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Social Media's Impact on Crime and Retaliatory Violence

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Introduction

Research has established that over 93% of American adults use the internet and that over 95% of adolescents (aged 3 to 18) have access to the internet (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., Pew Research Center, 2021). Therefore, it is no surprise that social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram are used by offenders to propagate violence quickly and to a broader audience than ever before. Gang members use the internet for a variety of reasons, which include making incendiary remarks about rival gang members, inciting challenges and dares, recruitment, flaunting illegal substances or weapons, uploading videos of fights, watching gang-related music videos, and generally promoting gang culture (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2018). With this increased accessibility, the literature has explored social media's role in crime and retaliatory violence, especially among gangs and at-risk youth. This literature review will explore how online social media conflicts between gangs and online disputes among at-risk adolescents fuel in-person retaliatory violence. This is the first paper in a series that examines the relationship between social media and retaliatory violence.

Defining Terms

Given the increasing role that social media plays in society, scholars must devote more attention to understanding how technology contributes to interpersonal retaliatory violence. Retaliatory violence is a dispute involving an interaction between two or more people (Klofas et al., 2020). It occurs over a set period of time and is marked by two or more confrontational or intimidating events where at least some of the events involve violent acts or threats of violence deemed credible. Two violent or threatening events in a pattern of negative reciprocity reflect retaliatory violence. Retaliatory violence can be initiated or accelerated

when an individual uses the internet, especially social media sites, to communicate disrespect with the aim to incite a reaction from others. The *code of the street* is defined as a presentation of oneself in which one must uphold their public image by sending an unmistakable message that one is capable of violence if a situation necessitates it (Lane et al., 2018; Anderson, 1999). Where the “code” was once restricted to the streets, it can now be violated through online social media interactions, such as *internet banging*. Internet banging is used to promote one’s gang affiliation, interest in gang activities, maintain relevance by reporting participation in a violent act or spewing threats, or to share information about a rival gang or national gang network (Patton et al., 2013). These internet banging events often led to real-life meet-ups with the intent to inflict physical violence.

Gang Violence and Social Media Findings

Status, Respect, and "Code of the Street"

Status, respect, and the code of the street relate to the concept that social media fuels online conflict among gang members where a gang member’s status is disrespected. Disrespect through social media incites the gang member to maintain their status and street credibility, by means of physical retaliatory violence. Several pieces of literature support that online disrespect between gangs leads to physical altercations in efforts to establish credibility and maintain status.

Based on their analysis of Chicago gangs, Patton and colleagues have identified three mechanisms that link social media and gang violence including intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking (Patton et al., 2016a). Status-seeking relates to the “code of the street”

and maintaining respect among the gang's community. Status-seeking violence was studied in a survey conducted by the National Gang Intelligence Center, where they found that twenty-five percent of gang members used the internet at least 4 hours per week, and 74% of internet-using gang members use the internet to show or gain respect for their gang (Patton et al., 2013). Patton concludes that gang members will use social media to achieve and maintain their street credibility or status.

In the case study of Southside Chicago gang member Gakirah Barnes, Patton et al. (2016b) discovered examples of aggression in Barnes' tweets that were closely linked to the code of the street. The three parts of violence that occur in online gang interactions: intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking were present in Barnes' online communications. Status-seeking was observed in the tweets where Barnes and her network established a tough front by displaying their willingness to retaliate if challenged. When Barnes was threatened by a rival gang, she used social media to express her readiness to take matters offline. This preparedness to fight in person stemmed from the disrespect inflicted by the other gang. This study further illustrated how social media can stimulate physical altercations between rival gangs.

Similar findings were seen in a study conducted in the United Kingdom (Densley, 2020). Gang members with street capital tend to back up their words online with physical altercations to maintain status, which is another way retaliatory violence is seen among gangs. This reflects the code of the street, as gang members are more likely to report that online provocations lead to offline violence; they respond to instances of disrespect towards their gang and retaliate with violence against their rival gang. Densley discusses how social

media fuels the idea that a gang identity offers protection and excitement, as the internet displays the constant threats of violence throughout the day. Code of the street and status-seeking are both instances where gangs are challenged and/or disrespected by opposing gangs, which causes them to turn to physical violence to prove their strength and status in their community.

