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Where's the Beef? How Chicago Gang Members Utilize Social Media to Promote Beefs and Incite Gang Violence and Gang Murders

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WHERE'S THE BEEF?

HOW CHICAGO GANG MEMBERS UTILIZE SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE
BEEFS AND INCITE GANG VIOLENCE AND GANG MURDERS

A Thesis Project Presented to
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HONORS SENIOR PROJECT
ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FORM

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How Chicago Gang Members Utilize Social Media to Promote Beefs and Incite Gang Violence and Gang Murders.

Title of Senior Project

This senior project has been reviewed by the faculty of the NEIU Honors Program and is found to be in good order in content, style, and mechanical accuracy. It is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the NEIU Honors Program and graduation with honors.

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ABSTRACT

This is a literature review about how gang members utilize social media to incite gang violence offline to assist in the creation of a new special unit of the Chicago Police Department that will work together with gang violence prevention/gang violence reduction organizations to assist in reducing gang conflict/gang violence created on social media. There are studies that focus on how gang members use social media. The literature focuses on different aspects of how gang members and gangs use social media. “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” is a form of gang banging but on social media platforms. “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” is used to threat, provoke, and taunt rival gang members and gangs. “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” can incite violent reactions when gang members are responding and replying to each other on the internet. This can also lead to violence on the street. This literature review will describe and explain how gang members utilize social media to incite gang violence and gang murders offline and how can we use social media and other alternatives to prevent gang violence.

In my research I have conducted a literature review of case studies regarding “internet banging” or “cyber banging”, how gangs and gang members use social media to “gang bang”, how has social media changed the way gangs interact or conduct gang actions, and how the Chicago Police Department polices social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is used to keep in touch with those near and far. But social media is also being used for destructive purposes. One of those destructive ways is how gang members are using social media to “internet bang” or “cyber bang.” Traditional gang banging consisted of representing gang affiliation on the street such as using their gang hand gestures or symbols, wearing specific gang colors or hanging out in the area the gang claimed territory. “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” is the same as traditional gang banging, which is usually done on the street, but today uses a computer to gangbang. Gangbanging on the social media (“internet banging or cyberbanging”) consist of postings of bragging, post fight videos, post videos of being on rival gang territory, and insulting and threatening rival gang members (Patton et al., 2017).

This literature review is about how gang members utilize social media to incite gang violence offline. “Where’s the beef?” Is a famous slogan created and marketed by Wendy’s Restaurants in 1984 to increase sales of Wendy’s hamburgers. (Bhatia, 2016) According to the Urban Dictionary, the definition of “beef is to have a grudge or start one with another person.” Is social media “where's the beef?” The beef is on social media because gang members are utilizing the internet to express their beefs with other gang members. How are Chicago gang members utilizing social media to incite gang violence and gang murders offline, and how can we use social media and other alternatives to prevent gang violence? The purpose of this paper is to use the research literature to answer these two questions.

Social media networks have changed the way people interact and communicate. Staying in touch with each other is quicker than in the past. This is especially true with

the younger generations. The days of getting someone's phone number have since disappeared. The way the young generations connect is by asking for someone's name on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Gangs are a population that has evolved with social media networks. The internet and social media have changed the way gangs interact since the earliest social network site Myspace; gangs have been present on social networks since then. Gangs have been present in newer social network platforms and will continue to be present as newer platforms emerge.

The way social network's function and how the subscriber uses it can be problematic. For instance, it becomes problematic if gangs have a private account or public account. Some gang members may keep their accounts public. Since nothing is private on the internet and social media, gang members' posts can get to the wrong person, such as a rival gang or a rival gang member that they had "beef" with. This occurs when someone shares a posting that they have posted, or someone forwards your posting to a person or group via text or messenger, or someone can screenshot a posting and send it to others via text or messenger. When gangs engage in "cyber banging" or "internet banging," it leads to street violence.

We can develop social media as medium to help gang members resolve their beefs and become part of a social network that results in self-actualization instead of the grim alternative of violence or murder. Social media as a tool should be used for peaceful purposes and not to infringe on the rights of others that leads to violence. Gang members' use of social media for "Internet banging" or "cyber banging" is leading to more offline gang retaliations and violence that can be prevented. Some types of alternative mechanisms need to be in place to reduce "Internet banging" or "cyber banging."

The significance of this literature review is to obtain knowledge of when does someone know when a social media posting of dissing, provoking, taunting and threatening rival gang members result in offline violence in hopes that it will assist with designing better public policies with regards to the use of social media. Which posting should be taken seriously and looked into? What kind of intervention can prevent “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” to become offline violence? These are some questions that were not addressed in any of the literature reviewed for this study. Would squashing beef on social media help reduce offline violence? Why is it that hardly anyone wants to squash a beef on social media? What is it about social media that perpetuates “internet banging” or “cyber banging.”

