Yar, 2005), reinforcing that audiences own interpretations of criminal representations can deviate significantly. This dissertation will acknowledge that whilst many of the issues portrayed in *Top Boy* are portrayals of drugs, gangs and violence amongst young black males, it will also recognise the criminalisation of street culture.

Criminal representations of young black men in popular culture illustrate the media as "hundreds of tiny theatres of punishment" (Cohen, 1972), emphasising hostility towards black males because of their negative media portrayals (St. Cyr, 2003). Black males are portrayed as the enemy in *Top Boy,* harbouring the potential to ignite public outrage and vicarious punishment by media audiences as this social group are criminalised and punished without the occurrence of crime (Rios, 2011) as a result of negative media representation (Ferrell, 1999). Despite Channel 4 (the original provider of *Top Boy*) being at the epicentre of UK multiculturalism, the general consensus is that elite media providers reproduce dominant ideologies (Golding & Murdock, 1979), values exclusive to the hegemonic discourse (Foucault, 2000) of contemporary Capitalism. Those who hold the most power - white upper-class males that possess a significant amount of the country's wealth – criminalise and marginalise young black males as they are considered to have the potential to disrupt the status quo, subsequently rising from their position of subordination at the foot of the social hierarchy. Representations in *Top Boy* both maintain and challenge the view that the media criminalises young people through representations that reaffirm and challenge ideological views, offering viewers alternative perspectives of social reality.

In contrast to the media as an institution of dominant ideological discourse (Golding & Murdock, 1979), the representation of culture offers a space for the hegemonic ideas of society to be challenged (O'brien et al, 2005: 18). The media's surge in academic relevance is significant for Hall (1981) in explanations and understandings of 'popular culture'. Society and the media exist simultaneously and should only be investigated together in terms of their interrelation as social meanings derived from media representations which are more often than not based on an individual's social meanings around a particular issue (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Representations of crime in fictional media productions have come to be interpreted as sites of knowledge (Wakeman, 2014), whilst images in news media have come to be understood as dramatized representations of reality. This is evidence of the dissolving dichotomy of real and representation as the boundary becomes blurred and the polarisation and monolithic nature of culture is eradicated (Hall, 1981).

4.2. Popular Criminology

This dissertation will analyse *Top Boy* as a form of 'popular criminology' (Rafter & Brown, 2011), a form of entertainment media that provides insight that is not exclusive to academics and researchers (Raymen, 2018). Current issues around gangs and violence are exposed through representations in popular culture, in this case, *Top Boy.* While 'popular criminologies' (Rafter, 2007) offer insight that allow viewers to construct their own meanings of representations (Ferrell, 1999), it can begin to address criminology's 'aetiological crisis' (Winlow, 2014). An 'aetiological crisis' is a term coined by Young (1987), returning to emphasising on *why* (Hall et al, 2008) people act criminally rather than the crime itself. Through understanding the subjectivities produced by liberal capitalism, stigmatising meanings and labels attached to those at the bottom of the capitalist social hierarchy, analysing the ethnic minority males in *Top Boy* can begin to answer questions of criminology, reinforcing the significance of analysing popular culture to future criminological developments.

'Popular criminologies' (Rafter, 2007) welcome the communication of contemporary culture, the reconfiguration of relevant policy debates and the ability to reflect on media representations and their interpreted meaning (Wakeman, 2014). Corresponding to DeFino's (2014) 'HBO Effect', screening shows without interruption from adverts enables providers to indulge their viewers in cultural representations of crime and crime control; a transformation adopted by Netflix, reinforcing the importance of *Top Boy* as form of popular criminology. In the criminological analysis of *Top Boy*, it is important to adopt a simultaneously 'synthetic and critical' (Yar, 2010: 77) framework, acknowledging that the show both reinforces and maintains ideological ideas of black males, violence and gang involvement, and challenges hegemonic ideas, representations and meanings of this group. This is demonstrated through many of the characters in *Top Boy* who commit serious acts of violence (synthetic) and those same characters as loving parents, children and siblings (critical).

4.3. Pathologies of violence as a 'black' issue

Top Boy is located at the 'intersection of complex media relations and modes of production' (Malik & Nwonka, 2017: 423), saturated with political and cultural agendas whilst offering a critical representation of the 'black gang, gun and knife crime consensus' (ibid). The cultural dynamics of 'blackness', masculinity and crime offer racialized meanings, inevitably influencing the media audience's understanding of criminal representations in *Top Boy*. The discourse around black gangs produced by the media acts as a catalyst for interest in urban criminality, illustrating the significance and criminological potential of culturally analysing the series. Where gun and knife crime is pathologised as a 'black' issue in *Top Boy*, and much of the violence represented is committed by a black male against another black male, 'urban' is associated with ethnic crime (Hobbs, 2013). This demonstrates the synthetic (Yar, 2010: 77) analysis of the show yet *Top Boy* must also be understood as challenging the ideological discourse by constructing black males as capable of love, guardianship and affection, offering security for their families when the hegemonic ideology that

protrudes Capitalist society infers that this 'urban' youth are what society requires and security and protection from.

