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Old Message in a New Bottle: Taking Gang Rivalries Online Through Rap Battle Music Videos on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is changing society, including criminal behavior. It has been shown that gangs are active online, but it is unclear how gangs are using the Internet. Most studies seem to conclude that gang members are not using the Internet instrumentally to commit or promote criminal behavior, but these same studies show that gang members use social media for flame wars—to insult and threaten one another. We argue that using social media in this way is actually an instrumental use of the Internet because it promotes violence. According to the code of the street, a diss requires a response, often a violent one. Using a set of six underground battle rap videos, we demonstrate a connection between online flame wars and street-level violence.

Introduction

It is estimated that there are about 3.1 billion Internet users worldwide and that 86.9% of Americans are Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2014). Clearly, Internet use is widespread, and it has dramatically changed society (Holt et al., 2012; Holt & Bossler, 2014). People can now stay in touch with long-distance relatives and friends via Facebook, stream TV shows and movies, shop online, find medical information and advice, and get a higher degree without ever leaving their house. The Internet and social media have even been used to help organize revolutions (Lister & Smith, 2011).

Unfortunately, the Internet has also become popular among criminals. In their survey of 585 individuals at risk for and involved in criminal behavior, Moule, Pyrooz and Decker (2013) reported a positive relationship criminal offending and Internet adoption; further, 81% of their sample reported social network usage. With criminals logging on, the Internet has also transformed criminal behavior by providing more criminal opportunities to a wider range of people. For instance, the Internet has increased opportunities in four main cybercrime areas: cybertrespass, cyberdeception/theft, cyberporn and obscenity, and cyberviolence (Holt, Bossler & May, 2012; Holt & Bossler, 2014). While all four areas are important (see Holt & Bossler, 2014, for a detailed review of each area), the current study focuses on cyberviolence.

Cyberviolence involves the ways individuals use the Internet to cause harm in real or virtual environments (Holt & Bossler, 2014). This type of crime includes cyberbullying, which has become an increasingly serious problem as youth exposed to cyberbullying suffer very real consequences, like poor school performance, depression, and suicide attempts (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2010; Dehue, Bolman & Vollink, 2008).

Cyberviolence also includes using technology in support of prospective acts of terror (Holt & Bossler, 2014). Terrorist organizations and other extremist groups use the Internet to recruit new members and disseminate violent messages (Weimann, 2004; Zanini & Edwards, 2001). Weimann (2004)

explains that the Internet is ideal for terrorist organizations because it offers easy access, little regulation and censorship, potentially large audiences, anonymity, and the fast flow of information. These traits that make the Internet attractive to terrorists also make it attractive to gang members as a medium through which to communicate and spread their message (Moule, Decker & Pyrooz, 2013).¹

In part due to the shrinking gap between wealthy and poor communities' access to technology and the Internet, gang members appear to be increasing their online presence and taking advantage of social media (Pyrooz et al., 2015). According to O'Deane (2011), "its ease of use, potential audience size, and reduced risk of user detection has made the Internet one of the most prominent methods of gang communication" (p. 1). Drawing from law enforcement reports and social networking websites, the FBI's National Gang Intelligence Center (2011), determined that gang members are "becoming increasingly savvy and are embracing new and advanced technology to facilitate criminal activity" (p. 41). The online presence of gangs has been established by other studies as well (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2012; Van Hellemon, 2012; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a). Scholarship suggests that more organized gangs may be more likely to take advantage of the Internet (Moule, Pyrooz and Decker, 2014).

According to the NGIC (2011) report, gang members use the Internet for a variety of purposes, including to communicate, intimidate, promote and recruit, showcase illegal exploits, and facilitate criminal activity. Thus, a number of gangs and gang members are essentially "cyberbanging," or participating in illegally downloading media, selling drugs, coordinating assaults, and uploading deviant videos (Decker & Pyrooz, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2015; Van Hellemon, 2012). Part of cyberbanging includes fulfilling expressive goals of defending turf, boasting about violent reputations, and disrespecting rival gangs. Like with cyberbullying and terrorism, social media provides a larger audience for gang activity and a permanent stage for disseminating harmful messages. Haut (2014) notes that, "if not replacing graffiti, cyberspace widens and boosts the impact of this [gang] communication, without noticeably changing its fundamentals and its aims" (p. 24). He goes on to say that while social media communications operate in much the same way that graffiti does in the real world, an important difference is the increased speed and reach of these Internet-based messages (Haut, 2014). The fact that the globalization of gangs has been linked to the dissemination of gang culture via the Internet is proof of the utility of the Internet's broad reach for gangs (Moule et al., 2014).

One way gang members are spreading their message is through the creation of amateur rap music videos (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Van Hellemon, 2012; Haut, 2014). Advances in social media have given way to new outlets of expression whereby individuals are now capable of creating, editing, and distributing their own content throughout the World Wide Web (Moule, R.K., Pyrooz, D.C. & Decker, S.H., 2013). Gangs have taken advantage of the ease of making and disseminating recordings; many of

their communications take the form of gangsta rap that is recorded by a rapper in the gang whose job it is to send out messages via song (Haut, 2014). Recognizing this, some rap music and even gang scholars suggest that researchers might want to look beyond traditional data sources for the empirical traces of “culture in action” (Holt, 2010; Kubrin, 2005; Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013).

Our study is an attempt to do just that. Using information from street outreach workers (SOWs), we located battle rap videos posted on YouTube by gang members that are believed to be connected to acts of violence, including the death of one bystander and one of the participants. Utilizing the “code of the street” as a lens (Anderson, 1999), we conduct a qualitative analysis of the content of these videos to explore the ways in which these gang members were disrespecting one another in a public forum. Further, using interviews with the SOWs, we discuss how disseminating these videos online using this new public medium would demand a violent reaction according to gang subculture.

Scholars studying the group process of gangs have demonstrated that a governing rule of gangs requires retribution for disrespecting the gang’s name, reputation, or turf (Papachristos, 2009; Decker, 1996; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Short and Strodtbeck, 1965). In areas with poor formal social controls, norms of reciprocity link social status with revenge, and, in order to maintain cohesion, gangs view a threat against one member as a threat to the group (Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Decker, 1996). This leads to a cycle of retaliatory attacks as gangs must continue to respond to threats in order to defend or maintain their reputations (Papachristos, 2009; Decker, 1996).

According to Decker et al. (2013), the lack of research on group process in non-criminal behavior among gang members is an important omission from gang research. Our examination of battle rap videos posted to YouTube by gang members is a descriptive exploration of a non-criminal activity that gang members are now engaging in. However, we discuss the way in which their non-criminal participation in social media can contribute to the retaliatory cycle of expressive violence. Through a case study analysis of battle rap music videos, we contribute to the literature by showing that social media is a new medium for gang members to increase group cohesion by responding to threats online. We also discuss the possible connection between the online threats and violence in the street.

Literature review

Rap music, gangsta rap and rap battles

Rap music, a form of hip hop, emerged in the music industry in the 1970s from the South Bronx epicenters of hip hop culture alongside graffiti art and break-dancing (Rose, 1994; Basu, 1998). DJ Kool Herc is credited with inventing the form of spinning break beats back-to-back in 1973, while Grandmaster Flash perfected mixing and blending those break beats, but the commercial explosion of rap began with the Sugarhill Gang’s release of *Rapper’s Delight* in 1979 (Rap of Ages, 2007; Basu, 1998). As a genre, it evolved from the more carefree period of the 1970s and early 1980s into the Afrocentric

community stance of the late 1980s, and, now, into “gangsta rap” today (Kubrin, 2005, p. 434). According to critics, gangsta rap with its themes of masculinity, misogyny, crime and violence, was not expected to last (Alton & Spirer, 2003; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang; Rose, 1994; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). But, this type of rap music was successful in targeting and attracting urban Black youth because it was and is often based on rappers describing the struggles of living in concentrated disadvantage. Moreover, it depicts their experiences with managing to survive under a cultural code, which has emerged because of the combined effect that poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and general isolation has had on them and their communities (Anderson, 1999; Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Much of gangsta rap today then focuses on the group, clique, or even gang life experience, which many urban youth are exposed to at an early age (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005).

Further, within the evolving history of urban culture and rap is the competitive side of the poetry or word play that goes on between rap artists. Verbal contests stem from the tradition of “the dozens,” which was first solidly documented in African American vaudeville (Wald, 2012). According to Abrahams (1962), playing the dozens is a verbal battle that occurs in crowds of lower class African American boys; one boy insults another boy’s family member (usually his mother) using rhyme and wit, and the insulted boy must return the insult. The boys retaliate back and forth until everyone is bored, one hits the other, or they are interrupted. For adolescents, playing the dozens helps with the process of identity formation; it allows adolescent males to attain a sense of masculinity by simultaneously rejecting female authority and asserting their own superiority and virility. The dozens also prepares adolescents for similar and more complex verbal endeavors in manhood (Abrahams, 1962).² These rhymed exchanges contributed to the birth of rap and, in particular, the rap battle.

The genre then evolved around 1981, when Kool Moe Dee, in a battle of the MCs with Busy Bee, gave birth to the lyrical MC—moving rap past the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s “rock the party” type of battle that went on between early rap artists in clubs (Alton & Spirer, 2003). Since Kool Moe Dee, the contemporary battle of the MCs is a debate that goes on between rap artists, based on convincing people that they can “move the crowd” and are the best or “dopest” rapper. Sometimes this is done by “dissing” (disrespecting) a rival rap artist. According to Alton and Spirer (2003), after the emergence of Kool Moe Dee and the lyrical MC, rap became a full contact sport, or highly aggressive and competitive, and neighborhoods started taking credit for their own local rapper’s work. By the mid-1980s and early 1990s rap evolved into the hardcore style of gangsta rap and the streets, not the clubs, became the natural stage (Rose, 1994). As gangsta rap popularized and became commercial, the rap artists’ battle on the streets was a way of taking steps toward increased notoriety and fame. And the idea was that “you practice in the streets to see if you can make it in the industry; because anybody could test you at any time; they will come at you” (Alton & Spirer, 2003).