In my review of literature of case studies, I will focus on (1 How gangs and gang members use social media to “gang bang”, (2 How has social media changed the way gangs interact or conduct gang actions, (3 how the Chicago Police Department polices social media to “and,” (3 What is internet banging or cyber banging.

METHODS

The method for this literature review was locating journal articles on (1 How gangs and gang members use social media to “gang bang” (2) How has social media changed the way gangs interact or conduct gang actions. (3 What is internet banging or cyber banging? The literature was obtained from Northeastern Illinois University Library online database, and Google Scholar. Literature was obtained by using key terms: social media and gangs, gangs and social media use, social media and cyberbanging, social media and internet banging, law enforcement use of social media, law enforcement and cyberbanging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is a literature review on (1 How gangs and gang members use social media to “gang bang” (2) How has social media changed the way gangs interact or conduct gang actions. (3 What is internet banging or cyber banging.?

Internet Banging or Cyberbanging and Social Media

The following information was obtained from a summary of past published articles. The information was obtained from a literature review by Fernandez-Planells, et al (2021). This literature review focused on different studies about gangs, their use of social media, and how gang literature has increasingly reflected on the importance of social media in gang lifestyle (Fernandez-Planells et al., 2021). The study conducted a systematic literature review by analyzing academic studies of gang use of social media with the use of Scopus and Google Scholar databases. This search led to seventy-three publications. They proceeded to undertake a content analysis of each publication using an exhaustive evaluation model, comprising twenty variables and seventy-one categories (Fernandez-Planells et al., 2021).

The internet has changed the way people interact and has transformed social relations. This has been especially true with the younger generations and how they interact. This has also been a reality with urban gangs and how they interact. Urban gangs also use social media on a daily basis for communicative purposes. In fact, gangs have been present on social media since the earliest social networking sites such as Myspace (Fernandez-Planells et al., 2021). Gangs have adapted to newer social network sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Gangs will adapt to newer platforms as they emerge. Fernandez-Planells et al. (2021) study focused on Twitter gang member’s

account but it did not take into account the newer social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

Patton et al. (2016), in a study of five major cities of six hundred current or former gangs, researchers discovered that over 80% of participants used the internet in the same way as the general population (Patton et al., 2016). Threats and disrespect via social media can provide youth with a sense of security and make youth confident to post inflammatory comments (Patton et al., 2016). Youth may feel comfortable making threats online and disregard the increased risk of victimization if they are confronted by the person (Patton et al., 2016).

Patton et al. (2016) focused on community-based organizations and their staff that work directly with gangs and gang members. The study revealed a new trend amongst Chicago youth between the ages of 12 through 24. These Chicago youth are “internet banging” or “cyber banging” using social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to brag about violence, make threats, and recruit gang members and to plan criminal activity (Patton, et. al., 2016). “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” is a dangerous and a complex form of computer communication (Patton, et. al., 2016). “Internet banging” or “cyber banging” is the equivalent of traditional gang banging on the street, but it is conducted on a computer. This may be the cause of gang violence offline in urban areas.

Chicago Police Department’s Policing of Social Media to Help Prevent Gang Violence

This purpose of this section is to show how the Chicago Police Department is policing social media to help prevent gang violence. The following information was obtained from a summary of past published articles. The information was obtained from

literature written by John Buntin. The Chicago Police Department in the past have approached gang violence in different ways. Every Superintendent has had their own ideas on what to do when it comes to controlling gang violence. This literature focuses on the 15th District on the West Side of Chicago in 2012 when Barbara West was the Commander of the district. According to Butin, Chicago has “100,000 documented gang members. Chicago has more gang members than any other city except for Los Angeles” (Butin, 2013). In Chicago, gangs claim territory in neighborhoods through the city. One gang can claim one block and a rival gang can claim the next block which is how gang conflict can arise (Carmicino et al, 2014). Chicago’s South and West Sides have the highest percentage of gang and gang activity (Carmicino et al., 2014). At the time, the murder rate has surged, “due in part to a feud that broke out within one of the area’s largest gangs, The Four Corner Hustlers, a faction of the Gangster Disciples that controls the area’s lucrative marijuana trade” (Butin, 2013). Also, the Chicago Police Department officials estimated at the time that 50 to 80 percent of the city’s shootings and murders were gang related (Butin, 2013).

During this time, the Chicago Police Department was taking a different approach on how to handle the gang violence, instead of using the usual tactic known as “hot spot” policing which consists of flooding a problematic area with police to control the violence (Butin, 2013). They had to figure out exactly who is likely to kill and be killed in each district in Chicago. When they figured out who was likely to be killed, Barbara West, accompanied by Chris Mallette from Chicago Violence Reduction Strategy would make visits to people they found were at extreme risk or associated with high-risk people.