4.4. The impact of drill music on gang violence

Following a significant rise in violence crime in London in 2018, media attention became fixated on the emergence of 'drill' music (Fatis, 2019), a subgenre of hip-hop closely connected to road culture (Ilan, 2020), a UK phenomenon derived from Black Atlantic popular culture (Gilroy, 1987). Due to the strong association of drill music and gang violence, the head of the Metropolitan Police campaigned for the removal of some drill music from YouTube through the suggestion that drill and grime artists utilise the genre to incite violence as many themselves are, or were, members of UK gangs (Lynes et al, 2020). In search of a cause of blame, dominant media representations illustrated drill music as the driving force for the deadly violence of London youth (Knight, 2018). The agencies of media that infer that drill is the main causal factor of urban violence also "tend to reaffirm the view that young urban black men – and the forms of culture that appear tied to their population – constitute a threat to the civic mainstream" (Lynes et al, 2020: 3). The association of black men and violence in the media depicts a road culture of drill music defined by race and ethnicity (Gunter & Watt, 2009), criminalising young black males who utilise the genre as means of expression and the mediation of the complex social issues they are often submerged in (Bakkali, 2019).

Despite this detrimental association, drill music is also a rooted in the experiences of youth that are victims of class based oppression, linking all low-income youth, regardless of ethnicity, to the prospect of violence (Fatis, 2018). The drill scene in London has become notorious (Lynes et al, 2020: 3) as a number of high profile artists have been arrested in recent years; for example, M-Trap 0 was convicted for the murder of 15-year-old Jermaine Goupall in South London in the summer of 2017 (Badshah, 2018). This is portrayed through the saturation of drill music in *Top Boy* at times of severe and deadly violence, reinforcing the correlation between drill and violence. Dave, a grime artist who plays ZTs former leader Modie in the 2019 Netflix series, used his platform at the BRIT Awards to

hold the state accountable for the racist ideology that criminalises young black men, in his new verse

for *Black,* Dave expressed his feelings about the UK authorities:

"It is racist, whether or not it feels racist/ The truth is our prime minister's a real racist".

(Dave, 2020)

The lyrics challenge the idea of grime as solely a perpetuation of crime and violence as it

demonstrates a reflection of the complex issues that contribute to young black boys' involvement in

street culture (Ilan, 2020).

Popular criminologies are based around representation and the construction of meaning (Ferrell,

1999), meanings that can then be reconstructed by viewers. Reading cultural texts has the potential

to expose some subjectivities so it is imperative that a combination of synthetic and critical

analytical framework is imposed on *Top Boy* to really understand the representation of urban gang

culture. Such representations and analysis can influence discussions around black males, gangs and

violence through creating a 'cultural paradigm of policy debates' (Wakeman, 2014), reinforcing the

cultural criminological role of interpretation of meaning and representation.

Many policy debates today argue between young black men as a threat to social order and the

criminalisation of young BAME communities, *Top Boy* contributes to both sides of this argument as it

represents an opportunity for the reimagining and reconstructing of such debates. Rather than

seeing black youth as a violent threat, they must be identified as a social group that requires support

and economic assistance to help prevent gang involvement and participation in urban drug markets.

It could be argued that intervention and support should be favoured over the institutionalisation and

punishment of these young people. However, it could also be argued from the representations in

Top Boy, that punishment should be harsher as gang feuds remain prevalent in depictions of prison

and Sully (Summerhouse gang) and Modie (Fields/ZTs) immediately return to crime after they had

been to prison. The illustration of weapons, knives and guns in particular, could also spark debates around whether or not stop and search measures should be returned to the streets to get a grip of soaring rates of violence in London and beyond. Through both a critical and synthetic analysis of *Top Boy* as popular culture, it is evident that media representations of black youth hold the power to influence the practitioners, policymakers and its general audience.

5. <u>Literature Review</u>

5.1. Gangs and hierarchies

In 2007, youth gangs become the focus of Home Office specialist efforts as the *Tackling Gangs Action* program was introduced (Armstrong & Rosbrook-Thompson, 2017) as well as increased efforts following the 2011 London riots from Boris Johnson, who was London mayor at the time, in tackling gang violence through *Operation Shield.* This sought to exhibit harsher punishment for young people who are involved in gangs and commit acts of violence through such gang involvement. Despite this, gangs continue to control urban neighbourhoods, acting almost as a carcinogenic agency for the disease of violence that pollutes the streets of the UK. Black youth are overrepresented as gang members, highlighting the negative stereotypes of black youth as troublesome and violent (Williams & Clarke, 2016). Where Boris Johnson aimed to introduce a scheme modelled around the harsher punishment for uncooperative and particularly intractable gang members, it can be interpreted that those at the top of the social hierarchy seek to control and subordinate black youth.

There has been a marked increase in the amount of attention paid to youth gangs and urban violence over the past decade, though the topic still remains a fairly miniscule area of research amongst criminology and other academic disciplines (Gunter, 2017). Although there is much controversy about the definition of a *gang*, Bullock and Tilley (2002: 26) identify in their Home Office report that gangs are comprised of 'main players', 'ordinary members', 'runners' and 'associates', all of which are explicitly represented in *Top Boy.* It is also mentioned in the report that many gang

members are black males and come from "disadvantaged" and "deprived" areas (Gunter, 2017).

Social hierarchies are prevalent in both society and gang structure and though the infrastructure of the two vary, it is evident that those at the top of the gang hierarchy have achieved the universally desired status of power by illegitimate means; Dushane, Sully and Jamie in *Top Boy* are evidence of this. Gangs and criminal subcultures are derived of values that largely oppose those of the parent culture, yet there are some shared goals that are unachievable legitimately for some. For those living in deprivations and situations of social disorganisation, gang culture can offer a path to success for such individuals though it is illegitimate and in most cases illegal. Both systems are based on status, money and power and those who are socially and culturally disadvantaged growing up in poor urban neighbourhoods can be both at the bottom of the capitalist social structure and the top of the gang hierarchy.