Additionally, violence entered rap battling once the lyrical content changed (Big Daddy Kane, 2003). By the mid-1990s, lyrically and thematically, West coast gangsta rap emphasized skills on the street as much, if not more, as those on the microphone. The emphasis on street skills increased the prevalence of violence in lyrics. To illustrate this point, Herd (2009) examined 340 of the most popular rap songs from 1979 to 1997 and showed that, beginning in 1990, the proportion of songs with violent lyrics escalated dramatically. Further, the attitude toward violence also shifted over time in lyrics so that it was viewed positively and glorified in the later years. Ice T, a known rapper that comes from gang culture, explains that “most rap crews are made up of 50% business men and 50% thugs..you know, homeboys who just came home from jail” (Alton and Spierer, 2003). Thus the “keep it real” mentality began to blur the line between artistic differences and street warfare (Alton & Spierer, 2003).³ Easy-E, in an interview in the 1990s before his death, said: “Everything you hear on our records, its true ... the stealing, robbing, murd—the thieving” (Alton & Spierer, 2003). While this may or may not be entirely factual, with the increasing popularity and commercialization of gangsta rap music, a violent youth culture generally is encouraged as youth listen to and follow the battles and rivalries (Alton & Spierer, 2003; Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005).⁴

Rap and rap battles online

With the advent of relatively new social media outlets, youth now can do more than just listen to and follow these gangsta rap artists’ battles and rivalries; they can participate in them, and the fights may cross over from the virtual world to the street. Lil JoJo’s story is an example of the consequences of a rap music/gang rivalry that was allegedly connected with murder. A song by Chief Keef called “I Don’t Like,” which glorified his gang, the Black Disciples Nationals, was remixed and popularized by Kayne West. The success of “I Don’t Like” inspired aspiring young rapper and alleged rival gang member, Lil JoJo, to upload his own song, “3 Hunna K,” on YouTube. The song “3 Hunna K” mocked Chief Keef and his gang (Howard, 2013; Haut, 2014). Two days after the video was posted on YouTube, Lil JoJo was gunned down (Aqua Blanco, 2012; Haut, 2014).

While we do not know whether Chief Keef was actually involved in Lil JoJo’s murder, the case is an example of the way in which social media outlets, and specifically YouTube, have recently reconfigured the relationship between production and consumption, and between professional and amateur content (Weaver, Zelenkauskaitė, & Samson, 2012, pp. 1067-1068). Specifically, what we are seeing is the emergence of local amateur rap artists’ increasing involvement in the gangsta rap game through YouTube. The problem with YouTube videos, though, is that while many of these local gangsta rap artists are just presenting an entertaining image that is considered “hot” in the rap music industry in order to obtain notice from record labels, others are doing so for more criminal purposes—like to retaliate against other gangs or to coordinate, entice, or brag about street-level assaults (Van Hellemonst, 2012). While many gangsta rappers are not real gang members, some gangs are taking advantage of the Internet and social media to use rap music to facilitate the expressive goals of their

gangs. Before we explore the six battle rap videos that are the focus of this paper, we discuss the literature on gangs, group process, violence and online behavior.

Gangs, group process and violence

While the proper definition of street gangs has been a subject of debate (Decker, Melde & Pyrooz, 2013), street gangs are generally defined as “street-oriented groups, whose membership is youthful, that exhibit persistence across time and for whom illegal activity constitutes a part of group identity” (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b, p. 156). Research tends to show that gangs are more likely to form in economically disadvantaged areas marked by racial and ethnic heterogeneity (Pyrooz, Fox & Decker, 2010). The organizational structure of gangs varies from gang to gang, but there are two general models of gang organization, instrumental-rational (organized) and informal-diffuse (disorganized) (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Moule et al., 2014). The instrumental-rational model proposes a vertical structure with clear leadership roles, regular meetings, and coordinated criminal behavior. These gangs are able to enforce discipline among members and effectively define and achieve goals. On the opposite end of the continuum, the informal-diffuse model describes gangs with a flat structure and loose leadership that is situational. There is a lot of turnover in membership, and formal meetings are rare. These gangs are self-interested groups that sell drugs for individual, rather than group, profit. Research seems to suggest that most gangs are not very organized and that the majority of gangs more closely resemble the informal-diffuse model (Melde, Diem & Drake, 2012; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

According to Decker and Van Winkle (1996), there are several “pushes” (external forces) and “pulls” (attractive qualities of gangs) that lead to the decision to join a gang, but some of the reasons most often cited by gang members are joining for protection from violent victimization, because a friend is in the gang, and to make money (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Melde, Taylor & Esbensen, 2009; Melde et al., 2012). Reviews of the literature on risk factors for gang membership conclude that the following factors increase the odds of gang membership: experiencing a critical life event like an injury or disrupted relationship, evincing antisocial tendencies, having pro-delinquent attitudes, having low levels of parental supervision, and interacting with delinquent peers (Decker et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, these risk factors are not unique to gang membership because they also predict an increased likelihood of participation in general offending. However, studies show that there is a cumulative effect to risk factors such that juveniles with more risk factors are more likely to join gangs (Melde et al., 2012; Decker et al., 2013).

Joining a gang tends to occur in the early teen years, between 13 and 15 (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Pyrooz, 2014). For example, Pyrooz (2014) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that the majority (73%) of gang-involved youth followed adolescent pathways into and out of gang membership; the modal age of gang onset was 13, while the

modal age of gang involvement was 15.⁵ Contrary to the common perception of gang life, though, most gang members do not remain in gangs for life. The general length of gang involvement is about two years or less (Pyrooz, 2014; Melde et al., 2012; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b), though a small subset of committed gang members remain in gangs for four or more years (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Pyrooz, 2014). Factors that predict more stable gang membership include joining a gang at a later age, joining for protection, belonging to a more organized gang, and being involved in more violent activity (Melde et al, 2012).

One common perception of gangs that seems to be accurate is the central role violence plays in gang life. It is often part of the initiation process as new members are either “beat in” or sent on violent missions, and it helps members, and particularly leaders, acquire or re-establish status (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; McGloin & Decker, 2010; Hughes & Short, 2005). Further, studies have shown that gang membership increases violent behavior (Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng & Esbensen, 2013; Melde & Esbensen, 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2012; Gordon, Lahey, Kawai, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber & Farrington, 2004). For example, using a panel study of over 3,700 youth, Melde and Esbensen (2012) demonstrated that self-reported gang membership was associated with a 592% increase in delinquency propensity and a 21% increase in the violent-to-nonviolent offense ratio. Once youth left their gangs, their ratio was no different than non-gang youth, which suggested that some quality of gang membership increases the odds of violent offending beyond personal propensities for violence.

Thus, much gang research focuses on group process and the formation of the group identity and the normative standards that produce violence and make it a “defining feature” of gangs (McGloin & Decker, 2010; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Decker, 1996). Group process research attempts to understand “what motivates individuals to do things in a group that they would not do as individuals” (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b, p. 154). Part of this involves understanding the cohesion and solidarity created within the gang by the group identity and the group’s collective norms. In terms of identity, gang membership is displayed through the use of signs, symbols, and clothing. These signifiers of membership help to create a sense of “us versus them,” thereby uniting members, and they serve to intimidate others by demonstrating their proclivity for violence (Decker et al., 2013). Gang turf is also at the foundation of gang identity and group process, as it is where the gang originates, and commitment to the gang is tied to allegiance to territory (Papachristos, 2009; Decker, 1996). Thus, defense of territory is important for both instrumental and symbolic purposes.

Part of the normative belief system held by gang members emphasizes masculinity and posturing (Decker et al., 2013). Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) identified a code of personal honor that stressed the importance of one’s manhood in their study of inner-city gangs. According to Papachristos (2009), these honor codes tend to emerge where formal institutions of social control are missing and so

violence becomes the informal means of social control. Being tough and fearless are dominant values in this culture of masculinity. These values are taught and reinforced by gang members; in part, the violent initiation rituals force new members to demonstrate their toughness and fearlessness (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Thus, a central way of building one's reputation and proving one's toughness and fearlessness is through violence.

The honor code of masculinity not only provides guidelines on values but also on behavior; importantly, it shapes gang members' responses to perceived insults (Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). In these cultures of masculinity, reputation is purely symbolic and determined almost entirely by the recognition of one's status (Papachristos, 2009). Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) demonstrate that "a heightened concern with personal honor makes a person both a self-image defender and promoter, i.e., one demands deference from others and is sensitive to any act that suggest that one is not worthy of respect" (p. 240). That is, if a gang member perceives an insult, he must respond with willingness to use violence (Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). This retaliation serves as a type of justice for a wrong committed.

Further in the group context of a gang, insults or threats must be responded to because they become collective grievances—an insult of one member insults the entire group (Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Decker et al., 2013). Therefore, the ability of the group to successfully retaliate against an insult or threat and protect its members determines both collective and individual honor (Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). In support of this idea, Decker (1996) argues that expressive gang violence is the result of collective norms and behavior. In addition, Papachristos (2009) contends that gang violence spreads through a process of social contagion as gangs retaliate against threats. A public murder of a gang member threatens the gangs' social status, and the norms of reciprocity link social status with revenge for that murder. For gangs, then, violence is a group phenomenon spurred by the group beliefs and collective behavior, which lead to escalating retaliatory violence (Short, 1989; Decker et al., 2013). Confirming this, both Decker (1996) and Papachristos (2009) determined that the majority of gang violence in their samples was expressive and retaliatory in nature, having started over nonmaterial matters, like insults to reputation. Papachristos (2009) notes that retaliatory responses become even more necessary when there is a prior contentious relationship because failure to retaliate against a long-standing opponent is "honorific suicide" (p. 117).