Social networking has evolved further from 2012. We now live in an age of social media and the Chicago Police Department is catching up with the advanced digital age. Chicago Police Department used “network analysis” which maps the relationships among Chicago’s 14,000 most active gang members (Butin, 2013). “Network analysis” ranked how likely people are to be involved in a homicide as a victim or an offender. The idea of “network analysis” began with a sociologist by the name of Andrew Papachristos, who is originally from Rodgers Park in Chicago. Rodgers Park is a diverse neighborhood on the far North Side of Chicago. Papachristos’s mother worked with the Guardian Angels during the 1990’s. The Guardian Angels was “a group of volunteers that helped the police in patrolling the high-crime area in Chicago” (Butin, 2013). While Papachristos attended University of Chicago obtaining his Ph. D, he began to conduct ethnographic studies on the West Side of Chicago. He concluded that “most residents of even the poorest neighborhoods did not kill or commit violent crimes, even most gang members did not either. But when they did, it was often as members of a group” (Butin, 2013).

The Chicago Police Department is not the only department using social media. Other police departments across the United States are using social media to some capacity for investigation purposes. In 2016, over five hundred local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies have used social media for different purposes (KiDeuk et al., 2016). Some law enforcement agencies have reported that they have social media to obtain tips on crime and gather intelligence, and information for investigations (Levinson-Waldman, 2018). Sixty percent of law enforcement agencies have contacted social media companies to obtain information and use it as evidence in criminal cases

(Levinson-Waldman, 2018). Law enforcement use intelligence, investigations and use the collected information during surveillance in court (Lane et al., 2018).

Law enforcement can conduct surveillance of social media in three ways: first is following or watching online an individual, group of individuals, or affiliation (e.g., online hashtag), second is using an undercover account or using an informant where they create a fake online account and use it for surveillance, and third is to use “analytical software that can obtain information about an individual, groups, associations, and locations” (Levinson-Waldman, 2018). Law enforcement agencies can also request information from social media companies, which at time may require a subpoena or court order

The information obtained from social media companies can vary from “subscriber information to metadata to the contents of messages” (Levinson-Waldman, 2018). The use of the information collected by law enforcement agencies can have challenges such as how the data collected should be used, sorted, and stored (Patton et al., 2018). There is no policy or protocol in police academies wherein they provide proper training on how to store and organize data collected from social media (Wijeratne et al., 2015). Investigators create their own methods on how to collect and store information but also there is no formal training on how to analyze and interpret data extracted from social media (Wijeratne et al., 2015).

The Chicago Police Department updated their Use of Social Media General Order in February 2020 and it states in what circumstances you can use social media for investigative purposes (Chicago Police Department, 2020). The Chicago Police Department allows use of social media by police personnel to obtain information about

missing persons, wanted persons, gang violence and retaliation, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and other criminal activities (Chicago Police Department, 2020). Chicago Police personnel must use Chicago Police Department-issued electronic equipment to use social media for investigations and their investigations must take place while on duty. The General Order does not state any information regarding storage or preservation of any postings found during investigations. The General Order is vague in nature (Chicago Police Department, 2020).

There has been a growing list of wrongful convictions, which demonstrates that even non-gang-associated youths routinely exaggerate their violent behaviors and take credit for crimes they did not commit (Patton et al. 2017). Non-gang associated youth may post gang related content but it does not mean they may be in a gang (Lane et al., 2018). Law enforcement may perceive that non-gang members may be in a gang due to the gang related content they post online (Lane et al., 2018). Even being associated with a gang member can be problematic as it does not mean that the person is a gang member. The content posted by gang affiliated youth can be exaggerated in nature (Lane et al., 2018).

According to Patton et al. (2017) social media policing affects communities of color. Youth and young adults who live in violent urban neighborhoods may feel the need to portray a hard and tough persona. The tough portrayal makes them feel safe and protected from violence in their communities. The way youth and young adults of color behave on social media may be seen as gang activity and even some street slang may be taken out of context and translated as threats (Patton et al. 2017). Even though some youth and young adult's postings may be an outlet of aggression, frustration and/or

express anger, they are permanent and public, and it can possibly involve them unwillingly in investigations and possible charges (Patton et al. 2017).