5.2. Gangs and masculinities

Studies of masculinities and gang involvement emerged early in the 20th century as Thrasher's (1927) social disorganisation theory developed which still holds criminological significance today as many young people (particularly those from urban neighbourhoods where social disorganisation is high (Shaw & McKay, 1942)) resolve their family breakdowns through gang membership. Many studies of gang involvement draw upon Merton's (1938) strain theory, emphasising the inability of disadvantaged social groups to achieve universally accepted goals. Because of this, many young people experience status frustration and demonstrate this frustration through gang involvement, committing crime and violence as alternative means of achieving consensual capitalist goals. This 'defiant individualism' (Sanchez-Janowksi, 1991) of expressed marginalised masculinity (Rios, 2011) is particularly prevalent amongst considerably deprived social groups. Crime provides means of enacting hegemonic masculinities when conventional opportunities for success are unachievable (Holligan & Deuchar, 2015), one of the most common ways of expressing this is through violence. Displays of hyper-masculine aggressiveness as means of achieving status are developed through

gang membership, reinforcing negative associations with gangs as subcultures of negativistic masculine identities, crime and violence (Deuchar & Weide, 2019).

Black youth are more susceptible to experiencing deprivation and status frustration (Kawachi et al, 1999) and are also more likely to be demonized in the media (Gray, 1995: 403). The culture of black youth is inferred as a threat to the hegemonic ideology of Capitalist society (ibid), young black subcultural groups are cultivated as a danger to the societal consensus of morality and conformity to both laws and unwritten rules. In accordance to Shaw & Mckay's (1942) 'social disorganisation', media representations of black males contribute to moral panics about dysfunctional black families and the security of Capitalist society at the threat of black youth. 'Media representations of black masculinity operate within the cultural politics of blackness' (Gray, 1995: 404), *Top Boy* offers an insight into this whilst leaving enough ambiguity for ideological and political ideas to be challenged through critical interpretation and understanding.

The media reinforces capitalist hegemonic ideology through its representations of young black men through their hyper-criminalisation (Cooper, 2006). Ethnic minority males are often illustrated as animalistic and inherently criminal, reiterating the ideological view of the "bestial black man" (ibid: 875). This is particularly relevant to *Top Boy* as protagonist Sully, a hardened criminal and seasoned gang member, visits his daughter after a long spell in prison and reads to her, *The tiger who came to tea* (episode 8*)*, suggestive that Sully is predatory and dangerous. To sustain the stereotype that black males are "criminal" and "dangerous", it is important that viewers consume popular culture and other media representations (Oliver, 2003). Targeted media audiences are enticed into watching through the emulation of fear and fascination (Potts, 1997), inferring that people view black men in media as they view predatory animals at the zoo, reinforcing the dominant ideology that so often marginalises and dehumanises black men.

5.3. Media representations of gangs and violence

Violence and gang crime in the UK is at a decade high (Densley et al, 2020), knife crime is particularly prevalent in the rise in these statistics. Rival street gangs compete for respect, reputation, control of illicit drug markets and the defence of their turf (Nakamura et al, 2020), all factors contributing to the rise of inter-gang violence. This is represented in *Top Boy* through the rivalries of Summerhouse, the ZTs and A-Roads, with illicit drug markets and revenge being the most significant indicator of gang violence in the fictional urban crime drama. Over the past 10 years, 40% of homicide deaths in the UK have been the result of knife attacks (Kirchmaier et al, 2020), cementing its place as a social issue and UK epidemic in desperate need of social reform. Knife carrying is particularly habitual in 'known' gang areas where there are generally higher rates of violence (Pitts, 2019), reiterating gangs as intrinsically violent and dangerous. The reason for the rise in knife crime in recent years must be explored. Eades et al (2007) interprets that knife crime stems from a fear of knife crime victimisation, for protection and the desire for social status; when all rival gangs in the same area carry weapons for the same reasons, it is inevitable that there will be a rise in fatalities. The fear of victimisation is significant in understanding knife carrying amongst delinquent youths, elaborating on the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) (Boss et al, 2015), young people carry weapons for protection when assessing the proposed threat of a rival. This highlights the interconnection between PMT and youth knife carrying; young people carry knives to protect themselves from other young people carrying knives, another social issue that is explored in *Top Boy* as the unarmed ZTs are involved in altercation with weapon carrying A-Roads, a situation that lead them to obtaining 'straps' for protection (episode 3).

Victims of gang related homicide are disproportionately young black males (Pitts, 2019), this can be explained through their disproportionate gang involvement as they are in a position where they are more likely to victimise and more likely to be victimised. Media representations pay more attention to the portrayal of black youth as criminal than they do to them as victims, though the fictional representations of *Top Boy* demonstrate both sides of this analysis. It is not only young people who are involved in criminal subcultural groups that are the victims of gang violence, although it is not

common, innocent people are occasionally caught up in weapon bearing rivalries. Rhys Jones was an 11-year-old boy walking home from football training in Liverpool when he was caught between a gang shoot out in the car park of a local pub (Carter, 2008), 18-year-old Sean Mercer left his home that day with the intent to kill a rival, but instead murdered Rhys, emphasising the fatal consequences of using weapons on the whole of society. *Top Boy* also portrays this through the shooting of Tilly who was in the line of fire after Cam from the A-Roads gang aimed to shoot at the stand in ZTs leader, Jamie (episode 2). This act of violence sparked a string of affairs related to revenge, violence and murder, highlighting the rising issue of gang violence on UK streets (Densley et al, 2020).