The group identity and collective norms that facilitate this retaliatory violence allow individuals to engage in violent behavior that they would not do alone (Decker, 1996; Papachristos, 2009). Decker et al. (2013) describe bonds between gang members that are built on "a common normative orientation and shared activities" (p. 384). Those bonds create a structure that allows violence to be used for what may appear to be minor events, like a look or painted-over graffiti. In this sense, then, violence creates bonds in gangs and builds cohesion among its members. Cohesion varies from gang to gang and can

depend on the type of gang and the gang organizational structure, but groups generally become more cohesive as they spend time together engaging in group activities (Papachristos, 2013). Conflicts with authorities or rival gangs are major activities that increase cohesion as the gang unites together in response to common enemies (Decker, 1996; Papachristos, 2013; Decker & Curry, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Gang online behavior

The literature on gangs and their online behavior demonstrates that gang members are following the trend of the rest of the world and adopting an online presence. There are primarily two types of studies that have investigated the online behavior of gangs. The first type is interviews with gang members about their Internet use. These studies report that the majority of gang members surf the web. For instance, Decker and Pyrooz (2012) interviewed 174 current gang members from three American cities. They discovered that 78% of the gang members interviewed for their study reported using the Internet. The most prevalent online activity in their sample was viewing YouTube videos. Similarly, Sela-Shayovitz (2012) interviewed 30 gang members in Israel and revealed that all the gang members except for two had access to the Internet at home. They spent about five hours a day online; they played computer games, gambled, listened to music, and watched movies together online.

The second way studies have measured gangs' online presence is to conduct word searches on various social media sites to uncover the degree of gang activity on those sites. For example, Knox (2011) reviewed the scope and extent of gang activity on Facebook. He utilized gang names and slang and uncovered Facebook pages for many prominent gangs, including, Latin Kings, Insane Vice Lords, and the Gangster Disciples. These groups justified their presence on Facebook by calling themselves community or religious organizations. Knox (2011) concluded that there was a high volume of activity by street gangs on Facebook. Likewise, Decary-Hetu and Morselli (2011) conducted a word search and found that 19 prominent gangs, such as the Bloods, Crips, Hells Angels, MS-13, and Latin Kings, had a presence on Facebook, and 11 of those gangs had Twitter accounts. There is also evidence that gang members are creating personal blogs as a venue for promoting their gangs. Van Hellemont (2012) located 170 blogs related to gang activity in Brussels, including among others, individual blogs, whose authors claimed gang membership, and music blogs with songs and pictures of rap groups composed of gang members. It seems evident from interviews with gang members and studies searching the web for gang activity that gangs are online and use social media (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2012; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Van Hellemont, 2012; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Morselli & Decary-Hetu, 2013; Shela-Shayovitz, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2015).

It is still unclear, though, how gangs use the Internet. Are gang members taking advantage of the advances in technology to facilitate criminal activities? The literature investigating this question is sparse and, despite the NGIC (2011) report, has not provided much evidence to support the idea that

gangs are actively using their online presence to recruit new members, commit crimes, or instigate criminal activity. For instance, Moreselli and Decary-Hetu (2013) monitored Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace for gang presence using 56 street gang names. Most of the visitors to the sites were curious about the gangs, and many posted comments expressing support for them. However, the researchers observed no evidence of gangs proactively using the Internet to convert any visitors into becoming gang members. They suggested, instead, that social networking sites are new convergence settings for gang members to interact with a wider audience that shares their underlying values (Moreselli & Decary-Hetu, 2013).

The studies using interviews with gang members tend to show that only a minority of gang members use the Internet for recruitment or criminal activity. According to Decker and Pyrooz (2011a), most gangs they interviewed frowned upon using the Internet to engage in crime, because it would increase the chances of being caught by bringing attention to the crime. Additionally, Sela-Shayovitz (2012) reported almost no link between street activity and online delinquency. In her sample, the majority of gang members did not utilize the web to commit crimes. Only 6.6% reported using the Internet for drug sales. While Pyrooz et al. (2015) reported that current gang members participate in more online crime compared to former gang members and non-gang members, only a very small percentage of gang members said they used the web to recruit new members (8%) and sell drugs (6.6%) or stolen property (4.4%). Pyrooz et al. (2015) concluded that there was little evidence to support views that the Internet facilitates instrumental goals of gangs, like drug sales or recruitment.

Studies tend to show that much online behavior by gang members is similar to that of non-gang youth. Gang members use the Internet to talk to girls or each other, listen to music, watch videos, post videos of themselves, play video games, and do school research (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012). A recent survey of adolescents in the general population show that 91% use the Internet to post photos of themselves on social media, and 24% post videos online (Wexler, 2014). Further, a Pew Report showed that 72% of teens play video games online or on their phones, 47% of teens talk with others using online video or chat, and 76% of teens use social media (Lenhart, 2015). In addition, it seems that when gang members do use the Internet for illegal activities, their illegal activity was similar to that of youths not associated with gangs. Both Sela-Shayovitz's (2012) and Pyrooz et al. (2015) reported that the most popular illegal activity in their gang samples was illegally downloading music and other media. Surveys of the general adolescent population show that about 31% admitted to pirating music or movies online (Statista, 2012). Further, Holt et al. (2012) reported that the most common type of cybertheft committed by youth is digital piracy.

While much of gang members' online behavior seems age-appropriate, the Internet is also providing a new arena for achieving the expressive and symbolic goals of gangs (Moule et al., 2013; Moule et al., 2014). Pyrooz et al. (2015) observed that gang members often used the Internet to accomplish what the

authors called “status goals,” by posting threats on Facebook or videos on YouTube. The viral nature of social media allows the insults posted online to spread quicker than the more traditional word of mouth, and so online insults can have serious real-world consequences. Decker and Pyrooz (2011a) reported that posting videos to YouTube was a “big deal” for the gang members they interviewed, and that the insults posted online could lead to trouble in the street (p. 10).

There is additional evidence to support the idea that gangs use their online presence to communicate the gangster lifestyle and to intimidate rival gangs. Searches through Facebook have revealed that gangs use their pages to issue death threats to rival gangs through subcultural slang and rap lyrics (Knox, 2011). Such searches also have shown an increased use of Facebook and Twitter for “flame wars,” online and vicious retaliatory insults. The trading of insults inevitably evolves to online threats (Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011). Further, blogs created by gang members are also being used to communicate the gangster style and to promote rivalries with other gangs (Van Hellemon, 2012). Van Hellemon’s (2012) examination of 170 gang blogs revealed a pattern of blog authors claiming territory for their gang, using gang signs and dress, and flaunting weapons, money, and expensive clothing, jewelry, and shoes. More importantly, these blogs were used to post pictures and lyrics that serve the dual purpose of promoting their gang and also insulting rival gangs.⁶ Van Hellemon’s (2012) research stops short of connecting the virtual gang insults and threats to real-life consequences but provides indications that the virtual gangland may have repercussions beyond the virtual world.

It seems, then, that research has shown that gang members are active online and using social media to enhance their street reputation and fulfill their expressive goals (Moule et al., 2013; Moule et al., 2014). Further, research has demonstrated that, in order to strengthen group cohesion, it is necessary to respond when the reputation of a gang or a gang member is threatened (Decker, 1996; Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974), and online attacks are more visible and permanent than normal street attacks (Van Hellemon, 2012). To build on the group process literature and further understand the necessity of responding to insults and threats in the gang subculture, we provide a brief summary of the code of the street.

Theory

Code of the street

In his ethnography of inner city life, Anderson (1999) described a subculture that has emerged in poor urban communities and that guides the behavior of residents in those neighborhoods. He called this subculture “the code of the street” and compared it to the code of civility that operates in the larger, mainstream society. According to Anderson (1999), the code of the street emerged because of extreme structural disadvantage—poverty, unemployment, racism, and a lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. As globalization and deindustrialization removed jobs from the inner cities over the last several decades, the masculine identity of the working-class urban male was challenged. Facing

few traditional avenues for achieving social status and the effects of structural disadvantage, the urban male began to rely on violence to achieve status in his community (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005; Patton, Eschmann & Dirk, 2013).

The code of the street regulates this use of violence and centers around the concept of respect—“being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves” (Anderson 1999, p. 33). Respect provides protection but also establishes a person’s self-esteem. Respect can be gained through demeanor, association with certain crowds, family reputation, and appearance—expensive clothing, shoes, and jewelry. All of these modes for gaining respect, though, must be backed up with the ability and willingness to use violence (Anderson, 1999). For instance, wearing expensive jewelry gains a person respect because it shows he or she has money, but more importantly it signifies he or she can defend that property from others who would use violence to take it. A person has achieved the most respect when they are not “messed with” because they have proven themselves as violent individuals. In an area with little faith in the police’s desire and ability to respond to calls, the code of the street provides people with a way to defend themselves from violence by establishing reputations for violence and rationalizing violent payback for perceived insults (Anderson, 1999).