Irwin-Rogers, Densely, and Pinkney (2018) showed similar findings relating to the online code of the street material. The authors recognized that gangs use music videos as a tool to challenge the reputation and status of rival gang members. Music videos tend to glorify violent acts, but an increasing number of videos have begun to boast about drug operations as well. Gang members argue that music videos are a fun and creative pursuit that aids in the launching of a professional music career, in which they can escape the violence of gang life. However, these scholars maintain that these videos are a catalyst for inciting face-to-face gang violence, consistent with the code of the street.

Social Media Used as a Practical Tool for Violence Precipitation and Response

Most of the literature suggests that social media is a way for gangs to ignite violence among rival gangs, generating violent face-to-face responses. For example, gang members will post themselves trespassing on rival gang territories, rival gang locations, or their own location to provoke a physical altercation. In this way, social media is used to generate this participation and response. According to Lauger and colleagues (2020), threatening and insulting material online produces violent behavior just as internet banging creates a strain. This study looked at how an online presence of gangs may cause strain that results in gang members retaliating against each other through physical violence to alleviate that strain. Although the

review acknowledges that more research needs to be done on applying General Strain Theory to gangs as a whole, it states that “technologies act as a medium through which conflicts can develop, fester, and even spillover into the street” (Lauger et al., 2020, p. 17). This research establishes that gangs can use social media to construct threatening or violent material that can evolve into real-life physical conflicts.

In their analysis of Chicago gangs, Patton and colleagues (2016a) identified three mechanisms linking social media and gang violence: intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking. Reciprocity is defined as violent exchanges among gangs in which retaliatory violence is expected. This idea is essential to understanding how social media generates responses through violence because of the accessibility social media provides for gang members. Due to this accessibility, gangs can gather information on their targets’ locations, increasing the precision and fatality of future assaults (Stuart, 2020). When a conflict begins online, violent responses are reciprocated by both gangs until one gang eventually locates the other gang. Once this location is found, the gang members can take their violent responses offline and commence in-person fighting. Patton and colleagues (2016a) conclude that social media is a tool used by gangs to retrieve rival gang locations, which can lead to physical retaliation.

In a case study of a Southside Chicago gang member’s Twitter communication, more evidence was found to support the idea that retaliatory violence is heightened through social media (Patton et al., 2016b). This study looked at a gang member named Gakirah Barnes and examined a small subset of Twitter data. Their primary strategy was capturing Barnes’ tweets, mentions, replies, and retweets. The concept of reciprocity was also found in this

study, as Barnes' tweets used specific hashtags and wordings that others would use as well. Many of these tweets illustrated a desire for retaliation that outweighed the threat of injury or death that could potentially arise from further escalation. Spatial referencing allowed these gang members to reference their location to challenge their rivals to meet up in person and reveal their opponent's location to threaten them with physical violence. Overall, this study can be applied to how gangs utilize social media to challenge other gangs, boost their status, and reveal locations to take their threats offline and turn them into physical retaliatory violent events.

Similar findings on gang location were observed in a study on gangs in the United Kingdom (Densley, 2020). Similar to other research, this study found many examples of online conflict spilling into real-world violence. For instance, gang members made known a rival's location through social media posts. By displaying one's location, rival gang members can meet up and get physical with one another. This supports the idea that social media can be a tool for inciting violent response participation in which locations are posted via social media.

In their study of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, Pawelz and Elvers (2018) also found that social media is used to reveal the gangs' geographical locations. When gang members send threats to another gang, they usually indicate the geographical area. By including the location, the goal is to ignite a physical altercation and to display their street credibility and group strength. The quickest way to take violent responses from social media offline is by exposing their rival's location because they know that the gang will not accept any disrespect and need to maintain credibility. Again, it is shown that social media is a tool used to start conflict taken offline in retaliation.

In addition, Irwin-Rogers, Densely, and Pinkney (2018) found that youth gang members used social media to post themselves trespassing or stealing from rival gangs. Social media was the primary communicator used to exhibit these threats. Provoked by the opposing gang to protect their reputation and status, these online threats gave rise to physical retaliation. Gangs who post themselves trespassing or stealing from opposing gangs are showing disrespect towards the other gang. Since status and credibility are essential to the group, they will often turn to physical violence to maintain how they are viewed in their community and neighborhood. Social media is routinely used as a way for gangs to threaten their enemies by posting themselves at their rival's locations to incite physical confrontations.