Violence on the streets is a national issue that has been present for decades, yet rates have not reached heights as worrying as those currently. Published by the Home Office in 2018, the *Serious Violence Strategy* (HM Government, 2018) applies blame for the rise in violence on 'county lines' drugs gangs who function on systematically violent models of supply and consumption. The strategy recognises the influence of social media glamorising gang life and normalising weapon carrying. *Top Boy* can be seen to highlight the inaccuracies of the supposed glamorous lifestyle of gangs and drug selling through representations of abominable traphouses (Windle et al, 2020), fears of fatal repercussions for themselves and family members and the inability to enjoy a fruitful lifestyle with the 'stacks' they are illustrated as making.

5.4. County Lines & CCE

'Cuckooing' is a term that expresses the exploitative nature of drugs gangs who target vulnerable individuals and use their homes to sell drugs (Spicer et al, 2019), a fairly new concept that holds a significant space in drug market lexicon (Linneman, 2016). This is due to its common association with 'county lines' (HM Government, 2018), an issue that has influenced the increased violence and child criminal exploitation (CCE) in the UK. The National Crime Agency (NCA) (2017: 12) explores

'cuckooing' as a persecutory process whereby drug dealers pursue individuals that are particularly vulnerable and use their homes as central location for their drug markets. *Top Boy* illustrates this issue (episode 3) as Sully, Jason and Gem use the home of desperately poor immigrants to sell their drugs in the remote seaside town of Ramsgate.

Before assessing the implications of 'county lines', it is important to understand what the term actually means:

> "County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons."

> (HM Government, 2018: 48)

As the crack and heroin markets in major cities become saturated (Windle & Briggs, 2015), runners are ordered to travel long distances for 'drop offs' (Spicer et al, 2019), commuting on day trips – 'going country' (Coomber & Moyle, 2018), depicted in *Top Boy* as Ats and Stefan commute from East London to Manchester to 'drop off'. More often than not, the urban dealers who are sent on day trips (ibid) are young children, their involvement in county lines processes is becoming increasingly alarming (Windle & Briggs, 2015) and the detection of vulnerable children at risk of CCE is a focus for key practitioners across all sectors, including health workers, teachers and social services (HM Government, 2018). Those with increased susceptibilities and vulnerabilities are suitable targets for criminal exploitation and recruitment by drugs gangs (Chakroborti & Garland, 2012), this is why young people from deprived and broken families are often targeted. *Top Boy* represents this issue through Ats 'going country' as part of Summerhouse gang; his mother is facing the threat of

deportation by immigration control officers and is left with no job, no benefits and the prospect of losing their home, Ats is targeted through his desperation to assist his mother financially.

Top Boy is recognized for its cinematic media representation of CCE, 'county lines' and 'cuckooing' (Spicer et al, 2019) and joins forces with practitioners, MPs and academics in emphasizing the nature of these issues as inherently exploitative of vulnerabilities. Through the acknowledgement of the exploitation of young people with vulnerabilities, county lines and youth gang involvement can be interpreted as a public health issue (Pitts, 2019), children involved in county lines gangs are now seen as "victims not criminals" (Children's Society, 2017). Focusing on county lines and gang violence as a public health issue relies on the interpretation of gang involvement as an inter-generation cultural issue (Pitts, 2019), an issue that receives minimal focus in *Top Boy.*

6. **Methodology**

This dissertation looks at analysing the 'cultural verisimilitude' (Nwonka, 2017) of *Top Boy,* a critical cultural analysis of the 2019 Netflix series is the best method to do so. Through applying the meanings generated in this research to current social policy debates, the relevance and validity of claims made in the discussions are reinforced. This dissertation will identify cultural and social issues present in *Top Boy* that are reflective of issues facing the real world such as immigration, drug wars, gang violence, deprivation, marginalisation and broken families. Throughout this study, meaning will be attached to such representations as they are directly linked to issues facing the UK in 2020 with knife crime and gang violence being a particular focus due to its status as a social phenomenon (Stodolska et al, 2017).

6.1. Discourse

Before discussing the methods utilised in this work, it is important to understand 'discourse' (Schiffrin et al, 2001: 1) who infers that the main elements of discourse are language, a range of

social practice that isn't language and dialect, and the actions of those who are being analysed. Analysing 'discourse' offers a way of understanding the world (Jörgenson & Phillips, 2002: 1) that is different from many other methods of criminological research and thus offers alternative ideas of media representations; from this, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is derived (Fairclough, 1995). Prior to taking a more in depth look at CDA, it should be reinforced that discourse should not be reduced solely to language but should also refer to the illustrations and actions of the social group at the heart of the research when analysing fictional media representations of social realities, in this case, black urban youth.

6.2. Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

CDA, like many other methodologies, identifies the unequal power distributions of capitalist society making this method an obvious choice for analysing *Top Boy* as one of the main goals of the young people depicted is to gain power, respect and wealth. Foucault (1977) understands power as a productive entity rather than being an oppressive tool as those that are prevented from achieving power and success legitimately due to such unequal distributions, look for illegitimate paths of achievement. The concept of 'power' raises a multitude of issues, particularly in the manipulation and exploitation for those on the negative side of the power imbalance that continues to perpetuate in the UK; CDA more often than not draws attention to illustrations and examples of the domination of one social group by another (Phillips, 2006: 288). In the case of this research, the critical analysis highlights the criminalisation and marginalisation of young black males at the hands of those at the top of the UK's social structure.