Thus, the code states that if someone is disrespected, it is imperative to respond, or that person leaves himself or herself vulnerable to physical danger. Verbal prowess is one way to defend one’s reputation, but aggression and violence are the more common ways of proving oneself because they are unambiguous. According to Anderson (1999), children living by the code of the street learn to resolve their disputes mainly through physical contests that settle the question of who is the toughest. The use of violence is encouraged by peers and even by parents who often sanction a child for appearing weak. Therefore, children raised by the code are socialized to have a predisposition for violence and to believe that being disrespected is an offense worthy of a violent response.⁷

The code and gang violence

Quantitative studies support the link between the code and violence. Brezina, Agnew, Cullen and Wright (2004) reviewed previous research, and those studies tended to show that the code mediated the relationship between violence and other variables, like race, age, socio-economic status, parental influence, and peer influence. Brezina et al. (2004) also conducted their own direct test of the relationship between the code and violence using the National Youth Survey, and their findings replicated support for the relationship between the code and violent behavior in youth aged 11-17. Stewart and colleagues (with Simons, 2006, 2010 and with Schreck & Simons, 2006) have also tested the link between the code and violence. They found that neighborhood context, family characteristics, and racial discrimination directly influenced adherence to the code, and that the code mediated the effects of these factors on violent delinquency. They also reported that the effect of street code values

on violence is enhanced in neighborhoods where the street culture is widely endorsed (Stewart & Simons, 2006, 2010).⁸

While these studies support the link between the code and youth violence, they are not direct tests of the influence of the code on gang member violence. Clearly many elements of Anderson's code overlap with gang culture, including the origin of the code in areas with poor formal controls and few conventional skills for success in mainstream society (Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974); the centrality of violence in building status (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; McGloin & Decker, 2010; Hughes & Short, 2005), and the importance of retaliation if insulted or threatened (Decker, 1996; Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). Matsuda et al. (2013) conducted the only direct test of the link between the code and gang violence using a school-based sample of 2,216 youth. They found that joining a gang significantly increased code acceptance and violent behavior, and that the code of the street mediated a significant portion of the effect of gang-joining on violent offending. Thus, one reason gang membership increases violence is the stronger adherence to the collective norms centered around the code.

The code and rap music

Research on the lyrical content of rap music generally finds that many references are made both to street code ideals like toughness, aggression, and violence, and also to gangs (Kubrin, 2005; Moule et al., 2013: 151). Kubrin (2005) demonstrated that rap lyrics in 403 commercial rap songs promoted the ideas of the code of the street. In particular, the music provided a formula and a justification for constructing violent identities and reputations. The music also frequently portrayed the use of violence as a form of social control, endorsing violence as a way to respond to challenges or retaliate against someone. Therefore rappers' lyrics delineate the rules of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and teach listeners how to respond when the rules are violated—thereby prescribing violence as a method of social control in the urban milieu where gangs navigate (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, 2005, p. 375).

Further, Patton et al. (2013) drew an important connection between hip hop/rap music, masculine identities, and social media. They suggested that after the 1990s and the death of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, rap artists changed the nature of rap beefs to settle feuds through verbal and technical prowess rather than with bullets. This left a void in artists' ability to prove they were “keeping it real”—staying true to the street and their violent identities. Since then, the Internet serves as a medium by which rap music (and through masculine identities) can be performed in front of a large audience. Patton et al. (2013) argued that social media has evolved into a space where anyone, including gang members, can challenge each other's street credibility.

Our study is an attempt to explore such “culture in action” (Holt, 2010; Kubrin, 2005; Moule et al., 2013; Swindler, 1990) by examining the use of social media as a tool for gang members to achieve their expressive goals. Social media provides a new venue where gang members can easily generate “buzz” or supplement their reputation to achieve their expressive goals (Moule et al., 2013; Moule et al., 2014). It makes insults and threats against rivals more visible and permanent than they would be in normal street confrontations between gangs (Van Hellemont, 2012). We add to the literature by demonstrating that battle rap videos disseminated through social media are a new medium through which gang members are making and responding to threats, and we discuss a possible connection between this cyberbanging and street violence.

The present study

The present study is a case study of the circumstances surrounding a set of six YouTube-based underground battle rap videos. These videos were identified by the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime (PIRC). PIRC is a city-based cross-institutional program that collaborates with local police and a community-based non-profit organization named Youth Opportunities Development (Y.O.D.) in order to work to reduce gun and gang crime and violence in the city of Pittsburgh. Through biweekly PIRC risk assessment meetings with the two street outreach directors (the executive director and director of operations) from Y.O.D. and their street outreach workers (SOWs), six local underground battle rap videos were identified as an area of concern due to the nature and content of the videos, lyrics, and known gang member involvement. The data and analysis procedures are described below.

Underground battle rap videos and lyrics

The first source of data consists of the battle rap videos posted on YouTube between September 2012 and November 2012 and the transcribed lyrics from these videos. A purposive sample of six videos was selected to form this case study (n=6). Underground battle rap videos for this study are amateur rap music videos posted on YouTube that portray one individual gang member or group of gang members specifically targeting another individual gang member or group of gang members through their video and lyrical content. In particular, this set of battle videos consist of four local gang-affiliated rappers, each representing a part of their neighborhood and gang, who are going back and forth at each other with counteracting battle rap videos.⁹

We were first introduced to these videos by the executive director of Y.O.D. at a PIRC meeting in 2012 after two of the six videos in this group were uploaded on YouTube. The executive director explained at the PIRC meeting that the SOWs were hearing local youth talk about these videos in the streets and that these videos were becoming more popular in their communities because of the gang-affiliated rappers. The Y.O.D. directors and the SOWs were concerned about the videos and the public forum because it made the videos available to a wide audience, including other gangs and gang rivals across Pittsburgh. After our introduction to the initial two videos in 2012, we conducted keyword and name

searches on YouTube weekly and continued to rely on the Y.O.D. executive director and SOWs to help us uncover the total of six battle rap videos specifically made by the four rappers included in this study.

Once we found or heard about a video, we watched the video to ensure that it was part of this battle rap series—that is., it was conducted by one of the four gang members of interest and targeted one of the other three gang rappers. We also followed up with the Y.O.D. executive director and SOWs, and, upon receiving verification that the video featured one of the rappers of interest, we transcribed the video lyrics. All names were changed to protect the identity of those involved. Overall, the YouTube-based battle rap video data for this study has over 1.3 million views with 4,934 “Likes” and 603 “Dislikes.” And there are around 2,500 comments on these six battle rap videos.

Interviews with Y.O.D. directors and street outreach workers

In addition to the battle rap videos and their lyrical content, our data also consists of a series of in-depth face-to-face and phone interviews with the Y.O.D. executive director and the director of operations and their four SOWs. The four SOWs are representatives from the same four neighborhoods as the rappers in this set of videos. These SOWs were at one point gang members and have ongoing ties to their community. The interviews were open-ended semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2004; Holt, 2010). During the interviews we generally probed for the Y.O.D. directors’ and SOWs’ knowledge and understanding of the background and context of the YouTube-based battle rap videos, the gang-affiliated rappers and other individuals in the videos. We also inquired about the gangs that the rappers were affiliated with. We asked about their impressions of these videos, the Internet, and the on- and off-line impact of such video and lyrical content over time. Because the videos were ongoing, or still being posted, during this project, we were able to contact the Y.O.D. director and SOWs multiple times to ask questions. Generally, each interview lasted between one to one-and-a-half hours, and during the interviews copious notes were taken that were later compared.

In sum, the types of data collected for this study come from multiple sources, allowing us to better understand the gang-affiliated rappers and their intentions with their battle rap videos. Moreover, the data provided insight on the potential impact that such Internet-based videos may have on gangs and gang members on- and off-line. In the following section, we describe our analysis procedures.

Analysis procedures

For the purposes of this study, we utilized a version of the NVivo software package to organize and analyze the transcribed video lyrics and interview content. NVivo is a software package that supports qualitative and mixed methods research, and it allows the researcher to collect, organize and analyze a number of types of data. Berg (2004, p. 291) suggests utilizing such computer-based programs because, “as a result, higher-order classifications and connections can be formulated.”

For the present study, we therefore began by organizing and examining the transcribed lyrics for the context between the four rappers. Immersing ourselves in the lyrical content, we began to open-code the lyrical content, creating initial nodes or themes and then tree nodes or refined themes. Through this process, we uncovered two major themes related to the subcultural code and gang group process; the “disses” exchanged between these gang rappers included both insults and threats. Further, the insults could be categorized by level of severity and potential for repercussions. For the purposes of this study, then, insults are coded into three subthemes: superficial insults, reputation insults, and “dry snitching” insults. Superficial insults revolve around making fun of someone’s appearance, for example, hairstyle or dress. They are swipes at a person’s social status but are not as potentially damaging as the other insults. Reputation insults are more serious attacks on one’s street abilities and reputation for violence or selling drugs, while “dry snitching” insults utilize personal knowledge of, and stories about, real-world past incidents and failures within the street culture. According to the code of the streets and backed by group process research and the SOWs’ knowledge, reputation and dry snitching insults require a response so that a person’s street credibility is not damaged. Finally, threats are statements of an intention to inflict pain, injury, or death on another. As these relate directly to the code’s mandate to demonstrate a propensity for violence, they are the most serious infraction. If a person allows a threat to go unpunished, it leaves that person unguarded against future violence (Anderson, 1999).

During the open-coding phase of the analysis we also began interviewing the Y.O.D. directors and SOWs in order to help us better understand the lyrical content and context. Finally, we continued to refine our initial lyrical themes and built relationships through ongoing interviews, which allowed us to better understand the battle rappers’ intentions with their battle rap videos. As a result, we learned more about the possible relationship between onand off-line gang violence. In the sections that follow, we provide the findings and a discussion of our results, and we conclude with some take-away points from this research.

