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Code of the Tweet: Urban Gang Violence in the Social Media Age

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ABSTRACT

Academics, criminal justice professionals, and news outlets have warned that gang-associated youth use social media to taunt rivals and trade insults in ways that cause offline retaliation. But there is surprisingly little empirical research investigating how gang-associated youth deploy social media in gang conflicts. Criminal justice professionals routinely overstate the violent effects of social media challenges, which further exacerbates criminalization, racial stereotyping, and social inequality. Drawing from two years of ethnographic fieldwork on Chicago's South Side, this study asks how gang-associated black youth use social media to challenge rivals. Bridging traditional theories of urban violence with emerging media scholarship, I argue that social media disrupt the key impression management practices associated with the "code of the street." Specifically, gang-associated youth exploit social media to publicly invalidate the authenticity of their rivals' performances of toughness, strength, and street masculinity. Challengers do so through "cross referencing," "calling bluffs," and "catching lacking." Each strategy differs in its likelihood to catalyze physical retaliation, which is a function of the amount and depth of counter-evidence necessary to refute a given challenge. These findings carry important implications for addressing urban violence, gangs, and inequality in the social media age.

KEYWORDS: violence; gangs; social media; context collapse.

In recent years, academics, criminal justice professionals, and news outlets have warned that the proliferation of digital social media is amplifying urban gang violence (Mahtani 2017; Patton, Eschmann, and Butler 2013). According to these reports, gang-associated youth use online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to taunt rivals and trade insults in ways that cause offline retaliation (Patton et al. 2013). Despite this potentially alarming development, there is surprisingly little empirical research investigating how gang-associated youth *actually* deploy social media in gang conflicts and to what consequence. Instead, the existing literature remains largely theoretical, exploratory, and speculative, focusing on the *potential* and *assumed* connections between social media challenges and physical violence. Current scholarship overwhelmingly imposes traditional (and potentially outdated) theories of violence onto today's digitally mediated gang feuds. However, according to emerging

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research on digital communication and online interaction, these conflicts are more likely to operate according to new and distinct interactional rules and dynamics. As a result, the existing literature risks mischaracterizing key mechanisms and potentially overestimating the extent to which affronts on social media cause offline violence.

These shortcomings are not merely academic; they carry real-world implications. In order to more actively police and prosecute gangs, criminal justice actors increasingly monitor social media in search of aggressive statements, photos of firearms, and other gang-related content (Brayne 2017; Ferguson 2017). In the vacuum of rigorous empirical research, criminal justice professionals consistently overstate the violent effects of social media. This reinforces the myth of black criminality and generates what Simone Browne (2012:72) terms "racializing surveillance"—that is, the reification of boundaries and stereotypes along racial lines in ways that lead to discriminatory treatment and the reproduction of social inequality.

Against this backdrop, this article empirically examines the role of digital social media in gang violence. Drawing from two years of ethnographic fieldwork alongside gang-associated black youth on Chicago's South Side, this study asks how these individuals deploy social media to challenge rivals, as well as how and why certain challenges are more likely to catalyze physical violence than others. Bridging traditional theories of urban violence with emerging new media scholarship, I argue that social media—particularly the capacities of social media to create "context collapse" (boyd 2014; Meyrowitz 1985)—disrupt the key impression management practices associated with the "code of the street" (Anderson 1999; Lane 2019). Within this new interactional environment, gang-associated youth exploit social media to publicly invalidate the authenticity of their rivals' performances of toughness, strength, and street masculinity. Challengers do so through three concrete strategies: "cross referencing," "calling bluffs," and "catching lacking." Each strategy differs in its likelihood of catalyzing physical retaliation, which is a function of the amount and depth of counter-evidence necessary to refute a given challenge, particularly if the rebuttal brings feuding parties into shared physical space or if the online challenge threatens existing social ties. Contrary to common belief, the majority of social media challenges remain confined to online space and do not generate offline violence.

However, fieldwork data also reveal a previously overlooked way that social media facilitate, and thus potentially exacerbate violence. Through a virtually invisible form of "lateral surveillance" (Andrejevic 2002), assailants gather actionable intelligence on their targets' current whereabouts and vulnerabilities, thereby increasing the precision and deadliness of future assaults. These findings carry important implications for understanding and addressing violence, gangs, and inequality in the social media age.

URBAN GANG VIOLENCE: THEN AND NOW

Developed long before the proliferation of social media, traditional theories trace the roots of urban violence to the subordinated position of poor minority residents—particularly young black men—in broader social, economic, and gender hierarchies. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2004), multiple generations experiencing racial oppression, economic insecurity, and blocked opportunities compel urban poor residents to attain dignity, respect, and masculinity through linguistic and embodied performances. As critical race theorists and feminist scholars importantly remind us, the majority of these interactional practices *do not* result in violence (see hooks 1995; Kelley 1997). Take, for example, the black oral tradition of "signifying"—alternatively referred to as "woofing," "sounding," or "playing the dozens"—in which participants engage in a ritualized exchange of witty, comedic, sometimes-rhyming insults. Although these verbal duels may appear to outsiders as aggressive, disrespectful, and incendiary, signifying allows black youth to increase self-worth, engage in social critique, and build solidarity, while simultaneously honing verbal and emotional skills required for surviving a racially hostile world (Mitchell-Kernan 1999).

Unfortunately, some efforts to earn respect and establish masculine authority *do* result in violence (Collins 2004). In economically depressed and physically insecure neighborhoods, young men—particularly gang-associated youth—may feel compelled to prove their manhood by adhering to the code of the street. "The code," writes Elijah Anderson (1999:72), "revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. A person's public bearing must send the unmistakable . . . message that one is capable of violence, and possible mayhem, if the situation requires it." Successful displays require one to publicly challenge others, discredit their violent dispositions, and claim their reputation, or "juice," for oneself. As Jacobs and Wright (2006:42) confirm, "bringing someone down for what they did to you . . . raises your personal market worth in the eyes of your peers." A spiral of retaliatory violence can ensue, as those challenged in the past seek future opportunities to reestablish their reputation.