6.3. Dispositive Analysis

Jäger relates Foucault's three categories of the dispositive (discursive practices, actions and objects (Jäger, 2001: 83) to the formation and transmission of knowledge (Caborn, 2007) which is so significant to the issues represented in study as there is much focus on the representations of black male youth in popular culture making the dispositive analysis of *Top Boy* so necessary for this type of

research. Knowledge, in this sense, is both transported and generated through media representations (ibid) that contribute to the construction of meaning for viewers of popular culture. It is important to acknowledge this in relation to *Top Boy* as discursive language alone would not address all of the deviant and criminal urban practices illustrated in the series.

In the early developments of this dissertation, there were considerations of combining media discourse analysis with online surveys to gage an audience perception of the cultural representations in *Top Boy.* However, this research will focus on the way young black males are portrayed in popular culture and media. This provides the potential for further research in understanding the "social reality" (Manji, 1993) constructed by *Top Boy* media audiences as they construct their own meanings around such representations.

7. Discussion

7.1. Gangs - A synthetic analysis

7.1.1. Going nowhere

UK street gangs stereotypically possess a certain dress code - tracksuits and trainers, the characters in *Top Boy* are illustrated as in this fashion. Although not every young BAME male who wears a tracksuit has gang ties, many young people who are involved in gangs do and as such, this style has become associated with deviant subcultures. Despite enticing images that romanticise the gang lifestyle through the portrayal of stacks of money, luxury cars and designer brands, *Top Boy* illustrates the lifestyle as dead end and a detriment to their ambitions and goals of those involved. People involved in gangs for many years often find after many years of involvement, that they do not achieve the success they had once dreamt of. Ashley Walters' character Dushane acknowledges that he has not made anything of himself and that he is a now 27-year-old man in the same position as when he became involved with Summmerhouse (Ep03). On his return to Hackney after years in Jamaica, Dushane is illustrated desperately attempting to rekindle some of the relations he had previously, emphasising the stark contrast of the reality of gang culture and the proposed success

they were once hopeful of achieving. Despite this, Dushane continues to believe crime and dealing drugs is the answer to his financial problems regardless of the fact that a decade of involvement has led him to this point, reinforcing how those who have only ever known gang culture internalise the culture and values so deeply that it becomes almost impossible to take a legitimate route to success. As such, the culture of gangs is a cycle that is rarely broken, and those who become submerged find it difficult to reabsorb dominant societal values.

7.1.2. Growing up around gangs

The risk of young children becoming involved in gangs is more likely in gang saturated areas due to increased exposure. There is much evidence of children being exposed to gang culture in the fictional Summerhouse estate, a place where violence, drug selling and gang rivalry is almost ordinary and normalised, and most importantly, representative of many housing estates in East London and throughout the UK. Children are on several occasions playing football in the midst of chaos caused by Summerhouse and the ZTs retrospectively, the most startling occasion being when the ZTs ambush Summerhouse youth with an influx of knife and acid attacks (Ep06). As one of the 'youngers' is stabbed, the children continue to play and are unstartled by the event that had occurred beneath them, highlighting that not only are those directly involved submerged in the culture that holds violence and rivalry as of high importance, it also becomes a part of everyday life for children in the area. Bennett also acknowledges the increased vulnerability of these children in his script, as Jaq and Dris, members of the fictional Summerhouse gang are accompanied by a young child who lives in the flat and the child plays toy guns with Dris whilst investigating who the new leader of the ZTs is(Ep05). As the risk of gang involvement significantly increases in gang saturated areas, this can only be deemed as a sign of things to come as the series depicts that a child growing up in the centre of acute gang rivalries and conflict is vulnerable to exchanging his plastic toy guns for real ones. In interpreting this representation, it is suggestive that children vicariously learn

behaviours and values attached to gang culture and inherit these values from the environment they grow up in.

7.1.3. 'County lines' and child criminal exploitation (CCE)

One of the most significant issues that faces the UK today in terms of crime is 'county lines' and child criminal exploitation (CCE). *Top Boy* illustrates several dimensions of this issue as it covers grooming, drug running, 'going country' and 'cuckooing', as well as exposing the way in which vulnerabilities and certain susceptibilities make it more likely for gangs to groom and recruit certain young people. With grooming being prevalent from the initial episode of the 2019 series, Ats, whose mum is facing an immigration crisis, is made a clear target by the Summerhouse seniors as Jaq tells him "might have you working for me soon" (Ep01). In episode 6, Jaq recruits Ats and tells him he is "part of the family now". This sense of belonging would entice an already vulnerable youth into gang involvement and the prospect of being given his own phone would give him a taste of the material gain associated with drug dealing, something his mum would be unable to provide for him due to her circumstances. Referring to Ats as "part of the family" offers an insight into a sense of family culture and collectiveness, something he had not been a part of as he reiterates to Stefan that his dad was not involved (Ep07). 'Going country' is an issue that is currently being faced by UK law enforcement as drugs gangs frequently move location and sell drugs in secluded areas making them more undetectable, Ats and Stefan are illustrative of this as Jaq sends them to Manchester with "food" (Ep07). Previously a high achiever, Ats is now involved in a high-risk gang feud, transporting drugs up and down the country and framing people for crimes out of desperation to help his mother and through fear of the repercussions if he refused Summerhouse requests. From this representation, the culture of gangs is evidently more than a desire of masculinity and rivalry, it often comes from a place of desperation and vulnerability, a susceptibility that increases the likelihood they will be preyed upon by gangs recruiting, particularly with regards to county lines.