Findings

Coming in as an unknown rapper on the Pittsburgh rap scene, a young man who goes by the name Swerve introduces himself to the world in the first of a set of six battle rap videos uploaded onto YouTube’s website. In Swerve’s four videos he proceeds to insult and threaten his “competition.” And in return, his rivals, Waxy, Lugar and J-Time, come back at Swerve in the subsequent videos in the same manner. Table 1 introduces each battle rap artist by providing information on their neighborhood and gang. Each battle video is made up of an individual rapper creating a unique and individualized rap about another; however, of the six videos, the battles are either from Swerve or intended for Swerve. The other three rappers are not battling amongst one another; they are all just going at Swerve in the similar manner of throwing out lyrics that reflect personalized insults and threats. In the subsections to follow we contextualize the battle raps and our two major themes. Table 2 shows

the number of insults, broken down by category, and threats exchanged between Swerve and the other rappers in each video.

Table 1. Most prominent cases by coverage

Artist	Neighborhood	Gang	Posse
Swerve	North Side	“KTR” Keeping it Too Real	Bull, Chopper, “Certified Guerilla”
Waxy	Hill District	“OTP” On The Payroll	Haiti (brother), Darma, Turner
Lugar	East End Pittsburgh	“T2G” Trained To Go	J-Time
J-Time	East End Pittsburgh	“T2G” Trained To Go	Lugar

Note: For both article and total words, results are presented as counts with percentage of total data set (n=564 articles / 489,638 words) in parentheses.

Table 2. Battle rap by the numbers: Insults and threats

Diss Type	Video 1	Video 2	Video 3	Video 4	Video 5	Video 6	Total
	Swerve on Waxy 1	Waxy on Swerve	Swerve on Waxy 2	Swerve on Lugar	J-Time on Swerve	Swerve on J-Time	
Superficial Insults ¹	6/30%	9/30%	8/32%	6/22%	9/30%	11/29%	49/29%
Reputation Insults ²	9/45%	8/27%	12/48%	11/41%	13/43%	15/39%	68/40%
“Dry Snitching” Insults ³	3/15%	10/33%	4/16%	7/26%	3/10%	8/21%	35/21%
Threats ⁴	2/10%	3/10%	1/4%	3/11%	5/17%	4/11%	18/10%
Total	20	30	25	27	30	38	170

Note: 1–These insults revolve around insulting appearances (e.g., hair, dress and style). 2–These insults include more serious attacks on one’s street abilities and reputation (e.g., selling drugs, fighting and violence). 3–These insults use personal knowledge of, and stories about, real-world past incidents and failures within the street culture. 4–Threats are statements of a willingness and intention to inflict pain, injury, or death on another.

Battle rap videos 1-3: Swerve vs. Waxy

In battle rap Video 1, Swerve begins, “First off I am with Fifty Boss encase you niggas didn’t know, nigga. You nice when it come to rap, but I am always trained to go, nigga.” Swerve starts off by claiming where he is from and, in his quick, off-the-cuff style, states right away that he is prepared to battle. This demonstrates the nature of these battle rap videos; they are intended to insult, and essentially disrespect, other gangs and these lyrics or statements have implications for the street. He opens with a reputation insult, saying that while Waxy may be good at rapping (talking), Swerve is “trained to go,” meaning ready to fight. His actions in the video echo his words. In the beginning of this video Swerve walks up to the microphone shirtless and with a pistol tucked into his waistband. According to one Y.O.D. director, “Doing this suggests that he is ready to go to another level with it. These are real street gangs and this is all they got. You can’t say you’re strapped up if you ain’t gonna go there.” In this sense, these amateur rap videos by gang members may differ from commercialized rap videos where weapons are also often brandished to create a reputation and sell records; in these gang videos, a rapper does not show a weapon unless that rapper is willing to use it.

In Swerve’s introduction he claims that he is organized and that he can move weight or product (drugs) and that “it’s too hard a living nigga, but I ain’t afraid to die. In the mix nigga, I blitz nigga, and made it out alive.” Thus, with his introduction, Swerve is letting all know that he is committed to the street culture, and even to violence if need be, as he has been there. After Swerve introduces himself “to the world,” as he put it in the beginning of this video, he aims much of his lyrics at Waxy, Waxy’s neighborhood, and his gang. In Table 1, we see that nearly all of the lyrics involve Swerve insulting Waxy in this online battle. The majority of disses are reputation insults (45%), questioning Waxy’s ability to deal drugs and make money. For instance, he starts by claiming that Waxy and his mates are all talk and just fronting like they are making “real” money: “might look like ya’ll putting on but we all know ya’ll broke niggas.” He goes on to say that there’s “no action! All that ‘G’ing you doin’ is moving all of them lips. And just to let you know, I’m ‘T’ to ‘G’ to the third degree. Want to battle me, better come to me with like four stacks [\$4,000].”

Gloating now with his off-the-cuff flow, “I’m ridiculous with this spin shit and I’m firing off like a Luger,” Swerve then continues his battle rap on Waxy for 4 minutes and 4 seconds (4:04), throwing numerous insults. As the SOWs put it, “He [Swerve] is going deep with his insults on Waxy.” Swerve even goes as far as dry snitching, bringing into his battle rap some real-world affiliates of Waxy’s:

“Why your big brother on ‘Darma’ shit, dance around like a baby. And then the other nigga who think they hard or wanna act up, come G me; I’m strapped up, I’m racked up.” Thus, according to the SOWs, Swerve “goes in” even further beyond superficial insults regarding Waxy’s personal style by insulting, or “dissing,” Waxy’s promotional tactics and ways of making money (reputation insults) and, later, his music label, neighborhood and fellow gang members (dry snitching). In addition, coming back around from his original introduction that he is “in the mix nigga,” Swerve throws out a warning and threat with “[Waxy,] you a soft nigga, I’m a boss nigga, I’ll take the hazel out you ass.”

Swerve’s first battle rap video ends with him claiming victory in this online battle by expressing, “It’s crunch time and young Waxy is a lunch pack out the box. And I merc the track; young Waxy I think I caught me a body.” The SOWs explain that Swerve is simply an unknown rapper with certain gang affiliations, and that he is attempting to gain some attention and some respect from the local Pittsburgh rap scene by going after a more known rapper/gangster, such as Waxy. This, according to the Y.O.D. director, is Swerve’s attempt to gain “buzz” from the viewers and to entice Waxy into an online rap battle. And, as the director put it: “He [Swerve] disrespects him [Waxy], and now everybody is watching; what’s he [Waxy] gonna do about it now?” It is clear from this quote that Waxy was expected to retaliate against Swerve because he, his gang, and his neighborhood were dissed in Swerve’s video. According to both the code of the street and group process research, these threats had to be answered or Waxy and his gang would lose respect and status (Anderson, 1999; Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974).

In Appendix 1 we provide a “Battle Rap Chart” that displays a timeline of our set of battle rap videos. As mentioned before, the Y.O.D. director and his SOWs were concerned about Swerve’s attempt to get noticed, and, specifically because the video went viral, they were nervous about how Waxy would respond. As can be seen in the chart, within the month Waxy put together his own battle rap video (Video 2) that is entirely centered on Swerve, his neighborhood, and fellow gang members. In Video 2 Waxy is standing in a dark tunnel spray painted with bright neon graffiti. He is wearing a baseball cap and a shirt with an acronym (“OTP” or On the Payroll) that we later find out is signifying his affiliation with a local neighborhood gang. “This is the Hills’ response to Swerve’s video,” explained the director of Y.O.D.

In Video 2 Waxy sets the tone of the battle with the opening line: “Bleached jeans, cut-up pants, ya’ll walk around like some fucking faggot.” Insulting Swerve and his crew for their style, Waxy “goes in” even deeper in the next few lines: “Fuck your boss, you can work for me; rather, all you niggas is dead. And Swerve, what you want nigga? You aint a ‘G,’ you from Northview; you a Crip nigga.” Within the first minutes of his 5minute and 35 second battle rap video, Waxy not only uses superficial and reputation insults and then threatens Swerve and his crew, but he also dry snitches—calls Swerve out in public as being a “set tripper.” A set tripper, according to the SOWs, is “someone who switches rags,”

or leaves one gang for another gang. In his video Waxy even shows an Instagram photo of Swerve throwing the Crip gang hand sign, providing some evidence that this is true. In the eyes of the Y.O.D. director and the SOWs this now public information could potentially infuriate some individuals living the gang lifestyle. And anybody trying to make a name for themselves could go after Swerve for “breaking the code” (Anderson, 1999).

As can be seen in Table 1, column 3, Waxy takes the battle a step further by using a larger percentage of dry snitching insults (33%). Interestingly, the SOWs note that “Waxy goes hard” at Swerve in his video. That is, if we are just looking at the numbers, Waxy’s lyrics are more intense and personal. While he continues to berate Swerve with superficial insults about his own personal style, as well as his gang members’ style, Waxy goes beyond the superficial by bringing into the battle real personal knowledge about Swerve’s street and neighborhood activities (dry snitching), and threatens him again with this simple message:

Keep trying to rap like (you) a soldier Vick, you fuck around and get killed. Keep trying to rap like (you) a soldier Vick, you fuck around and get killed, fuck around and get killed.

As a final but important note on Video 2, at the end of the video, Waxy is standing at the end of one of Pittsburgh’s many infamous bridges that cross the Allegheny River. We learn that Waxy is finishing his battle rap video just outside of Swerve’s neighborhood. As the music and beat play in the background, Waxy talks directly to the leader of Swerve’s gang: “Hey Bull, tell your sons to come back to reality man. This shit is real over here nigga. I’m almost at the edge, and your niggas’ tryna push me. KTR [Keeping it Too Real] and Swerve you a full time rookie, you hear me. Nigga I’ll get some fuck KTR shirts and put this music on the back.”

While at the edge of the bridge bordering Swerve’s neighborhood Waxy warns Bull that it is “real over here,” and Waxy is essentially asking Bull to pull Swerve back or there could be future trouble between the two neighborhood gangs. The director of Y.O.D. explained that “the Hill District and the North Side are cool. They’re not beefing like the North Side and the East End guys.” He continued, “You see, the North Side and the East End have a ‘traditional’ or lasting beef, but these guys don’t have that kind of bad history between each other.” Despite Waxy’s warning, Swerve does not stop; he comes back immediately at Waxy in Video 3.