Amid growing reports of digitally mediated gang violence, researchers have drawn on these traditional theories to produce a handful of exploratory articles (see Patton et al. 2017; Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015; Sela-Shayovitz 2012). According to these accounts, gang-associated youth have ostensibly transferred the street code directly to social media. Patton et al. (2017:1012) claim, for example, that "gang members . . . use Twitter to threaten rival groups (including police), posture, and 'campaign for respect' through the incitement of violence . . . . [T]he same gang violence mechanisms . . . on the urban street unfold online." Existing scholarship thus advances a theory of "parallelism," in which online activity purportedly "mirrors" offline activity. "Online identities and behaviors," write Pyrooz et al. (2015:475), "are reflections of offline identities and behaviors, thus one is the analog of the other." By conceptualizing social media as an *additional* and *duplicate* site for violent conflicts, the parallelism thesis predicts that social media will *necessarily* increase the frequency and intensity of offline violence. "Confrontations between rival crews," write Urbanik and Haggerty (2018:13), "have been supplemented and exacerbated by social media. New animosities emerge quickly and take on added significance."

These studies represent a vital first step in outlining broad trends. However, they are characterized by notable limitations. First, the parallelism thesis dramatically overestimates the causal relationship between social media and offline gang violence. Even a cursory review of recent crime statistics reveals that violent crime in urban areas has *decreased* to historic lows in the same years that gang-associated youth have *increased* their use of social media (see Sharkey 2018). Unfortunately, by assuming a direct, positive relationship between social media use and physical retaliation, the theory overlooks the possibility that social media may also provide opportunities for gang-associated youth to *de-escalate* or *avoid* offline violence in ways that were unavailable only a decade ago (see Urbanik and Haggerty 2018 for an exception). Second, parallelism neglects the potential for social media to *transform* (rather than merely amplify) offline conflicts. It is certainly true that gangs challenge rivals in both offline and online settings; however, the latter is characterized by distinct rules, conventions, and consequences that afford new and different kinds of outcomes while constricting previous ones. An insult uttered on Twitter, for example, carries different meanings, and demands different responses than if those exact words were uttered on the street. As new media scholars importantly remind, offline interactions and identities are better understood as *coevolving* with online interactions and identities (see Lane 2019; Urbanik and Haggerty 2018).

A second and equally important limitation is methodological. Previous studies rely primarily on self-report surveys and/or content analyses of disembodied social media posts several years after their creation, often asking people other than gang-associated youth to interpret the meanings and motivations of a given piece of social media content (e.g., Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016; Patton et al. 2017). To date, researchers have not conducted direct, real-time observations alongside the actual producers of gang-related content and/or participants in gang conflicts. Lacking access to such on-the-ground, real-time data, existing studies are unable to determine the relationship between a given piece of social media content and the physical violence that may or may not result.

Criminal Justice (Mis)Uses of Social Media

These shortcomings carry practical implications. By mischaracterizing key mechanisms and overestimating the negative effects of online behavior, existing research risks inadvertently contributing to criminal justice practices that disproportionately harm poor urban communities (Stuart, Armenta, and Osborne 2015). By 2014, 81 percent of law enforcement professionals had already reported using social media as a tool in investigations (Lexis Nexis 2014). Police officers frequently search individual suspects' social media profiles for potential evidence of engagement in violent crime. Prosecutors and court personnel similarly rely on social media content to secure indictments, convictions, and sentences. Problematically, the majority of these professionals—a reported 75 percent—are "self-taught," and thus act on their own personal (and potentially biased) interpretations of social media users and their content. As research consistently confirms, law enforcement personnel overwhelmingly lack the cultural competencies and knowledge necessary to accurately comprehend and regulate the cultural practices of urban youth (see Rios 2011; Stuart and Benezra 2018). Criminal justice actors are particularly prone to misidentify and thus criminalize non-violent interactions and ordinary behaviors, especially those related to expressions of black cultural identity, such as signifying. The opportunities for misinterpretation have only increased in the social media age, particularly with the emergence of "Black Twitter"—defined as the "millions of Black users . . . networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices" (Florini 2014:225). Although such online spaces provide vital discursive arenas for activism, political mobilization, and "*doing* blackness" (Brock 2012; Florini 2014; Graham and Smith 2016), they contain content that law enforcement personnel are prone to inaccurately label as aggressive and potentially violent.

Such misinterpretations produce detrimental outcomes for black youth and their communities. In 2012, for example, a Harlem teenager named Jelani Henry was falsely arrested and incarcerated for 19 months in Riker's Island (including 9 months in solitary confinement) based largely on his social media activity, which included "liking" various gang-related posts on Facebook (Broussard 2015). Police departments in major cities currently assign residents to gang and criminal databases based (sometimes exclusively) on social media activity (Rivlin-Nadler 2018; Tarm 2018). Database inclusion carries disproportionate harm for black residents, who are seven times more likely to be wrongfully convicted than whites (Gross, Possley, and Stephens 2017). In addition to these gross violations of constitutional rights, database inclusion routinely results in unemployment, deportation, and loss of housing. Outcomes like these are increasingly common, given the emerging public narrative that imagines urban streets overrun by hypersensitive black youth who perpetrate violent retaliation in response to the slightest social media insult or affront.

Reconsidering the Role of Social Media

A more accurate understanding of the role of social media in urban violence requires a revised approach. Rather than impose traditional mechanisms of violence onto online interactions, researchers must instead ask how these mechanisms are altered and re-structured by social media. Prior to the introduction of social media, the code of the street and its violent status-seeking practices were subject to the structural features of place-bound, face-to-face interaction, as theorized most famously by Erving Goffman (1959). In their campaigns for respect, gang-associated youth could rely on a relatively large and predictable amount of "audience segregation" (Goffman 1959:49), which allowed them to hide the multidimensionality of their social roles and identities. As Victor Rios (2017) reminds us, gang-associated youth were able to "code switch" when they entered school, work, and other non-gang contexts by adopting the language, demeanor, and interactional styles deemed appropriate in these "non-street" settings. Thanks to audience segregation, there was a relatively small chance that rivals and other challengers would ever witness these potentially compromising

behaviors. Thus, gang-associated youth were able to create the appearance that they strictly adhered to the code of the street throughout every social context and even behind closed doors.