7.1.4. Intra-gang hierarchies

Intra-gang hierarches can be problematic, particularly in determining the distribution of power making one individual the area's 'top boy'. There is evidence of this throughout *Top Boy* as there is competition in both Summerhouse crew and the ZTs who have individuals all competing for power not only intergang related but within gangs. There is evidence of intra-gang issues in terms of hierarchies in both the Summerhouse gang and the ZTs though there seems to be more clear authority within the Summerhouse gang structure with Dushane and Sully clearly holding more power. Contrastingly, there is more conflict within the structure and distribution of power between the ZTs as Jamie, Modie and Leyton compete to be 'top boy'. In light of Modie's imprisonment in the initial episodes (Ep01), Jamie and Leyton are in constant conflict about this while he is away, although Jamie wants to do things his way and Leyton continues to follow Modie's orders from the inside (Ep06). This suggests that regardless of imprisonment and the inability of physical presence, his desires as ZTs top boy before he went to jail remain imperative, evidence that gangs have a relatively rigid hierarchal structure and loyalty to those at the top is a valued aspect of gang culture. After Leyton is killed (Ep07) and Modie is shot dead by the police (Ep08), Jamie is in a position of power(Ep10) prior to his imprisonment. This demonstrates the uncertainty of the gang lifestyle as an individual can so quickly gain a significant amount of power and authority for it to be taken away equally as quickly. The representation of all the violence and criminality to end up with nothing other than a prison cell to reside in further illustrates the meaningless values of gang involvement and the sacrificing of a relatively ordinary life to have nothing of value, whether it be material goods or family relationships. Gangs are often considered as sharing underclass values, putting them at the foot of the social hierarchal ladder, despite being at the top of the gang hierarchal ladder.

7.2. Violence – A synthetic analysis

7.2.1. "We need more army"

In the second episode of the 2019 Netflix series, Dushane returns to Hackney and is dissatisfied with the composition of the Summerhouse crew since he had fled to Kingston, he is concerned with the

number of drug runners Dris had recruited and tells him they need more "army". Referring to drug runners as *army* depicts a violent image of the drugs trade and gang culture of London, with gangs in direct conflict with their opposition. As such, this reaffirms the ideological view that the young black males, as depicted in the series, are involved in violence and are a threat to the social order.

7.2.2. Violent rivalries

One of the most prominent issues that arises as a result of gangs is violence and conflict between rivals competing for power in the same area. Gang violence occurs for a number of reasons including competition, power, revenge and dominance; revenge is significant throughout the series. Jamie and the ZTs seek revenge for the drive-by shooting carried out by Cam's A-Roads, with a stray bullet hitting his new romantic interest Tilly and causing her brain damage (Ep02); Jamie sends out a message to his rivals by ordering the ZTs to beat Cam to death and subsequently throws him from the balcony of a flat in a high-rise tower block (Ep04). This offers a synthetic representation of the culture of young black men as there is a constant cycle of violence that seemingly cannot be broken, the loss of or damage to one life leads to the loss of many more, suggesting a culture of violent revenge. Revenge is further illustrated through the attempted murder of Sully in the cemetery following Jason's memorial (Ep06) in retaliation for the disfigurement of Modie's face in prison (Ep01) and the kidnapping of Jermaine (Channel 4 series 2). Where the dominant parent culture of UK society values respect and mourning, opposition gangs see it as an opportunity to kill for revenge, eliminating some of their competition. While these representations illustrate the intergang violence, it is important to consider the representations of intra-gang related violence. When Jamie found out from Farah that Leyton (ZTs) had been meeting with the A-Roads, he ordered Farah to "kneecap" Leyton in revenge for his lack of loyalty (Ep07), loyalty is a common value held by most, however it is not an element of the dominant culture to seek such brutal revenge which in this case, left a young man dead.

7.2.3. Valuing revenge

There is no evidence of leniency in terms of the severity of punishment that is distributed in revenge for an act of betrayal, despite the recipient of such revenge being a child. After Ats plants drugs in his best friend Stef's (younger brother of Summerhouse rival, Jamie) flat to help get Jamie imprisoned, Kit goes to Ats' house with a shotgun and attempts to shoot him (Ep10). This analysis coincides with ideological discourse that young black men that are involved in gang crime are dangerous and lack dominant societal morals as young adults attempt to kill children. Moreover, despite having relations for over a decade, there is no leniency in the revenge of Dris selling Dushane and Sully out to Jermaine and the ZTs (Ep9/Ep10) as Dushane orders Sully to shoot him, emphasising the strong cultural gang value of loyalty. This reflects the ideological view of the brutality of those involved in gangs if it serves to protect themselves and their people.