“Blue and black Bugatti, I’m taking off like Ducati, and I merc the track and young Waxy I think I caught me a body. Now, I just got me some good news, Waxy finally sent me a diss. It’s 8:30pm and I am like it’s about time in this bitch.” With these lyrics we see that Swerve is actually excited that Waxy responded to his first battle rap video, and he makes his next battle rap video for Waxy the same evening that he receives the video. In Video 3, Swerve is sitting in a desk chair with a computer monitor behind him flashing his gangs’ acronym, “KTR,” on the screen. Swerve responds to Waxy’s diss

that he is a set tripper, and continues on with a new set of insults, sticking again primarily to superficial (32%) and reputation (48%) insults. According to the SOWs, this video serves a couple of purposes. First, it is Swerve's response to Waxy to clear up the set tripper comment, and to show that he can also "dig up dirt" on Waxy. Secondly, in the video he lets Waxy know that "this is music only, not street beef." And finally, through his one threat, Swerve expresses to Waxy that even while this is "music only" he will not back down: "Jerry me, cherry you, you a sweet nigga but there is thirty shots in all my glocks; I don't run around with sixteens. I'm the realist out here nigga."

As is, Swerve got the last word in the online battle with Waxy as Waxy did not respond to Swerve's second video. It may be that Waxy was pacified by the fact that Swerve made it clear that this was battle rap and not street battle. In the meantime, Swerve's videos, according to the Y.O.D. director, "definitely are getting some attention now. The [local] people think this type of music is hot and exciting for Pittsburgh. You got guys booming this out their cars across the Burgh now; it's a new fad or something." Since posting his first battle rap video on YouTube Swerve was getting some "buzz" or attention as the unknown rapper "testing" a more known local rapper. According to the SOWs, with this buzz, Swerve "is just trying to do this for the attention to get on with a record label and to get off these streets." Thus, these first three videos demonstrate that some gang members may be using social media as a way to promote themselves and gain attention as rappers to escape the street life, but that they also use social media to communicate dissers and threats against other gang members.

With Swerve gaining some local buzz at this point for battling Waxy online, he goes on to produce and upload a new battle rap video, and he focuses on another local rapper who goes by the name of Lugar. Lugar, it was explained by the Y.O.D. director, is from the East End of Pittsburgh and he is a very well-known local gang rapper in the city. According to the director, "The problem with Swerve's video is that Lugar is from the East End, and with Swerve from the North Side, it only brings the 'traditional' beef to the forefront by posting this [video]." And we are not only introduced to Lugar in the next three videos but Lugar vouches for another local gang rapper from the East End, J-Time, to battle Swerve on his behalf. The context of this previous beef is important since Papachristos (2009) noted that an insult is considered even more serious if from a long-standing rival; we will discuss this more below in the discussion section.

Battle rap videos 4-6: Swerve Vs Lugar and J-Time

Video 4 was first uploaded by Swerve to YouTube in October 2012, the same month that Swerve and Waxy were battling back and forth online. The Y.O.D. SOWs and director speculated that this video (Video 4), stemmed from a Tweet that said, "IM DA KING OF THE BURGH DIRTY NIGGA IM THE DON." They believed the Tweet was sent out by Lugar and was meant for Swerve, since Swerve mentions Twitter in his video. Standing next to his brother up against a blank white wall as his brother is lighting up a joint, Swerve begins his 6-minute-and-47-second battle:

I wish a nigga would war-time try me. I'd line him up with a carbon; I'd mess him up with a buck drum, his ligaments look retarded. Now he's road kill for the birds and the raccoons, he's garbage. I'm blitzing all you fuck niggas; these rap dudes is targets.

Video 4 is recorded in all black-and-white coloring. And as can be seen in Table 1, Swerve goes on to insult and threaten Lugar throughout his rap, relying primarily on reputation insults (41%) but also increasing the use of dry snitching (26%). In particular with this introduction he is clearly upset, feels disrespected and is coming back at Lugar and his neighborhood and gang.

Swerve's overall message for Lugar in his battle rap video is simply that he and his gang are "plastic," or fake and breakable. For example, "I remember that Miami trip, you got stuck again and bucked up...ain't none of them nigga's ride for you, real talk, that's fucked up." Here Swerve inserts a mock phone conversation in his battle rap, where he plays the part of both Lugar and his drug connect to whom he paid nearly \$40,000 dollars in exchange for some product. Basically, he mocks Lugar for getting "fucked around with an okie doke" or scammed out of not only his money but, according to the Y.O.D. director, "for two or three other dudes or street killers who put up the \$40,000 dollars." Swerve goes on to express to Lugar, "You call yourself the King and the Don, we would have caught a plane nigga and booted out of a dump truck" if someone tried to take that money without a fair exchange.

Swerve tries to lay out in his online battle rap some facts about Lugar and how fake and breakable he and his gang are; he does so by referencing another real incident that took place in New York. He also warns Lugar about his choice words on Twitter:

And you come out the copper [prison] and saying that tough shit on Twitter. That's my brother nigga with a team of certified killers. That one nigga you said you'd smack around is a certified guerilla. Don't nobody want that smoke nigga it's murder time for them niggas.

According to the SOWs, "These are real dudes [meaning gang members and known shooters] that Swerve and his brother are dissing. But, Swerve's brother, 'Chopper,' he is one of them dudes too; so, this [video] is a concern."

In particular, the SOWs explain that the lyrics are problematic, specifically the reputation and dry snitching insults (67%), and that "go-in" on Lugar in this battle rap video that may lead to heightened and future problems. Essentially, throughout Video 4 Swerve is dry snitching, or, as a director explained, "bringing the streets to the public [through YouTube] with these insults or disses" and then taunting Lugar. He goes even further by threatening Lugar and his affiliates with the idea that Swerve and his affiliates are "real," "hard," and "street" (Y.O.D. director, 2012).

Any nigga think he [Lugar] on my top, red dot will get ya off the couch. Pistol in your pocket with ya? We can buck it out, it's not an issue. Forty-four, that's a rocket missile, rocket missile. (Swerve,

2012)

Video 4 ends with this warning and threat by Swerve, and it seems as though the SOWs were right to be concerned about the reaction to this video. Within the same week that this video was posted on YouTube, we received a call from the director of Y.O.D. He began the conversation with “It just got real.” On an early evening in October 2012, just after the battle rap video went viral, an affiliate of Swerve’s was attending one of his son’s football games on the East End of Pittsburgh where Lugar and his gang reside. There was a confrontation between the gang members, “and a gun popped out” and led to three shootings, the director explained. The North Side affiliate himself was shot in the stomach, followed by a youth shot in the hand while sitting in the stands. A 64-year-old grandmother was fatally shot by stray bullets. The director went on to explain that “these shootings are directly related to the video. Everything was cool before this [video]. Swerve brought up some real personal stuff [in the video about Lugar and his gang’s street activities] that he shouldn’t have, and there was going to be some response. This is the East End’s response for now.”

It seems then, that the context of battle rap videos can change when there is a previous beef between gangs. In Video 4, Swerve was responding to an insult posted on another form of social media, Twitter. That public insult from a rival gang member required a response according to his code and group norms (Anderson, 1999; Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). His battle rap response was more personal than his previous rap video against Waxy and was not framed as “music only.” The word on the street conveyed to us by the director was that the football game shooting was retaliation for the insults and threats on the rap video. While we cannot prove that, it would support past research demonstrating the contagion effect of threat that leads to escalating retaliatory violence (Short, 1989; Decker et al., 2013; Papachristos, 2009). Further, it speaks to a possible connection between online threats and street violence that is hinted at in other research (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Van Hellemon, 2012).

Swerve’s battle rap video against Lugar, or Video 4, is one of the most aggressive and hostile battles that we came across (see Table 1 for the numbers). Video 5 is similar in content and hostility: it begins with Lugar standing next to an individual who goes by the name of J-Time. We are told by the SOWs, and J-Time himself verifies this within the first couple of lines of his rap against Swerve, that he just recently got out of prison: “I’m home now, Lugar kick your feet up Ima’ handle these niggas, you twist the weed up. I’m about to murder this shit then pay my lawyer fees.”

After Lugar vouches for J-Time, the 6-minute-and-28-second battle rap video begins in a sort of basement with seven main affiliates (all Black males) standing behind J-Time in the shadows. J-Time then begins to lay down his battle rap with these lyrics:

Swerve, you a bitch and I'm a panty gripper. First you're Crip, then you G, look, that's a set tripper. Type a nigga change colors when he in some shit. Scream "my homies" every time you get around some Crips. I don't understand what part of the game is this? You is throwing GK up, nigga I seen the flick. You's a fucking Crip, nigga you already know. We can fucking go, yea, fucking ho.

As mentioned before, according to the Y.O.D. director and his SOWs, there is a history of feuds between these two neighborhoods (North Side and East End) and their gangs. And, in fact, we learned through our interviews with the Y.O.D. members that J-Time's own brother was murdered in Swerve's North Side neighborhood. J-Time then at this time begins to "go in" on Swerve with a high number of reputation insults (43%) and the highest number of threats in all six videos (17%).

Once more it was the battle rap lyrics, and specifically the reputation and dry snitching insults and threats that the Y.O.D. members were concerned about. For example, in his battle J-Time raps about being "street" and potentially keeping or making this real: "Convicted felon, but you know I still keep the skill. I'll have a cookout on your block, we can start the grill. It's warfare, we are in warfare, better ask around. Don't slip nigga." J-Time, as it is explained to us, "is not worried about dropping names" in his battle rap. He in fact aims a part of his insults and threats at Swerve's gang leader, Bull, and even his brother, Chopper. And he goes on to explain, "Reckless, you can tell I ain't concerned about niggas. This is not just rap, I really do my thug thizzles." This, according to the SOWs, is just another form of dry snitching, or "going in" and getting personal by "dropping names" or calling out known gang members in his battle rap.