Music, Rap, and Videos

Another way that gangs use social media to display their reputation is by creating and posting music videos (Densley, 2020; Pawelz & Evers, 2018). Most of these videos are hip-hop and rap videos to help promote gang activities, threaten rival gangs, motivate criminal activities, and grieve over the death of fellow gang members. Retaliatory violence is seen when this music is used to threaten other gangs or to flaunt a gang's power. Gangs do not like being intimidated or made to feel less powerful than their rivals, so they often react to these music videos with physical violence to maintain their reputations and street credibility.

In a study done on gangs in the United Kingdom (Densley, 2020), rap videos were found to be a tool used by gangs to promote their reputation, warn off rivals, and promote their gang activities to improve business. When the opposing gang reacts to the videos threatening their street credibility, they often resort to physical violence as their response. By participating in an in-person altercation, the gang is displaying their power and strength in hopes of

maintaining their reputation within their community. Social media helps distribute these videos across the internet for all to see, which further challenges the reputation of the gang being taunted. Overall, using social media through rap music and videos is tied to increased physical conflicts and violence, as they can intimidate and threaten gangs to retaliate against each other.

In the Trinidad and Tobago gangs study conducted by Pawelz and Elvers (2018), they discovered that music motivates and increases self-confidence but also helps show off power to threaten an opponent. It is said that listening to hip-hop and rap music increases the chance of violent and antisocial behavior in those who are already deemed deviant. These authors interviewed thirty-nine people including active/former gang members, ex-prisoners, social workers, former prison officers, police officers, and others. The authors identified four ways gangs use social media and music: to glorify the gang lifestyle, to send messages to rival gangs, to promote the commission of criminal activities, and to bond over grief. Music distributed over social media allows gangs to showcase the gang members and their leaders as “generous, rich, and respected people” (p. 449). By depicting the lifestyle in this light, the gangs can network across national boundaries and recruit youth. Second, music motivates crime and the criminal process from the beginning to the end by glorifying the lifestyle, which encapsulates the youth. Third, social media and music are coping strategies for violence, pain, and loss. Gang members will mourn the loss of one of their own by posting on social media or using music to honor them. The fourth use of social media and music is vital to how retaliatory violence is seen in gangs: displaying power and sending threats. While social media helps build bonds, it is also a tool used to start online conflicts likely to be taken offline in retaliation.

Individual and Group Identities

Gangs have both group and individual identities within them. When a particular gang member's identity is threatened online, the other members of the group will work together to ensure a rival gang does not tarnish their member's reputation. Gangs have an "us versus them" mentality, meaning they have a group identity where they all fight to protect their members. When social media is used to harm one or more gang members' credibility or intimidate them, the entire gang will take the conflict offline and retaliate in person.

Patton and colleagues (2016a) identified three mechanisms linking social media and gang violence in their analysis of Chicago gangs, including inter-group conflict. This idea of inter-group conflict is the us-versus-them mentality among gangs, where they create an identity that goes against another gang. So, when a rival gang member threatens one gang member, the entire group is threatened as that individual represents the entire gang. Because of this group identity, the whole gang's reputation is on the line when one individual identity is harmed. When a gang feels that their street credibility is threatened, they will take matters into their own hands and physically retaliate against the opposing gang. This study shows how social media threats against one individual are used as ammunition against the entire gang's collective identity, which primes physical violence to protect the gang's image.

Similar findings on intergroup conflict among gangs were revealed in the study of the South Side of Chicago gang members' Twitter communication (Patton et al., 2016b). The tweets relating to intergroup conflict included proactive and reactive aggression. Proactive aggression occurred when Gakirah Barnes initiated the threat of violence toward an individual or group. Reactive tweets were responses to threats posed on Barnes and her network

(Patton et al., 2016b). The reactive aggressive tweets tended to prolong a violent event, but both were found to incite violence and threats that would be taken offline. The Twitter users in this study also used group threats to represent their gang's numbers and authority, and it directly targeted specific people and groups in opposing gangs. Again, because Barnes was a gang member, she and her members shared one identity. Therefore, when one of them was threatened online, the entire gang would react and respond with violence. Eventually, the back-and-forth between Barnes' gang and her rival gang would lead to a physical confrontation to protect not only her reputation but the reputation of her fellow gang members. This study further illustrates how social media threatens the entire gang's identity, resulting in physical retaliation.