7.2.4. Securing 'straps'

Guns are becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK, particularly in the capital as rates continue to soar; there were 388 gun offences in London in 2014 compared to 770 in 2017, a figure that continues to rise (London Assembly Police and Crime Committee, 2018: 2). The majority of gun violence that occurs in the UK is committed by gang members against other gang members, illustrated in *Top Boy* as rival gangs hire 'straps' from Reuben (Ep07). There are multiple occasions where gun violence is depicted, highlighting the issue of firearms and the threat they pose to innocent people as Tilly is shot and suffers brain damage (Ep02). This is representative of real situations that occur and the indirect consequences of gang rivalries as Tilly's victimisation can be compared to the murder of youngster Rhys Jones in Liverpool almost a decade ago, reaffirming the cultural verisimilitude of *Top Boy's* representations*.* The violence and death illustrated in *Top Boy* that comes as a result of gang rivalry is representative of gang culture plaguing the UK, painting the streets with the blood of many of the young people involved.

7.2.5. The knife crime epidemic

Knife crime is a current UK epidemic that has received significant news media attention in recent years as rates have soared. There are several representations of knife attacks in the series as the ZTs ambush the Summerhouse estate in a series of knife and acid attacks (Ep06) and a daylight brawl (Ep01) reinforcing the normalisation of these kinds of attacks in some areas. Knife attacks in broad daylight reinforce the danger of violence on the streets and suggests that young gang members are willing to kill 'on site' regardless of where they are and who sees. Offering validation to ideological claims that black youth are dangerous and criminal, many of the youth that appear with knifes in the Netflix urban crime drama are of minority ethnic origin and are depicted as a threat to the physical and emotional well-being of urban communities. Knife crime appears less so than gun violence despite knives being the most-deadly weapon currently on UK streets, perhaps to identify a true reflection of the issue, there should be more focus on this. However, more depictions of violence through knives would further criminalise an oppressed and subordinate social group in desperate need of reform. The disproportionate representation of young black males as disproportionately violent and involved in gangs in *Top Boy* coincides with ideological discourse and reiterates dominant views that this group are particularly problematic. Whilst the urban crime drama does illustrate this, there are elements of the show that offer a critical analysis of this and offer an alternative representation of young BAME males.

7.3. Black men, love and families – A critical analysis of ideological representation

7.3.1. Challenging the representation of the predatory black male

Top Boy challenges ideological representations of black males through illustrating their loving and familial relationships offering a critical analysis. Representations of black males in *Top Boy* are multidimensional as despite being portrayed as criminal, violent and predatory, the same characters are also depicted as loving parents and sons. This contributes to the re-humanisation of characters previously illustrated as obtaining animalistic characteristics, a stereotypical representation of black men as criminal in popular culture, particularly in film and television. Episode 8 illustrates the

overlapping of *Top Boy* as both a synthetic and unorthodox representation of young black males as Sully his reunited with his estranged daughter at his ex-girlfriend's home. Having not seen her since his imprisonment, he reads her the story of *the Tiger Who Came to Tea,* depicting Sully as a loveable companion though it is known that there is violent and deadly potential within him. This is an impeccable representation of people becoming involved in gangs doing the wrong thing for the right reasons as well as what could be referred to as living a double life for those wrapped up in the drama and mayhem of street culture who are looking to provide for their children.

7.3.2. Supporting family

Where much traditional criminological interest is placed on the *what*, cultural criminology seeks to understand the *why.* Many factors contribute to involvement in gangs, factors that aren't often illustrated in mainstream media constructions of young delinquents. Young males are more often than not portrayed as seeking power, dominance and the expression of violence, *Top Boy* depicts the less commonly illustrated casual factors of gang involvement; the desire to provide, protect and care for their family, *Top Boy* is unique in its portrayal of this, particularly through the character Ats who is desperate to help his mum get through an immigration crisis. Although the family structure varies, Jamie also has alternative reasons for his gang involvement as he lost both his parents and now acts as a "father, mother and older brother" (Ep04) to his orphaned brothers Aaron and Stefan. Despite the foreground lifestyle of gangs, drugs and violence, gang culture is not necessarily reflective of an individual's character and identity. Young people submerged in street culture also have family values and are not entirely defiant of the parent culture. Although much of Jamie's life is consumed by his involvement with the ZTs, throughout the series it is evident that he protects his brothers from that aspect of his life as Aaron denies to Stef that their big brother is a 'top boy' (Ep07). Jamie's character is significant as it emphasises the combination of roles that an individual can play and that they too can be emerged in a multitude of cultural enterprises and values. Where the mainstream media portrays young men involved in gangs solely as a "gang member", it detracts

from all of the other aspects of their identity and focuses only on the criminalised aspects of their identity.

7.3.3.   A brotherhood

The relationship between Sully and Jason throughout the series is imperative in assessing the cultural verisimilitude of the urban crime drama. Many young people involved in gangs and especially those who serve time in jail have minimal or no familial relationships as a consequence of their criminal lifestyle. When these young people have no relationships with their blood related family, they turn to the streets where their accomplices become family and the people they spend a significant amount of time around become the closest thing they have to brothers, subsequently becoming their role models. The 'bromance' between Sully and Jason is particularly significant here as Sully is reluctant to discuss his familial relationships on his release from prison and is instead greeted by Jason (Ep02). After almost a decade of gang involvement, selling drugs and violence, the closest thing Sully has to family is a man he met as a vulnerable young boy on the streets, stealing to fund his mother's drug habit (Channel 4 *Top Boy: Summerhouse* series 1). Jason is representative of the other side of the drugs trade as his mother was a drug addict, a disease that lead to her death, it can be interpreted that Jason had not known what it felt like to belong to a family, Sully fills this position and undertakes the role of Jason's best friend and older brother. Sully is protective of Jason (Ep03) and has hopes of him achieving his goals and dream of seeing Arsenal FC play live (Ep03), this illustrates the sense of belonging that comes with gang culture, as his involvement with Sully and Summerhouse had been the only time somebody had believed in his dreams. This contributes to gang involvement and the reluctance of young people to leave gangs, as they are provided the love and providing many of them had been deprived in the earlier years of their life. Despite this, Jason's involvement only leads to more death and despair as he burnt to death in a building set on fire by racists when selling drugs in Ramsgate (Ep04), although there was belief and clarity in his somewhat simple dream of watching a live football game, the death of Jason is reflective of the metaphorical