The Y.O.D. director points out that Video 5 is interesting because in the second scene after the dark basement scene, the video switches over to the streets. Here we are watching a large group of neighborhood members, many of whom are teenagers or young adults, dancing behind J-Time as he continues his battle rap. Beyond the battle rap lyrical issues, the Y.O.D. SOWs note that in this scene, these youths are dancing with guns in hand, aimed at the camera. Again, with such a show of force, we are reminded of what the Y.O.D. director said earlier, "Doing this suggests that he [this time J-Time and the East End] is ready to go to another level with it." And, ending Video 5, in the final cut scene J-Time is back in the dark basement with his seven affiliates in the shadows behind him. They are all wearing shirts that say "FUCK KTR" on the front.

The additional gang members in this video illustrate the collective nature of gang violence. As discussed, insults or threats become collective grievances because an insult to one member insults the entire group (Papachristos, 2009; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Decker et al., 2013). This video underscores this group process because Lugar is joined by fellow gang members, particularly J-Time, who help to threaten Swerve. Further, Video 5 demonstrates an escalation because of the increase in violent lyrics and content.

Video 6 then is Swerve's response to J-Time, Lugar, and Pittsburgh's East End, and is the final video in our set of Swerve-based underground battle rap videos. The number of people in this video is a little uncharacteristic of what we have seen in the previous three battle rap videos from Swerve. In Video 6, Swerve is not alone at a microphone (Video 1), alone in front of computer (Video 3), or battle rapping at ease with his brother beside him (Video 4). Instead, Video 6 is set in what appears to be a small, dark clubhouse in a basement somewhere. Behind Swerve stands his brother, Chopper, their affiliate (the "certified guerilla" we were introduced to in Video 4), and at least ten others. Swerve is essentially coming out in full force with this video, and so once again the collective nature of threats and escalation of violence is exemplified.

As Swerve begins his 8-minute-and-30-second video, he and his affiliates are drinking, smoking, and pouring some packaged white powder into their beverages. They just appear to be celebrating. Swerve says, "I'm way terked up, just gotta diss from some fuck nigga named J-Time. After this one I want your dirty ass to drop down to your knees." Slightly excited but agitated that he got some type of response from Lugar, though it was through J-Time, Swerve battles J-Time, Lugar and the East End with a series of cohesive insults (89%) and threats (11%). In the first few lines, for example, Swerve "goes in" on J-Time and Lugar: "Got a dope head [J-Time] with a cop guy [Lugar] trying to come at me for the title. You wanna be me, wanna G me, just tell me, Swerve, I'm your idol." Here Swerve knows that J-Time was, or maybe even still is, a drug addict. He is also calling Lugar a snitch, as it was J-Time who took the fall for the case that got him convicted on a felony drug and weapons charge, while Lugar was interestingly never indicted, according to the Y.O.D. director.

Swerve continues in his battle rap to explain his theory about why Lugar is the snitch: "You [Lugar] a Mickey Mouse, a fuck-around and a bitch rat. Got two-to-four for a fat case and a hundred pack of them dips rat. If you ask me, he made a deal with the D.E.A. and is a snitch." Alluding to the fact that Lugar is going against the code, from here Swerve goes on to threaten Lugar, J-Time and their gang.

If you see a rat, or spot a rat, run his ass down with a rifle. My bands longer, my clips longer, and I stand tall like the Eiffel. Ya'll be hiding out nigga, it's not hard to get at you, cause I rock out with my cock out, with my top down, and my glock out. We'll pop out with them wops out, shut the block down like a lock out. Smith and Wesson, six cylinder, glock, nigga no safety too. A dome shot for your G raise, ya younger sister, and ya baby too. Ray, Rico, J-Time, Lugar, you four niggas is dead.

As Swerve's brother and affiliates dance to this music like it is a party, Swerve walks over to the wall and picks-up a shovel. The scene then cuts, and comes back to the dimly lit clubhouse but now the camera is in a hole looking up at Swerve, shovel in hand. He then proceeds to shovel up some dirt and throw it over the camera as if he is burying somebody in the ground. Watching this with the SOWs, they explained that "when J-Time got involved [with this online battle], it was death." And that is

“because there is such a traditional beef between the North Side and East End, and because of who J-Time is and who he knows, these videos were death,” according to the Y.O.D. director.

Once again, then, the Y.O.D. members point out the importance of a longstanding rivalry and how that can add to the serious nature of threats. And death did follow in the days after these videos. Shortly after the last video was posted, Swerve was fatally shot. The Y.O.D. director described how “Swerve got into a car with an affiliate around 12:00 a.m. to go to a party near the East End. And sometime before 3:00 a.m. in the middle of the party someone spotted him” in the house where this party was held. Shortly afterward, around 4:00 a.m., someone pumped a number of shots into the house. The police, who were responding to another shooting in the neighborhood, responded and found Swerve on the kitchen floor with a semiautomatic pistol feet away from him. Swerve had taken several bullets to the body and he was pronounced dead at the scene at 4:25 a.m.

Discussion

It has been shown that gangs are active online (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2012; Van Hellemon, 2012; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011). Studies examining cyberbanging have noted that gang members frequently use the Internet to achieve “status goals,” by promoting their gangster lifestyle and especially through “flame wars”—by insulting and threatening rival gangs (Pyrooz et al., 2015; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Van Hellemon, 2012). And some studies even hinted at a connection between such cyberbanging and real-life consequences (Van Hellemon, 2012; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how gang members are using social media to disrespect one another in a public forum. Using interviews with the Y.O.D. directors and SOWs, we wanted to better understand how disseminating these videos would demand a reaction according to their gang subculture and collective norms. According to Anderson (1999), the code of the street values respect, primarily gained through the use of violence, above all else. Allowing an insult or threat to go unanswered threatens the status one has achieved, leaving one vulnerable to attack (Anderson, 1999). Gang research supports that these collective norms govern gang behavior (Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Papachristos, 2009), and that gang violence is influenced directly by the code (Matsuda et al., 2013). Thus, using multiple sources of data, we wanted to understand how gang members are using social media for achieving expressive goals and whether instigating online “flame wars” promotes violent behavior, just as instigating a face-to-face confrontation does in real life.

In the present case study we described six battle rap videos posted on YouTube by four gang affiliated rappers. These videos demonstrated the utility of social media for gang members. In these videos, the gang members asserted dominance over rival gang members through their lyrics and imagery. They flaunted drugs and guns, and their posse ventured into one another’s territory while exchanging insults and threats. Clearly, gang members can use rap videos on YouTube to achieve expressive goals.

Further, while the focus was on the content of these YouTube videos, it is interesting to note that additional social media were referenced in the videos. In Video 2, Waxy used a photo posted to Instagram as evidence of Swerve being a “set tripper.” Additionally, Swerve makes reference to an insult posted on Twitter that he is responding to in Video 4. It seems that the gang members in our sample are well connected on social media, and that they traded insults across various forms of social media.

During our analysis of the videos, we discovered several themes in the lyrical content. As we coded the lyrics, we found that the “disses” could be broken into two main categories, insults and threats, and that the insults could be classified into three subcategories—superficial insults, reputation insults, and dry snitching. We believe these distinctions are important because they indicate the level of severity of the diss and the consequent potential for repercussions. As mentioned, Table 1 shows that the rappers used superficial insults pretty consistently; about 30% of the lyrics were superficial insults in every video except for Video 4, where Swerve used such insults only 22% of the time. It makes sense that these battle rap videos would contain a fair amount of the most basic insults since the purpose is to brag about oneself and diss the other person.

Table 1 also shows about 40% of the lyrics were reputation insults. Swerve used this type of insult the most to goad his rivals; in his videos against Waxy, nearly half of his lyrical content was composed of reputation insults (45% in Video 1 and 48% in Video 3). Waxy’s response was to go back hard at Swerve, focusing not only on superficial and reputation insults but also incorporating dry snitching into 33% of his lyrics. Reputation and dry snitching insults are more concerning because according to both Anderson’s (1999) code of the street and the SOWs, these insults are more serious and require more of a response or the targets risk losing “juice” or status, which is dangerous on the streets. “Dry snitching” is a term used by the SOWs to describe the airing of personal street stories, especially failures, to the public. This type of diss was particularly worrisome to the SOWs because, aside from direct threats, dry snitching is the most damaging to reputation.

Despite how hard they went at one another, Swerve and Waxy’s videos stop short of leading to street violence. This demonstrates the importance of the context of rap videos posted online by gang members. One reason violence did not seem to occur is because the rappers themselves indicated that this was “just music.” Swerve’s videos against Waxy appear to be a gang member using social media to increase his reputation as a rapper. By paying close attention to the lyrical conversation in this set of videos, the listener is able to determine the likelihood of a violent conflict. In Video 2, Waxy asks Swerve if he really wants to take this to the next level (violence), and while Swerve responds that he is always ready to go, he says their battle is just the rap. Further, the SOWs explained that the main reason these two likely decided to keep the battle online is that their neighborhoods did not have an ongoing beef. This echoes Papachristos’ (2009) observation that insults between long-standing rivals

are more serious; these insults must be answered or they result in major reputational damage —“honorific suicide” (p. 117). The Y.O.D. director echoed this idea and explained that the Swerve and Lugar battle rap videos were more concerning because of the ongoing beef that demanded escalating retaliation. Of course, there is always a danger that videos like these could provide the impetus for a feud, since the code requires that disses typically be answered through violence, but Swerve and Waxy seem to have agreed to keep the battle within the music.