Times, however, have changed.

According to theories of electronically mediated interaction, social media fundamentally disrupt the defining features of place-bound, face-to-face sociality. Given the "always on" character of social media (Duffy 2017), gang-associated youth (like *all* social media users) are subject to "context collapse"—the process by which private and otherwise compromising pieces of information "leak out" onto the public stage, desegregate audiences, and jeopardize desired performances (boyd 2014; Meyrowitz 1985). On platforms such as Facebook, for example, the content intended for family and friends (e.g., childhood photos, recreational pastimes, and private hardship) is now visible to larger and multiple publics. Context collapse thus makes public a spectrum of information that was formerly confined to backstage regions or performed for limited audiences (Meyrowitz 1985).

Recent research has refined the study of context collapse by considering how social media users exploit this new interactional environment to their advantage. Indeed, for some individuals, context collapse provides historically new and powerful means for further validating public performances. By creating what Davis and Jurgenson (2014) term "context collusions," social actors use social media to *intentionally* collapse, blur, and flatten multiple contexts. A growing body of literature on digital self-branding finds that aspiring "micro-celebrities" leverage context collusion to provide public audiences with the impression that they inhabit a consistent, and thus authentic, identity across every social sphere (see Marwick 2013; Mavroudis and Milne 2016). Instead of hiding the existence of a back-stage region, as was the case in the pre-digital era, users strategically exploit the affordances of social media to provide the public with highly-manufactured "windows" into their backstage contexts. The power of this process is only amplified by the fact that social media performances are archived, searchable, and cumulative, thereby growing ever more convincing and corroborated with each successive upload (boyd 2014). So long as users can provide public audiences with coherent images of their ostensibly "real" behaviors and identities, they can continue to validate the authenticity of their desired public persona.

The following analysis advances this literature by examining how social media users intentionally and antagonistically create context collapse for *other* social media users. Gang-associated youth provide a fitting case study for analyzing this process, given the value these youth place on developing and defending a reputation for violence (Anderson 1999). In urban poor communities, such reputations carry significant stakes, constituting a powerful form of symbolic capital (Carter 2005), which gang-associated youth routinely convert into improved physical safety, advantages in the informal economy, and other material and social resources. In the remainder of the article, I consider how gang-associated youth strategically exploit context collapse as part of gang conflicts. Specifically, I analyze how gang-associated youth search out, compile, and broadcast compromising information intended to invalidate the desired displays and personas of their rivals. I then examine how the targets of such challenges defend their reputations in both online and offline spaces, tracing how, when, and why different challenges catalyze (and *do not* catalyze) physical retaliation.

FIELDWORK METHODS, SETTING, AND DATA COLLECTION

Empirical data were gathered during 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted alongside gang-associated black youth on Chicago's South Side. The term "gang-associated" denotes someone who is "perceived as, self-reported as, or informally or formally labeled (typically by law enforcement or schools) as an actual gang member" (Rios 2017:20). Accordingly, all participants self-report as associated with at least one gang faction listed in the Chicago Crime Commission's 2018 *Gang Book*, which officially delineates every Chicago gang and its associated territory. The term "gang-associated" (as opposed to "gang member") encourages researchers to recognize the "deep multidimensional complexity" of participants (Rios 2017:179). This is particularly important in the current social media

age, as youth necessarily navigate multiple online and offline contexts that may or may not be related to gangs.

I obtained access to participants through my role as director of an after-school youth violence prevention program, offering trauma-informed counseling and creative arts curricula to disadvantaged teens on Chicago's South Side. Through my position and programming, I developed close relationships with several gang-associated youth and their families. Following the shooting death of a local teen, I invited young men associated with one particular gang—which I refer to throughout the article as "the Corner Boys"—to participate in a research project examining the causes and consequences of urban gang violence in the social media age. Using purposive snowball sampling, enlisting participants to introduce me to their friends and families, I recruited sixty young men associated with the Corner Boys (29 participants) and four allied gang factions (ten participants from ally #1; eight participants from ally #2; seven participants from ally #3; six participants from ally #4). By including youth associated with five different gang factions, I was able to confirm that the practices observed among the Corner Boys were generalizable across multiple gang factions. I refrain from reporting any findings that I did not observe as similar across all five gangs. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 27. At the onset of fieldwork, six were in early adolescence (ages 13–15); 21 were in late adolescence (ages 16–19); 22 were in their early twenties (20–23); 11 were in their mid-twenties (24–27). This age distribution is representative of the composition of Chicago gang factions more generally, which is overwhelmingly comprised of men in their late adolescence and early twenties (Chicago Crime Commission 2018).

I obtained formal consent to shadow participants individually and in small groups throughout their daily lives (e.g., at home, throughout local neighborhoods, at work, to and from school, in criminal justice settings). I spent approximately 20–50 hours per week conducting direct observations. I recorded fieldnotes by hand—either in a small notebook or on a notetaking application on my phone. In a stepwise fashion, I expanded these notes into detailed field narratives immediately after leaving the field each day, supplementing observations with both formal and informal interviews, using an audio recorder to ensure accuracy. In doing so, I employed the case study logic of "sequential interviewing." As Mario Small (2009:227) writes, this approach provides "a clearer procedure for discovering previously unknown practices or processes, and refining one's understanding of those practices or processes during the conduct of the study." Sequential interviewing treats each interview as a case in its own right, using each interview to generate expectations about what one might see in the next interview, refining one's sampling and hypotheses with each subsequent interview. When salient issues emerge that the researcher had not anticipated, the researcher pursues them in future interviews and fieldwork. Sequential interviewing proved particularly advantageous when early interviews revealed variation in the strategies youth deployed to challenge a rival's online personas and performances. As variation arose, I revised my recruitment strategy, interview instrument, and observational strategies to better capture and analyze the most important differences in these strategies, as well as the ways certain strategies were more likely to catalyze offline retaliation than others.