Social media is protected under the Fourth Amendment but surveillance of gang members and gang activities on social media for investigative purposes does not violate the Fourth Amendment (Behrman, 2015). The Fourth Amendment protects citizens from invasion of privacy. Social media is a public source, and it is not an invasion of privacy monitoring a social media account (Behrman, 2015). The Fourth Amendment does not prohibit law enforcement from using social media for investigative purposes (Behrman, 2015). Even when a social media account is set to private, a law enforcement agency can obtain a subpoena or court order to obtain information on the social media account that is being investigated (Behrman, 2015). Law enforcement agencies are not allowed to cancel a gang member's social media account due to the content on the social media account. The cancellation of a social media account due to gang affiliated content would be violating the first amendment (Behrman, 2015).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis paper's focus was to enlighten the public and others how gang member's use of social media is leading to violence and murder. Is social media "where's the beef?" How fragile have we become in society that if someone uses social media to disrespect you, you feel that being disrespected gives you the authority to physically hurt someone or murder them? The beef is on social media. According to Fernandez-Planells et al. (2021) solely focused on the social media platform Twitter. But as younger generations of gang member use Instagram and TikTok more than Twitter, the study should be conducted on younger gang members who use Instagram and TikTok. The

challenges in studying gangs on social media is learning newer computer and machine techniques as the internet and social media is continuously evolving. Fernandez-Planells et al. (2021) states that big data should be relied on when studying gangs on social media but in-person interviews of gang members, and law enforcement personnel, and “participant observation.”

If internet use is the new information highway, why didn’t anyone foresee the possible harm that gang members travelling this information highway use of the internet would result in violence and murder? We have shown how law enforcement is monitoring the internet for potential gang violence and murder. However, such monitoring tactics may come too late to prevent violence or death. In the study by Butin (2013) states that those associated with homicide victims such as friends or close acquaintances are more likely to be victim of homicide compared to those not associated with homicide victims.

I have earlier discussed in the review of literature that use of social media is protected by the First Amendment but it does not protect any speech that expresses threats or offends. However, gang members do not seem to be aware or do not care that what they post can be monitored by law enforcement. I feel that we should not water down these constitutional protections for law enforcement to monitor potential gang violence on the internet. We should maintain that law enforcement will need a subpoena, court order or a warrant to obtain constitutionally protected internet information (Lane et al., 2018).

To maintain police transparency, proper social media training and surveillance should be implemented. According to Wijeratne et al. (2015) law enforcement agencies

do not have a protocol on how to conduct social media surveillance. Most law enforcement agencies are “self- taught” when conducting social media surveillance and investigations. I feel there should be proper training provided to law enforcement agencies including police academies to conduct investigations on social media.

In the study by Butin (2013) Dr. Papachristos’s research showed that a social network consisted of only few individuals that engage with each other that results in violence and murder. As in most homicides, many of these offenders and victims know one another. The Chicago Police Commander head of a community antiviolenace program has reached out to these high-risk individuals warning them that they at are risk of being harmed or murdered (Butin, 2013). The commander explained to them how their history and network placed them on the list. The police have told these high-risk individuals that their lives matter and to stay out of trouble (McDonald, 2013). How do we convince these high-risk individuals alternatives to change their current lifestyle and that their lives matter. Many of the younger gang members of this social network use social media as a tool to foster violence and murder. If many decline the police’s offer to change their life, the police as an alternative should use churches, not-for-profit agencies and former gang members to help these individuals learn how to “let it go.” We must develop a process that will enable these individuals to engage in constructive behavior where they can reach their full potential. Another solution would be developing physical safe spaces for younger members faced with violence to express their grief, anger, and plans for retaliation to individuals specially trained on how to help gang members process and heal from their trauma.

State and federal legislation should be developed, without infringing the constitutional rights of others, which cause social media to develop a more effective method of monitoring and curtailing internet violence. Social media should contribute financially to programs that will curtail violence and contribute financially to programs to help eliminate internet violence by gang members and others. If social media platforms are becoming situational transactions that are leading to public and advertising threats, then social media must develop ways that monitor potential violent situations and if possible, communicate with law enforcement about these potential threats. We can develop social media as medium to help gang members resolve their beefs and become part of a social network that results in self-actualization instead of the grim alternative of violence or murder.

I recommend that the Chicago Police Department create a new special unit called Social Media Intelligence. The Social Media Intelligence Unit would be staffed by Chicago Police Officers that are certified and/or trained in social network analysis, online surveillance, and online investigations. This new special unit would work with gang prevention/gang violence reduction organizations and their staff. The new Social Media Intelligence Unit and the gang prevention/gang violence reduction organizations would work together to collect information and to intervene in online gang conflict. Both organizations goal would be to prevent violent in-person gang confrontations. The Chicago Police Department's Social Media Intelligence Unit and gang prevention/gang violence reduction organizations would work together to create a safe space for gang members to prevent social media gang violence and to promote safe use of social media platforms.

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GLOSSARY

Beef: Conflict with an individual or group.

Hard: Being tough.

Internet-banging or cyber banging: The presence of street gangs on the internet and social media.

Squashing beef: Resolution to a conflict between an individual or group.

Block: A certain street where a gang may be active.

Hitta: A gang executioner or gang assassin.

Dissing: Disrespecting.