The concept of collective identity was observed in two selected gangs from Trinidad and Tobago (Pawelz & Elvers, 2018). In this study, Pawelz and Elvers discovered that gangs would exploit the internet to further their collective identity. The idea of collective identity within gangs is that their members have similar ways of thinking based on their gang's culture and are essentially one unit. When one of them is threatened, the entire group feels threatened. Social media was seen in this study to help create a collective identity online and display a gang's power for anyone to see. If another gang saw one gang's social media identity as posing a threat to them, they would turn to in-person confrontation to uphold their credibility. This idea further displays how gangs use social media to boost power and incite physical violence.

A study by Irwin-Rogers, Densely, and Pinkney (2018) found that gangs use social media to bolster their reputation by making their violent acts public for all to see, including the

opposing gang they are trying to humiliate or shame. By showcasing the violence done by an individual member or whole gang, rival gangs can view any disrespect or humiliation done to one of their members and retaliate with real-life violence since they share the same group identity. Because social media allows anyone to post whatever they want, gang members will create posts that can provoke severe incidents of violence in person. Larger audiences make in-person retaliation more likely because social media permits millions of people to view gang activity posted. Gangs cannot ignore blatant disrespect from rival gangs, forcing them to retaliate to save their reputations from being ruined.

In addition, there is some evidence that social media use by gangs is not universal but may vary depending on the age profile of gang members, their familiarity and use of social media in general, and how well established the gang is. Based on their qualitative research in London (UK), Whittaker and colleagues (2020) identified gangs that they classified as *traditionalists* and others that they labeled *digitalists*. The former represented more established gangs with older members who were more reserved in their social media use because they preferred to maintain a low profile to avoid law enforcement attention and because they recognized that gang-related social media content could be used as intelligence and evidence by law enforcement and prosecutors. In contrast, gangs and member profiles defined as digitalists viewed social media as a practical tool to promote the gang, facilitate internal gang communication, and as a means to enhance the status and reputation among younger gang members. This research establishes that there can be variability in the use of social media by gangs within the same area or jurisdiction depending on the nature and needs of the gang and its membership.

Social Media’s Influence on Adolescents

The use of social media by gangs and the use of social media by adolescents, in general, is treated separately in this literature review because of the different levels of violence and the types of conflict social media creates for each. Gangs tend to be more violent when it comes to retaliating against any disrespect communicated through social media, while the responses from adolescents in general tend to be less violent. Cyberbullying is primarily observed among adolescents because of their age and interaction style with others. Not only that, but the types of conflict that will be discussed are mostly among youths and are designed to incite a physical reaction. Gangs are threatened as a whole group and have reputations that they need to protect with physical violence, which means that they will have a more violent altercation than that among youths. Because of the differences between violence and conflicts, gangs and adolescents' use of social media, resulting in physical confrontations, are distinct.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a recurring topic in the literature. Cyberbullying has been defined as a “hostile digital communication intended to inflict harm” (Elsaesser et al., 2021, p. 2). Elsaesser et al.’s study of youth in Hartford demonstrated the connection between online conflict and real-life violence between non-gang-involved adolescents. It was found that social media intensifies cyberbullying to the extent that adolescents believe a physical fight is justifiable. Cyberbullying mainly occurs among adolescents who view themselves as being reactive instead of proactive, which makes it seem as though cyberbullying is used as a tactic for revenge (Patton et al., 2013). Cyberbullying is not always used to instigate conflict, but it

will often result in it because of its aggressive nature. Patton and colleagues discuss how internet banging and cyberbullying resemble one another due to the online aggression both promote. Marginalized youth often communicate differently online due to the violence and trauma they experience in real life. Because of this, cyberbullying may be used to cope with the stressors within their environment. Unfortunately, this coping strategy fuels in-person conflicts and retaliations among at-risk adolescents.