In order to better analyze the relationship between online activity and offline behavior, I enlisted participants to review each day's social media activity with me. This included their daily uploads, posts, and private messages. These debrief sessions focused attention on online exchanges with members of rival gangs, providing key data, as well as prompts and discussion topics for follow-up interviews, in which I asked participants about the origins, aims, meanings, and consequences of particular online antagonisms. This approach was vital for following in real time, or otherwise reconstructing feuds as they moved from online to offline spaces. Through multiple rounds of observations and sequential interviews with different participants, I triangulated the relationship between a given piece of social media content and resulting incidents of violence.

In order to protect my participants from undue harm, I have anonymized the names of all participants and gangs. Due to participants' involvement in criminal behavior, I also obtained a certificate of confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. Following the model set forth by Lane (2019),

Shklovski and Vertesi (2013), and other new media scholars, I also "un-Googled" social media data where necessary. This entailed Googling all content I wished to quote and making occasional minor changes to mask identifiable details.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GANG CONFLICTS

For gang-associated youth, social media has become a powerful tool for building and validating violent reputations. Using social media, they make a conscious effort to create the impression that they maintain their violent, "street" identities even behind closed doors and in ostensibly backstage contexts. Tevin, a twenty-year-old member of the Corner Boys provides a telling example. Over the course of a single week, Tevin posted a series of photos to Instagram that depicted him holding a large pistol in a number of private settings, including in his bedroom, bathroom, and living room. When I asked Tevin about these uploads during one of our interview sessions, he explained that they were part of his larger effort to convey a single, coherent identity to a range of different audiences. As he peered down at his Instagram uploads, Tevin asserted:

> On these networks [social media], you got all types of niggas watchin' you, tryna see if you really that savage [violent hustler] you say you is. The guys [fellow gang members] tryna' see if you really gon' ride for them [defend them or avenge their deaths]. The opps [rival gang members] lookin' to see if you sweet [weak and/or vulnerable]. The hood [neighbors] tryna' see if you gon' represent [defend] the block [neighborhood] when the opps slide through blowin' [commiting a drive-by shooting]. That's why I got them pictures with the pole [pistol] on me. They could see on my IG [Instagram profile] that I don't even take a piss without the pole! They gon' think twice about tryna' diss.

As menacing as Tevin's photos are likely to appear to outside observers, the story behind the images confirms that they are highly disingenuous. When I asked Tevin where he acquired the gun, he admitted that it belonged to a cousin who had been visiting Tevin's family the week before. Tevin borrowed the pistol and, over the course of just five minutes, took a dozen pictures of himself. Tevin took care to change outfits for each picture, creating the impression that the images were captured over the course of a week. Tevin was now uploading one photo every day, giving the impression that he was still in possession of the gun. Throughout the entire fieldwork period, however, Tevin never owned a gun.

Tevin is far from alone in this practice. Emerging research, along with a growing list of wrongful convictions, demonstrates that even non-gang-associated youths routinely exaggerate their violent behaviors and even take credit for crimes that they did not actually commit (e.g., Patton et al. 2017). Over the course of fieldwork, I regularly observed members of all five gang factions upload pictures to social media that contained inoperable firearms, fake narcotics, and counterfeit money. One of the more common practices, especially when antagonisms with rivals escalate, is to upload pictures they had taken while walking to school, to the community center, or were engaged in some other nonviolent activity, and then *claim* that these photos depict them currently on daring incursions into enemy territory for the sake of committing a drive-by shooting. Participants compiled such images on their phones, waiting for the most opportune moment to upload them. For audiences viewing these online displays, it is not immediately apparent just how manufactured these displays truly are.

The ubiquitous nature of online hyperbole has led to an important realization among gang-associated youth: If they themselves are uploading disingenuous content, and if their fellow gang members are uploading disingenuous content, then there is a high probability that their rivals are doing the same. This sentiment is well captured in the statements of twenty-year-old Johnny, one of the Corner Boys' central members. One afternoon, Johnny and I reviewed several Instagram photos uploaded by a rival gang member. The images depicted the young man riding a bicycle, pointing an

automatic handgun at the camera. Johnny snickered at the image, critiquing it as a gross exaggeration:

> Ain't nobody really in the field [engaged in violence and street hustling] like this! All these social network niggas is straight flexin' [overexaggerating their violent capacities], plain and simple. Ain't nobody actually rollin' around with a Uzi [automatic handgun] on their bike. You can see he ain't even firin' that thing. It's fake! It's just for the 'gram [Instagram]. These niggas is straight computer gangstas, that's all.

In response to such embellishments, gang-associated youth take proactive steps to create context collusions to expose such uploads as fabrications. By acquiring, generating, and publicizing pieces of information that contradict or cast doubt on their enemies' online displays of violent dispositions, challengers publicly raise the possibility that their targets' reputations are disingenuous. Challengers rely on three primary strategies to demonstrate such inauthenticity: "cross referencing," "calling bluffs," and "catching lacking." Below, I draw on fieldwork data to define and empirically illustrate each strategy in turn. In a later section, I return to these empirical examples to analyze their outcomes and potential for inciting retaliatory violence.

Cross Referencing

Cross referencing refers to the process whereby challengers scrutinize and contradict their targets' online claims of violence by calling audience attention to past online content or private information that might otherwise go unnoticed. Concretely, cross referencing most commonly involves the creation and dissemination of compromising photos of the target, often overlaid with comical captions, intended to expose hypocrisy and fabrication. Of the three strategies, cross referencing is the easiest and most prevalent. It can be accomplished using a basic smartphone photo editor application, from the safety of one's own home, requiring no physical contact with the intended target.