However, as soon as Swerve responded to Lugar’s tweet with a battle rap video aimed at him and the East End, trouble was inevitable according to the SOWs. These gangs have a strong history of beefing, so the battle rap disses, which require a violent response according to the code and collective norms, were more likely to lead to violence (Anderson, 1999; Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974). Though we cannot prove these videos directly caused the violence described, we do demonstrate the escalation in the lyrics and imagery of the videos themselves. Video 4 contains the harshest lyrical content from Swerve with 41% of his lyrics being reputation insults directed at Lugar’s street abilities and 26% being personal, dry snitching insults. J-Time’s response on Lugar’s behalf is just as harsh with a similar number of reputation insults (43%) but a larger focus on direct threats (17%) combined with dry snitching (10%). Further in the final two videos, the imagery also indicates a more serious beef. In both JTime’s response and Swerve’s final video, the gangsters increase the display of guns and gang members, implying that they have the power and resources to take this to the next level of actual street violence. This show of force and the increase in serious disses —reputation and dry snitching insults along with threats—is an escalation in the videos, and it demonstrates the collective and retaliatory nature of gang threats. With knowledge of the history between the neighborhoods, these online battle rap videos could be used to predict potential violent altercations, which leads us to the policy implications of this research.

In terms of policy, police have already been actively monitoring and using social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to investigate and gather evidence of gang activity. Police and prosecutors have used photos and videos posted on YouTube to successfully prosecute individuals of gang-related crimes (Marisco, 2010), and in 2011 YouTube actually worked with several police departments nationwide to identify gang members and their illegal activities (Hanser, 2011). Clearly, agents of the criminal justice system are aware of the benefits of social media sites, like YouTube, for apprehending and punishing criminals.

We propose, though, that such sites could also be used to help prevent criminal behavior. Through our analysis of these videos, we were able to recognize themes of insults, threats and a pattern of escalation, confirmed by the SOWs, which were warning signs of a possible violent conflict. Further, we believe that community-based programs are an important component in utilizing social media to prevent gang violence. The premise of PIRC is community engagement and empowerment, and it was

the partnership between PIRC and the Y.O.D. that allowed for the discovery of these underground battle rap videos. Cross-institutional efforts such as these, combining community-based organizations with city and law enforcement efforts to prevent and reduce violence, are of great importance and value. From these collaborative efforts and through information sharing, we gain knowledge that might not otherwise be discovered or understood, and police can be informed of worrisome online content for prevention purposes. There is greater potential then for saving more lives compared to using evidence gathered online after an assault or murder has been committed.

This study, of course, is not without its limitations. We used a purposive sampling technique in an effort to identify our set of underground battle rap videos. The sample size therefore is focused and small with only six videos from one city in our qualitative analysis. The small sample limits our generalizability so that we cannot say all gang members use social media in the way described. It may be that gang members in Pittsburgh (or even just these four gang members) are more connected online than others, but past studies do not suggest this is true (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Moule et al., 2013; Moule et al., 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2015). So while our study is more exploratory in nature, it still provides evidence of the utility of social media for gang members trying to achieve their expressive goals.

Also, like in all interview research, we are reliant upon the honesty and accuracy of our interview subjects. Our argument is built in part around the information we received from the SOWs and their knowledge of the context behind these videos. We found the SOWs to be incredibly forthcoming and have no reason to doubt their honesty or knowledge of the videos and events. Given that they have former connections to these gangs and still reside in these neighborhoods, we believe they are a reliable source of information on this subject.

Obviously, though, it is another limitation of our study that we were unable to interview gang members directly about these videos. It would have added valuable insight to talk to the gang members involved in these videos or even gang members affiliated with the rappers. Unfortunately, we did not have access to those gang members, in part because the violence discussed in this study made the environment too dangerous at the time. Thus, our analysis of the context of the videos and the violence that occurred around them are limited to the information provided by the directors and SOWs.

Conclusion

In this case study we explored a set of six underground battle rap videos posted on YouTube by four gang-affiliated rappers. With the assistance of the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime, as well as the Youth Opportunities Development and their SOWs, we were able to show that these gang members were using social media for achieving expressive goals of trading insults and threats. Through rap

music and social media these rappers were provoking one another publically in a way that would demand, at the least, retaliation online according to the code of the street and collective norms and behaviors of gangs. We demonstrated that social media is a new bottle for old messages of disrespect, and that the new medium does not change the expectation of collective response to maintain status.

In the videos there was a clear retaliation back and forth, and the lyrics and violent imagery increased as each gang rapper responded to previous insults and threats. Further, gang members clearly perceived threats as collective threats against the group. Though specific individuals were the primary actors in the videos, they were joined by known gang affiliates to back them up as the threat escalated. Our research also supported the idea that retaliatory responses become more necessary when insults are between longstanding rivals (Papachristos, 2009). Lastly, while we cannot be completely certain given the limitations of the present data, according to word on the street conveyed by the SOWs, the insults and threats traded online through this set of videos was linked to two shootings and shows a possible connection between online gang behavior and violence, which has been hinted at in other studies as well (Van Hellemonst, 2012; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011a).

We argue that, based on the types of insults and imagery found in this case study, similar types of insults and imagery could be used to identify potentially problematic online videos in the future with the help and assistance of community-based organizations and their members. It is clear from the present study that further empirical inquiry is needed to better understand the interaction between online and offline gang behavior and the impact that community organizations and monitoring social media can have in preventing any escalation of issues and violence. Relatedly, it would be interesting for future research to verify that current gang members perceive the difference in severity between the types of insults analyzed in our research. Street outreach workers, who are former gang members, made it clear that dry snitching insults were much more serious than superficial and reputation insults and required a definite, harder response. It would be useful to determine if current gang members support this distinction.

Finally, while past research has reported that gang members use multiple types of social media (Moreselli & Decary-Hetu, 2013), we found evidence that rival gang members' communications with one another span multiple social media applications at once, creating a web of communication. As mentioned, gang members in our study responded in their videos to pictures posted on Instagram and to tweets on Twitter. Future research should delve deeper into this web of communication and investigate the way that gang members may interact through these multiple forms of social media.

Appendix

Battle Rap Chart

Blue: Rappers neighborhoods are cool with each other

Red: Rappers neighborhoods have a "traditional" feud/beef

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Footnotes

1. While gangs and terrorist groups differ in several important ways, including the facts that gang goals are often more symbolic rather than political or religious and that gangs involve a profit motive

absent for most terrorist groups, there are similarities between the two groups. These groups are often composed of primarily male members, solidarity and collective behavior operate in both groups, and violence, which is often used to redress wrongs, is common in both groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Thus, the “axis of continuity across criminal, deviant, and extremist groups” means that studying the group process of gang members online may help to inform about the group process of these other groups as well (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011, p. 161). [↵](#)

2. Playing the dozens is less common among grown men, but when it is used, it is much more likely to provoke a fight and end in violence (Abrahams, 1962). [↵](#)

3. “Keeping it real” is a simple slogan that represents many complex ideas. According to Basu (1998), in one sense it means the artists continue to live by the principles of the code, which include making money and gaining respect. At a more general level, though, it also means staying true to yourself, not losing your identity, and not being fake—talking about what you know and experienced and not living vicariously through other people’s experiences. Real gangsters lived the life they portray in their lyrics, while studio gangsters make money singing about other people’s experiences. [↵](#)

4. While these rappers claim a reality to their violent lyrics, it is important to remember that not all rappers commit the violence they portray in their music. In the gangsta rap genre, exaggeration and figurative language are often used to boost sales. These conventions of the genre and industry often force rappers to adopt a violent style, but it is often posturing used as a marketing ploy (Nielson & Kubrin, 2014). According to Baker (2011), the commercialization of rap created an “uncomfortable double-dealing as gangsta rappers found it necessary to dwell somewhere between fact (‘I’m only telling it like it is’) and fiction (‘Of course I personally don’t do these things’)” (p. 237). [↵](#)

5. Though the majority of gang members in the Pyrooz (2014) sample joined as teens, he did discover that 17% of the sample experienced adult onset of gang membership. [↵](#)

6. In one sense, this online harassment of rival gangs is still similar to online harassment and cyberbullying that is common among juvenile populations. Online harassment by the general youth population can include threatening messages being sent via email and instant message or posted on social media (Holt et al., 2012; Holt & Bossler, 2014). However, the general youth population is not immersed in the collective norms of gang culture that prize masculinity and reputation and demand a violent response to insults and threats. Thus, while gang youth behavior of taunting and insulting rival gangs may seem similar to non-gang youth that harass each other, it differs in that the collective norms of gangs require a violent response to such insults. [↵](#)

7. It is important to note that Anderson (1999) does not claim that all residents in these poor areas adhere to the code. He makes a distinction between “decent” families that believe in mainstream

values and emphasize school and church as avenues for success and “street” families that prioritize respect and use violence to resolve disputes. [↵](#)

8. Interestingly, Stewart, Scheck, and Simons (2006) discovered that adhering to the street code exacerbates victimization. This echoes findings from Melde et al. (2009) who reported gang membership was associated with higher levels of actual victimization and perceptions of victimization risk, though lower levels of fear, compared to non-gang youth. Thus, the belief system of gang members that perpetuates violence, in part as a protective factor, actually puts them at more risk for victimization. [↵](#)

9. The particular videos we obtained were created by gang members. It is important to note that not all amateur rap and battle rap videos are created by gang members, and that rappers often must exaggerate a criminal lifestyle to sell records (Nielson & Kubrin, 2014). However, we purposefully selected battle rap videos posted by gang members so that we could examine the content of their videos and demonstrate a new way these gang members are achieving expressive goals through social media. [↵](#)