Types of Conflict

In their study of adolescent violence, Elsaesser et al. (2013) identified three sources of online conflict. This study was done to build on prior research exploring the relationship between social media and violence and involved four focus groups made up of 41 participants between the ages of 10 and 24. The first type of conflict discovered was disrespect to self, defined as a conflict that arises from the perception that one's self is being disrespected. The second type of conflict is disrespect to people one cares about, defined as a conflict that arises from the perception that someone one cares for is being disrespected. The third type of conflict is romantic, which occurs from pain due to a current or ex-romantic partner. All three of these conflicts may trigger aggression taken off social media and into the real world, however, some social media features further enhance the conflicts to be taken offline and in person. These features are commenting on posts, posting videos/pictures, live streaming, and tagging others in posts. Commenting was the most common feature used to incite conflicts, as it was mentioned by around 80% of the respondents in the study. Commenting on one's posts further increases tensions, often spilling into face-to-face conflict. In approximately 29% of the incidents recorded in this study, videos and pictures stimulated disrespect that turned into a physical altercation. In about 23% of the incidents, live streaming

brought a larger audience into the conflict, where physical retaliation was viewed as a way to end the embarrassment brought on by using this tool. Finally, tagging that resulted in physical retaliation only occurred in 10 out of the 56 cases of online conflicts studied.

Other Considerations

Social media provides a vector for gang and adolescent violence alike, but it has not completely replaced the mechanisms by which gangs and adolescents engage in violent behaviors. Patton et al.'s (2016a) study on Chicago gangs made note of several non-social media variables. The authors link urban growth and economic disenfranchisement to the rise in gang violence. In the 1960s, Chicago had over half a million residents employed in manufacturing jobs, with the majority residing in urban areas. Manufacturing employment plummeted in the 1970s, falling to 147,000 by 2000, as industry relocated overseas to escape unionization and paying higher wages (Moberg, 2005). These job losses disproportionately affected the Black residents of Chicago. The loss of Chicago industry, predominately in urban areas, profoundly affected masculine identity (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Without jobs or affordable housing, many turned to gang life. The rise of technology coincided with this economic shift and has created an increased accessibility for Chicago gangs to spread gang conflict across social media (Patton et al., 2013).

Portrayals of violence have become reliable vehicles for ensuring media profitability in terms of generating advertising revenue (Dholakia & Reyes, 2018). The relationship between social media algorithms and violent content cannot be understated. Content containing violence receives high user interaction through likes, comments, and shares. Social media algorithms

also have features that filter through content to block violent content, but it is not completely accurate. Lastly, users of social media sites have the choice to block content they see as harmful. However, content that is not actually harmful can be flagged by the algorithms if enough people report it. This is often referred to as *mass-reporting*. Algorithms can seemingly pick and choose what is deemed violent, and often let the real violent material go uncensored because it is the content that generates the best revenue.

Often excluded from the literature is the increasing role of female membership in gangs. There are a number of reasons that explain the lack of literature on the topic. Given that females drop out of gang life earlier than males, it is difficult to ascertain who was a gang member because their age precluded them from entering the system. Female criminality is still a largely misunderstood aspect of the criminal justice system, and oftentimes contains inclusive or conflicting evidence. Researchers are sure, however, that female gang members were involved in delinquency of some sort but on a smaller scale than their male counterparts. A 1993 study in Rochester, NY conducted by Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) found that 66% of female gang members and 82% percent of male gang members reported involvement in at least one serious delinquent act. Furthermore, an 11-city survey of 8th graders conducted in the mid-1990s found that more than 90% of both male and female gang members reported having engaged in one or more violent acts in the previous twelve months (Esbensen & Osgood, 1997). Female gangs' formation can occur for other reasons than male gangs. While both formations can be tied to changes in economic standings, female gang formation is uniquely affected by the state of welfare reform in most cases (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001).

Conclusion

Gang members and adolescents use social media in many ways, turning online conflicts into real-life retaliations. Gang members use social media to incite conflict through internet banging, the code of the street, status-seeking, intergroup conflict, collective identity, and reciprocity. In addition, music videos also perpetuate threats and disrespect that lead to the need to retaliate in person to display the gang's dominance over the community. Differing is the way at-risk adolescents use social media to ignite conflict. Most commonly, three types of disputes arise from the adolescent use of social media: disrespect to self, disrespect to people one cares for, and romantic conflicts. Social media features like posting comments, videos/pictures, live streaming, and tagging inflame these online disputes. Online conflicts among gangs and at-risk youth can be taken offline and onto the streets in retaliatory-style violence. Therefore, it is paramount that methods and practices be developed in collaboration with local communities and law enforcement professionals to prevent online conflicts from turning into deadly, physical violence.

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