The Corner Boys were routinely involved in cross referencing, as both challengers and targets. During the fieldwork period, amid rising antagonisms with a rival gang called "Crown Town," a Crown Town member searched through the Facebook profile of one of the Corner Boys named Will. Reviewing Will's uploads from four years earlier, the Crown Town member found a photo of a smiling, high-school-aged Will awkwardly dressed in an oversized tuxedo, preparing to depart for a formal school dance. The Crown Town member uploaded this photo to Facebook, positioning the prom photo next to a more recent selfie image Will had posted, in which Will portrayed himself standing menacingly on a street corner. To emphasize the disjuncture, the Crown Town member added the caption, "sweet bruford say he a savage."

With this caption, the Crown Town member invites online audiences to notice the contradiction between Will's current claims of a hardened, violent, criminal identity ("a savage") and evidence that he is, at his core, someone (a "bruford") who regularly engages in conformist and sentimental ("sweet") behavior when he is not in public. At a minimum, the upload calls on audiences to treat Will's reputational claims with elevated suspicion. Over the following twenty-four hours, the upload spread widely throughout the online networks of Chicago's gang-associated youth. With each new appearance, these audiences added their own commentary, poking fun at Will's apparent "sweetness."

Calling Bluffs

Calling bluffs refers to the strategy in which challengers publicly call on their targets to act in accordance with their online claims of violence, particularly online threats and boasts of violent dispositions. These calls to make good on their violent words often entail daring rivals to "slide" on them—that is, to enter their territory and attempt a drive-by shooting. Challengers typically supplement these incitements by advertising their own physical location (e.g., intersection or street address). If

their targets fail to accept such invitations, challengers document and publicize the unwillingness as evidence of their rival's inauthenticity. Gang-associated youth understand calling bluffs as more convincing than cross referencing. By definition, this strategy requires challengers to risk injury by opening themselves to a potential drive-by if their targets accept the invitation. Beyond physical harm, this can result in a reversal of public scrutiny back onto the instigating party. Those who accept these dares take care to record pictures and videos as they travel to the advertised location. If they demonstrate that the challenging party is not physically present, they can call attention to the disjuncture between their challengers' online claims and offline behaviors.

During the fieldwork period, the Corner Boys engaged in multiple rounds of this strategy with the "Blood Counts" gang faction, in which both sides repeatedly called and accepted each other's bluffs. In their efforts to convince the public that they maintain a large membership, are heavily armed, and are always ready and willing to attack intruders into their turf, the Corner Boys regularly post pictures to social media depicting themselves standing in large numbers on identifiable street corners. One of the Blood Counts openly challenged this reputation by posting a short, grainy video to his Facebook page that portrayed several of his fellow gang members driving unmolested past one of these locations. The video captures several hundred yards of empty sidewalks. The video is accompanied by a caption that read, "y Corner Boys block dry asl lol." In this short video and concise comment, the Blood Count calls public attention to the potential disingenuousness of the Corner Boys' claims. He rhetorically asks why ("y"), despite the Corner Boys' recurring claims of vigilantly protecting their turf ("block"), the area is completely empty ("dry asl") of gang members. His discovery of the gang's inauthenticity has apparently caused him to laugh out loud ("lol").

Upon noticing the Facebook post, the Corner Boys immediately took steps to refute this potentially damning evidence and redirect public scrutiny back onto the Blood Counts. They took to social media to invite the Blood Counts to return to Corner Boys' territory for a shoot-out. The Corner Boys gathered a dozen members and walked to the main street in their turf. There, they recorded and uploaded a video to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram depicting the group standing boldly on the sidewalk, flashing gang signs, looking at the camera, daring the Blood Counts to "slide." After two hours passed and no Blood Counts had answered their challenge, the Corner Boys announced on all three platforms that the Blood Counts were too scared to venture into their territory again. For several weeks, the Corner Boys re-posted screen shots and photos to remind online audiences of the Blood Counts' inaction and cowardice.

Catching Lacking

The third strategy for exploiting context collapse involves an opportunistic practice that youth refer to as *catching lacking*. To catch someone "lacking" means to confront them in non-gang-related social contexts (e.g., at work, at school, running errands with family), engaged in non-gang-related social roles and behaviors. It is a well-known truth among gang-associated youth that even those with the fiercest reputations for violence cannot live out such an identity during *every* minute of *every* day. Like everyone in society, these individuals must let their guard down to adequately perform the roles of employee, student, father, etc. As in the pre-digital era, gang-associated youth hope to encounter their rivals during these moments, when their targets lack the protection of fellow gang members and firearms.

The introduction of social media has altered the dynamics of this practice while increasing the stakes. Today, challengers use these serendipitous moments to gather evidence capable of contradicting their targets' online displays and personas, using their smartphones to record themselves demeaning and injuring their rivals, which they then upload to social media. Social media allows news of such encounters to spread both rapidly and across vast geographical areas. A simple Google search for the term "catch opps lacking" returns thousands of videos depicting challengers beating up their victims, forcing them to their knees, making them beg for mercy, and/or compelling them to say

disparaging words about their own gang, neighborhood, and recently slain friends. In their attempts to convey that their online personas accurately reflect their offline behaviors, many gang-associated youth make efforts to remind social media audiences that they have never been caught lacking by bragging that they are "never lacking," belong to "no lack gang," or are members of "team no lack." The ability to continue making such claims, however, rests on a gang's ongoing capacity to avoid such compromising situations.

The Corner Boys have been relatively successful in preventing such embarrassing online content. They are cautious to avoid public transportation and they travel in groups when they move beyond their home turf. One rare incident occurred when a peripherally associated young man named Nicky went shopping alone at a Family Dollar store located squarely within the territory of long-time rival "Murderville." As Nicky left the store, four men associated with Murderville recognized him, cornered him, flashed a gun, and started recording the ensuing scene on their camera phones. They went through the standard procedure. First, they verified his identity, making him confirm—for the camera—that he was, in fact, "Corner Boy Nicky." Next, under threat of death, they forced him to renounce, or "diss," the Corner Boys. With sufficient cowardice now on record, Murderville let Nicky go. He ran back to the Corner Boys' territory, where the video was already circulating throughout the Corner Boys' Facebook feeds. Online, audiences berated and laughed at Nicky and at the Corner Boys for Nicky's failure to "take a jump," stand up for himself, and defend the gang's reputation. Meanwhile, audiences applauded the superiority of Murderville.