death of the aspirations, hopes and dreams of young people involved in the criminal subculture of organised crime and gang involvement. This critical analysis of *Top Boy* is strengthened through Sully's feelings of guilt about Jason's death as he apologises to him at his memorial (Ep06). The emotion shown by Sully illustrates that, what on the surface appears to be a violent thug, is an empathetic and loving person who is truly devastated and takes responsibility for the death of his friend. This offers an opposing view of mainstream images of black males associated with gangs as they are depicted as emotionless, deadly monsters that offer nothing other than crime and misery to society. Sully represents the young people who have been brought up in gang saturated urban areas, in desperate need of love and companionship outside of the gang, he also represents the young people who acknowledge their wrongdoing and dangerous lifestyle but feel as though society does not allow them a way out.

7.3.4. Deadly consequences for family members

Gang involvement is detrimental to the families who are still in touch with their loved ones who are involved in delinquent subcultures as it has a significant impact on the people close to them. This illustrates the synthetic ideological construction of young black males, criminalising and marginalising them through their representation in popular culture. Much of the popular constructions of gang crime focus explicitly on the perpetrator and direct victim of crime, but pay little attention to the family of the perpetrator as victims of their actions, *Top Boy* emphasises this well and illustrates it through various scenes in the show. Despite not physically killing Donovan himself (Ep06), his involvement with his cousin Dushane directly led to his death in Jamaica, emphasising the detriment of gang involvement and organised crime on family relationships as Dushane finds himself with Donovan's blood on his hands.

7.3.5. Orphaned and estranged children

One of the most significant detriments of gang involvement is that of the children who are left without parents and caregivers when they are killed or are sent to jail. This is a very real impact of

the lifestyle many young parents choose to live and the representation of this issue in *Top Boy* further reinforces the richness of cultural verisimilitude possessed by the show. Although the initial episode depicts Sully in prison, leaving his daughter behind (Ep01), he is portrayed as rekindling the parent and child relationship with his estranged daughter. Contrastingly, in the final episode of the series, Jamie, who is a father figure to Aaron and Stefan is taken away from his brothers as he is imprisoned and Dris is shot, leaving his daughter without a father (Ep10). Despite the sacrifices they made for their families and the risks they took to support them financially, they end up being the reason their children or siblings are left in a dangerous community to fend for themselves. Individuals involved in gangs often do the wrong things for the right reasons, through a desire for love, respect and family. This is important in the media discourse analysis of *Top Boy* as it infers that the roots of the issues that lead to young people being involved in gangs and crime are represented with such vivid cultural verisimilitude in the show, that it contributes to media audiences, policy makers and practitioners the opportunity to understand *who* they are rather than simply *what* they do.

8. Conclusion

Exploring the construction of mediated crime images based on the stereotypes of young black men, this dissertation depicts both a synthetic and critical analysis of the significance of dominant ideologies that are prevalent in media depictions of this criminalised group. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), I have reflected upon the criminalisation of black culture within popular criminology which has subsequently led to the debate around whether fictional media representations that are produced initially for the purpose of entertainment can influence audiences to reconstruct their own meanings of gangs and violence in London and the rest of the UK. Cultural verisimilitude is imperative in this as *Top Boy* raises issues about gangs, the illicit drug trade, street culture and the deprivation that many young BAME individuals suffer as a result of the unequal distributions of power that are so prevalent in the UK. These are all issues that desperately need to

be addressed and *Top Boy* offers a platform to raise awareness of these issues, specifically amongst the targeted young audience that may be in the dark about the issues that are happening around them. Bringing to attention criminal epidemics such as knife crime reinforces the relevance and importance of representing this culture and the people that it has a profound impact on. Those involved are on the surface, represented as utilising gang culture as an expression of violence, aggression and masculinity, though delving deeper into the CDA of the show reveals an alternative picture. Young black males are represented in *Top Boy* as being involved in gangs for a sense of belonging, family and love, things they are regularly deprived of at home. Although the young black men represented in *Top Boy* are dangerous, criminal and violent, they are not defined by these characteristics and are essentially desperately searching for a path to success and belonging, something the oppressive and explicitly discriminatory Capitalist system deprives them of.

Media representations and popular criminologies are incredibly powerful sources of knowledge, and despite being fictional, *Top Boy* is just as educational as documentaries on gangs and violence because the creator, Ronan Bennett, has depicted such a vivid and accurate illustration of the issues currently being faced by the UK. From knife crime and 'county lines', to BAME communities disproportionately living in areas saturated with social housing and crime, *Top Boy* has the potential to spark policy debates to push forward and improve the lives of those living in areas that mirror the fictional Summerhouse estate both culturally and aesthetically.

9. **Bibliography**

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