Although these three strategies differ in precisely how gang-associated youth seek to invalidate their targets' violent dispositions, they share a common denominator. Each intentionally collapses their targets' multiple contexts onto a single public stage in the hopes of revealing inconsistencies that contradict the target's desired public persona. Given the cumulative, permanent quality of social media content, a piece of compromising information has the power to diminish the authenticity of a target's persona well into the future. Facing this possibility, most of those targeted in such online attacks make at least some effort to repair their reputations, which in some cases, may entail physical violence.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES CATALYZE VIOLENT RETALIATION

Having identified three primary strategies by which gang-associated youth exploit context collapse to invalidate the public personas of their enemies, it is now possible to examine the extent to which these efforts lead to offline retaliation. Just as each strategy differs in how it concretely documents, generates, and publicizes compromising information online, each strategy differs in its capacity to catalyze violence. Fieldwork demonstrates that the probability of violence depends primarily on the amount and depth of counter-evidence necessary for targets to refute challengers' public charges of inauthenticity. The above strategies are presented in ascending order of their likelihood to incite violence. At the lowest level of this spectrum, cross referencing requires relatively little counter-evidence, which can be easily and, more importantly, peacefully procured and broadcasted. Calling bluffs demands the next highest level of counter-evidence. Catching lacking demands the most extensive counter-evidence, which may require targets to engage their challengers in physical confrontations. The relationship between these different strategies and violence is illustrated by tracing the outcomes of the empirical examples detailed above.

In the majority of cases, targets of cross referencing are able to quickly mobilize counter-evidence to refute challengers' claims. This process is well captured in Will's response to Crown Town's challenge. Despite the fact that the image of a young Will looking "sweet" circulated among hundreds of Facebook users, Will easily and publicly minimized such allegations of inauthenticity. To discredit Crown Town's claims, Will simply uploaded a picture of himself taken at a similar age, holding a pistol with a menacing look on his face. Placing this new image next to his picture in a tuxedo, he added a new caption: "born Savage." In doing so, Will provided new evidence of his long-term dedication to

violence, refuting Crown Town's insinuations of his inconsistent adherence to the code of the street. Crown Town did not respond any further. As in most instances of cross referencing, Will "won" the dispute with one simple social media upload and statement, which he completed from the safety of his home.

Not all challenges are so easily refuted, however. Compared to cross referencing, the strategy of calling bluffs requires more counter-evidence to disprove indictments of inauthenticity, making it more likely to catalyze physical violence. To prove they are *not* bluffing about their violent capacities, the targets of this strategy must convincingly demonstrate that they are, in fact, willing to engage in violence. Of course, displaying a willingness to engage in violence is different from actually engaging in violence. In fact, research participants frequently prioritized modes of producing counter-evidence that allowed them to accept rivals' invitations *without* putting themselves directly in the line of fire. The Corner Boys' response to Crown Town's challenge is a case in point. According to Demitri, one of the Corner Boys who filmed the gang that afternoon, there was actually a very slim chance that Crown Town would accept their invitation in a timely fashion. As he explained:

> We *knew* they [Crown Town] wasn't about to slide right then. You got damn near twenty of us on front street [the primary artery running through the territory]. Even *they* ain't stupid enough to try sum'. We woulda let off shots [fired on the car] before they even turned the corner. They know that. I don't care what nobody say, ain't nobody who *likes* gettin' shot at. Hell naw! They gon' wait 'til we clear out. Just like I ain't about to slide on *them* when *they* all outside. We gon' wait 'til maybe one or two out there, but not their whole crew! That's suicide.

As Demitri explains, the very structure of the video—portraying a large mass of potentially armed gang members—created a deterrent. Demitri's assessment was further bolstered by his knowledge that at least two of Crown Town's "shooters"—those most responsible for committing drive-bys—were indisposed at the moment.

> I seen [on their social media profiles] that their main shooter was OT [out of town]. The other one locked up. The rest of them don't want no smoke [to engage in a shoot-out]. They only come through recording when they know we ain't out there, but they ain't really tryna' blow [shoot].

It is important to remember that these calculations are hidden from online audiences. In the absence of such ground-level information, the Corner Boys appear much tougher than they actually are. They appear wholly unafraid of death, despite the fact that they endeavored to strategically reduce this possibility.

Much to these youths' dismay, they cannot always produce counter evidence without the possibility of violence. If Crown Town *had* accepted the Corner Boys' challenge, driven into their territory, and put enough rival individuals within shared physical space, it is likely that shots would have been fired. Indeed, this was the case during a different instance of bluff calling, when Murderville filmed themselves driving through Corner Boys territory in the hopes of exposing the Corner Boys as too fearful to defend their turf. This time, the Corner Boys produced counter-evidence by filming themselves driving through Murderville territory. Over the course of the next two months, the two gangs posted several such videos to social media. At first, neither gang fired any shots from their cars. Violence resulted only when several of the Corner Boys happened to be armed and standing on the corner when Murderville drove into their territory. The Corner Boys recognized the car from the earlier videos and opened fire. This event altered future excursions into rival territory, which were now expressly intended to commit violence.

Of the three strategies for exploiting context collapse, catching lacking carries the highest probability of generating violence. First, by definition, catching lacking involves physical assault. Therefore,

creating counter-evidence capable of refuting these challenges often requires equal or higher levels of violence. Second, and relatedly, catching lacking is the strategy that is most likely to impact a target's social networks—a circumstance that has been shown to increase the odds of physical retaliation (e.g., Garot 2010; Papachristos 2009). Indeed, these factors combined to produce violent retribution when one of the Corner Boys' allies, a young man named Tyrod, was caught lacking by several young men associated with a rival gang, the "Almighty Kings," as he walked home from his girlfriend's apartment. The Almighty Kings filmed their serendipitous encounter with Tyrod, documenting how they cornered him on the sidewalk and punched him several times before Tyrod ran away. As the resulting video circulated across the gangs' online networks, audiences poked fun at Tyrod and his gang, the "Rocktown Gangsters." Kris, Tyrod's best friend and fellow Rocktown associate, felt particularly humiliated. Most of all, he feared that the video would embolden other rivals to attack. By responding with increased intensity, Rocktown could deter future assaults. He explained:

> They got him [Tyrod] on video lookin' bogus [weak] as hell. Now they think we *all* like that. Thing is, we can't really *say* nothin'! We gotta *do* something. We gotta show all these opps [rivals] we ain't goin' out like that. We gon' catch *them* [Almighty Kings] lackin'. But this time we ain't lettin' them get away.

Over the next week, Kris mobilized his friends to defend Tyrod's honor and repair the gangs' public reputation. To recruit them, Kris equated their willingness to retaliate with their love for Tyrod and dedication to the gang. As Kris asserted:

> Tyrod's like a brother to me. After that [incident], he's lookin' at me like, "Is you *really* down for me?" Is you gonna ride for [defend] me or what?" That got me lookin' at the guys [the rest of the gang] like, "Is y'all down for *me*? Yeah? Then show me!"

Kris' appeals successfully motivated his peers. He and three others associated with Rocktown spotted a young man associated with the Almighty Kings walking alone near a local school. Kris and his friends followed the young man down the street and recorded themselves beating him severely. They immediately circulated the video through the same online networks that had watched and commented on the earlier video of Tyrod. In Kris' words, the new video "topped" the Almighty King's previous upload by unambiguously documenting Rocktown's willingness not just to retaliate, but to escalate violence. As he relayed, "They [potential challengers] gon' see that, and think twice 'bout steppin' to us."

Although catching lacking is more likely to catalyze violence than the other two strategies, we should not treat this relationship as overly determined. As in the past, retaliation is less likely to occur when the affront does not significantly impact social ties and/or the offended party does not perceive retaliation as beneficial for the maintenance of those ties (see especially Garot 2010). This was the case in the earlier example, in which Murderville caught Nicky lacking at the Family Dollar store. Rather than retaliate, the Corner Boys sought to repair their reputation by publicly distancing themselves from Nicky. Despite Nicky's claims of membership, the gang had long ostracized him due to his worsening mental disabilities, drug addiction, and resulting criminal justice entanglements. Murderville's assault on Nicky thus stirred little anger on the part of the gang. In fact, most of the Corner Boys expressed pleasure in watching him humiliated. Across social media, they insisted that Nicky was not a "real" member of the gang and suggested that Murderville targeted Nicky precisely because they were too afraid to confront a genuine member. One of the Corner Boys, an eighteen-year-old named Junior, described the posts he circulated on Facebook and Twitter:

> We let those foo niggas [Murderville] know they a bunch of lames [cowards]. This nigga Nicky ain't right. He's *retarded*. You've seen his ass. Murderville *know* he ain't right. They know

> if they tried that on one of *us*, we woulda smoked [shot] their asses. Real niggas ain't goin' out like that.

Using social media to distance themselves from Nicky, the Corner Boys found a way to marginalize and discredit Murderville's challenge without resorting to direct physical confrontation.

These examples complicate both scholarly and popular belief that insults and affronts on social media necessarily incite retaliatory violence. Although some of the most egregious online challenges may demand face-to-face confrontations, the vast majority do not. In these cases, gang-associated youth capitalize on social media to defend and repair their reputations in historically new and *non-violent* ways. This is not to say, however, that social media never increase the frequency or severity of violence. In fact, fieldwork data reveal a formerly unnoticed process, in which social media can facilitate assaults by allowing offenders to overcome logistical obstacles that, in the past, might have stalled or even eliminated the possibility of physical retaliation.

How Social Media Facilitate (and Potentially Accelerate) Assaults

Criminological research demonstrates that would-be perpetrators face important constraints on successful retaliation (see Jacobs and Wright 2006). A drive-by shooting, for example, not only requires access to an operable firearm, car, driver, and someone to pull the trigger, but also knowledge of the exact whereabouts of the intended target. However, by closely monitoring social media activity of potential targets, aggressors can gather actionable intelligence to make retribution more immediate and deadly. Stevie, one of the Corner Boys' primary shooters, has made a daily routine of secretly monitoring the social media profiles of his rivals to piece together their habits, whereabouts, associations, and vulnerabilities, often in real time, which increases his chances of locating, confronting, and harming them. Stevie reflected on the usefulness of this strategy, as well as its ubiquity among gangs:

> Right now somebody is out there lurking on somebody [covertly monitoring their social media], getting ready to put a bullet in 'em. And, shit, social networks make it even easier. People know what you doing, what you eating, that you out in front of yo' house. It's mad easy. Everybody is doing their homework. People taking pictures in front of their house not even realizing that their opps [rivals] is steady waiting and looking at their Instagram . . . . Now he gaming you and you don't even know he out there with that information. It's all about information!

Shooters note the time and date stamps on their rivals' social media uploads. This allows them to piece together their targets' daily routines and determine when they are engaging in non-gang-related social roles and behaviors—the time when their targets are most vulnerable to attack.

The Corner Boys utilized this strategy when they attacked a rival known as "Smoky-P." After two weeks of unsuccessfully driving through the young man's neighborhood in search of him, the Corner Boys began monitoring his Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter profiles, quickly assembling a picture of Smoky-P's daily routine. They discovered that the young man routinely walked alone to a neighborhood store multiple times per week. Recognizing this pattern, the Corner Boys began driving past the store during those days and times when they were most likely to encounter Smoky-P. Their strategy soon proved effective when they spotted Smoky-P in the expected location. One of the Corner Boys sneaked up behind him while he stared at his phone and shot him multiple times. Smoky-P only narrowly survived the attack, spending weeks hospitalized in critical condition. This form of lateral surveillance represents an additional mode of exploiting context collapse. However, rather than publicize rivals' careless, non-gang-related admissions via social media, challengers keep this information to themselves, using it to improve the effectiveness of future assaults.

Misinterpretations of Social Media Content by Criminal Justice Actors

The assault on Smoky-P captures one of the main difficulties criminal justice actors face in their attempts to discern one's involvement in and exposure to violence based solely on the tone and tenor of social media statements, images, and other uploads. The Corner Boys' attack was made possible *not* by the aggressive content so commonly scrutinized by criminal justice actors, but rather by Smoky-P's non-violent daily uploads revealing his routine habits, vulnerabilities, whereabouts. This type of content is ubiquitous across social media and, therefore, belies the surveillance techniques currently employed by law enforcement. Determining the relationship between a given piece of social media content (in this case, a "selfie" photo outside of a liquor store) and subsequent physical violence requires in-depth knowledge of the social contexts, relationships, and motivations surrounding both the creation and reception of that content. Lacking this, law enforcement will continue to *underestimate* the violence associated with ostensibly mundane content while *overestimating* the violence associated with seemingly aggressive content.

Such misinterpretations produce individual and community harms. For Junior, aggressive posturing on social media resulted in further criminal justice entanglements, producing unnecessarily harsh penalties that undermined his efforts to desist from gang violence. While on probation, Junior attempted to refrain from criminal and gang-related activities. He engaged in pro-social behaviors that have been consistently shown to facilitate desistance (Sampson and Laub 1993). In addition to extricating himself from his gang network, Junior re-enrolled in high school, began an entry-level job at a fast food restaurant, committed himself to his relationship with his pregnant girlfriend, reconnected with his formerly-estranged mother, and moved to a North Side apartment miles from the Corner Boys' territory. Given his efforts at desistance, Junior was excited about his upcoming court hearing, anticipating that the judge and probation officer would terminate his probation due to his good behavior. The young man had avoided re-arrest, never failed a drug test, and even carried a support letter from his English teacher, who lauded his renewed dedication to school.

Despite such evidence of desistance and transformation, Junior's probation officer recommended *against* ending his probation. The reason: A series of Facebook and Instagram uploads where Junior exchanged aggressive, profanity-laden insults with several longstanding rivals. In the eyes of the probation officer, this content—more than the support letter and clean record—provided the clearest evidence of Junior's current behavior and character. Having spent time with Junior on a near-daily basis, I knew the probation officer's interpretation to be grossly inaccurate. Despite his online statements, Junior had not engaged in any offline violence. In fact, according to Junior, the social media activity in question was part of his attempt to *avoid* future violence—an effort to ward off opportunistic attacks that might jeopardize his desire to, in his words, "get right." As Junior explained:

> What he [the probation officer] want me to do? I ain't finna do sum' [be violent toward] these clowns. I'm tryna' get right [avoid criminal behavior]. But I also can't let these niggas talk shit without sayin' none. If I do that, I'm dead. I can't stay in my mama's house forever. I gotta go to work. I gotta go to school. If these niggas see me on the bus, and they think I'm sweet, they definitely gon' get down [attack him]. But if they think I'm still poled up [armed and ready], then they ain't gon' do shit!

In Junior's case, court personnel not only overestimated the relationship between his aggressive posts and his desire to engage in offline violence—they *inverted* this relationship.

CONCLUSION

This article draws on unique fieldwork data to offer an account of how gang-associated youth concretely use social media in the course of conflicts. The analysis produced several original findings. First, gang-associated youth utilize three related, though distinct, strategies—"cross-referencing,"

"calling bluffs," and "catching lacking"—to exploit the context collapse produced by social media. By generating and publicizing evidence of their targets engaged in compromising behaviors, roles, and situations, challengers attempt to invalidate their targets' public personas and reputations for violence. Second, the probability of violent retaliation differs significantly among these strategies. The likelihood of physical confrontation increases with the amount and depth of counter-evidence required to refute challengers' allegations of inauthenticity. Third, in those instances when individuals are determined to carry out violence, context collapse can increase the speed and effectiveness of attacks by allowing assailants to compile actionable intelligence on their targets.

The analysis challenges the dominant narrative circulating in current research on gang-associated youths' social media activity. Existing research overwhelmingly applies traditional theories of urban gang violence to disembodied and decontextualized social media content in an attempt to predict the probability that a given Facebook statement or Instagram image will generate violent retaliation. However, as this analysis demonstrates, it is virtually impossible (and analytically irresponsible) to infer the violent outcomes of a particular piece of social media content *without* adequately considering the social meanings of that content for the parties involved. Failure to gather such data threatens to reinforce the erroneous assumption that online behaviors are somehow straight-forward, accurate, and "parallel" reflections of offline behaviors—as if youth who upload incendiary statements and aggressive images necessarily act this way in offline settings.

Today, when the majority of law enforcement professionals report they are "self-taught" in the use of social media content, the risks and consequences of these inaccurate interpretations will continue to intensify. In police stations, courthouses, and probation offices across the United States, criminal justice actors decide the fate of urban youth based on insufficient knowledge about individual uses and meanings of a Facebook or Instagram post, as well as inadequate understandings of the articulation of black culture in online spaces (Florini 2014; Mitchell-Kernan 1999). Problematically, these professionals are likely to assess such online content by drawing on longstanding racial stereotypes that falsely equate blackness with violent criminality. In doing so, they perpetuate and reify those characterizations, creating a self-fulfilling system of suspicion that exposes urban poor communities to increasingly harmful criminal justice contact.

This trend cannot be addressed without systematic research capable of pinpointing the precise mechanisms and pathways by which particular forms of social media content both escalate *and* de-escalate offline violence. This article offers one potential model for doing so. By incorporating insights from new media scholarship, alongside ethnographic and other field research methods, researchers can produce more nuanced and accurate (and occasionally counterintuitive) accounts of the actual uses and meanings of online activity among gang-associated youth. Future research must also begin conducting on-the-ground observations alongside criminal justice actors to analyze precisely how they (mis)interpret and (mis)use social media content in the course of law enforcement. Both lines of research—alongside gang-associated youth and criminal justice actors—are necessary for creating policies and programs built on social scientific evidence rather than subjective (and often biased) assumptions.

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