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Broadcasting Badness: Violence, Identity, and Performance in the Online Gang Rap Scene

Timothy R. Lauger and James A. Densley

This study contributes to an emerging literature both detailing Internet usage among street gangs and gang members and exploring how street life is presented in underground rap music. We present a content and cultural analysis of 78 rap videos posted on YouTube by gang members in Buffalo, New York, between 2009 and the first few months of 2015. Violence was the most dominant and consistent theme in the videos. We find that online space operates like a virtual street corner enabling individuals and groups to perform social and collective gang identities that emphasize and exaggerate their capacities for lethal violence. Online gang rap videos use violent imagery, revisit violent events, and reference gang conflicts to enhance both gang myth-making and social or collective identity development.

Keywords violence; social media; street gangs; neighborhoods; rap music

The urban street corner can be a hub of social activity that provides a place for routine and diverse interaction between local residents (Duneier, 1999; Jacobs, 1992). This is especially true in marginalized and impoverished urban neighborhoods where people immersed in fluid and overlapping personal networks gather on the corner and engage in social routines that ascribe meaning to the local community (Hannerz, 1969; Leibow, 1967). Corners are places

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where groups form, social life plays out, and local culture proliferates. Corners also provide a common location for youth to meet and congregate, which, in some neighborhoods, fosters street gangs (Thrasher, 1927). The relationship between gangs and corners is so intimate that early researchers described gang members as “corner boys” and gangs as “corner groups” (e.g. Miller, 1958; Whyte, 1955). Contemporary scholars still maintain that congregating or socializing in public places is essential to defining the “street gang” (Klein, 2005).

Although physical spaces, like the corner, have historically been the primary arenas for gang life, the emergence of the Internet has altered how gangs interact and present themselves to peers. As Lane (2016) observes, relations on the street now unfold through media as well as through people. Media about people and events on the street reconfigure face-to-face interactions, and vice versa, creating a digital overlay, or “digital street,” that is as meaningful and consequential as the physical street (Lane, 2016). There is some evidence that the internet is redefining gang members’ “criminal and routine activities” (Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Sela-Shayovitz, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2016), even intensifying existing gang tensions (Morselli & Décary-Hétu, 2013; Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013). Social media in particular afford street gangs new avenues for “impression management” (Van Hellemon, 2012) and new ways to manage neighborhood rivalries (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). How well this has been demonstrated empirically, and how recently it has been demonstrated, however, is an open question. The digital world changes so quickly (St. Clair, 2011) that it is necessary to continually update the existing baseline of criminological work on this subject.

To date, few studies have systematically analyzed the online content of gangs (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). More common are illustrative “case studies” (e.g. Patton, Lane, Leonard, Macbeth, & Smith-Lee, 2016), theoretical models (e.g. Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2016), or research based on how gang members *describe* their social media habits (e.g. Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013, 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2015; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012). Even fewer studies tap the potential of video shared online to reveal gang culture in action. Previous research has examined gang “weblogs” (e.g. Van Hellemon, 2012) and searched Facebook and Twitter profiles using known gang names (e.g. Décary-Hétu & Morselli, 2011). The current study advances this work by examining the “blurring distinction between the virtual and the actual” (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015, p. 172) for gangs on YouTube, a video-sharing platform designed specifically for self-broadcast (Burgess & Green, 2009).

This study examines rap music videos posted on YouTube by Buffalo, NY gang members in an effort to depict the qualities of gang life in virtual space. This is not a trivial endeavor—research suggests that gang identity “performances” implicate violence during interpersonal interactions (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Garot, 2010; Lauger, 2012), but less is known about how such performances translate to virtual space (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). Our analysis of YouTube gang rap videos, therefore, provides vital insight into how the intersection of gang culture and identity performance translates to a virtual

space. Following Pyrooz et al. (2015), we find that online space operates like a virtual street corner, as a platform for gang affiliated rappers and rap groups to perform individual and collective gang identities to a potentially vast audience, promote their capacities for lethal violence, and directly call out other gangs and gang members in the city. Gang members' imperative to represent themselves violently via electronic mediation, what Yar (2012) calls "will-to-representation," reveals much about how gang members desire to be seen within their cultural milieu. It also demonstrates that performances in virtual space intersect with violence, as gang members perform identity by rapping about incidents of violence and ongoing conflicts.

Gangs in Physical and Virtual Space

Although theoretical mechanisms vary (i.e. social disorganization, marginalization, strain, etc.), scholars consistently acknowledge that gangs are not randomly distributed and socio-economic factors facilitate their presence in select neighborhoods (for a review, see Papachristos & Hughes, 2015). Street gangs share an intimate relationship with the physical locations they inhabit within such neighborhoods, to the extent some gang names and zip codes are synonymous (Densley, 2013; Garot, 2010). Much theory and research has focused on mechanics of this relationship (e.g. Katz & Schnebly, 2011), positing that physical spaces hold *symbolic* value for gangs as sites of collective experience and memory (e.g. Conquergood, 1997; Vigil, 1988), but also *instrumental* value as spaces of economic activity (e.g. Venkatesh, 2000). For both reasons, gang "set space" (Tita, Cohen, & Engberg, 2005) is meaningful in gang life. Hence, it can be fiercely defended (Decker, 1996; Horowitz, 1983; Hughes & Short, 2005; Suttles, 1972), and gang neighborhoods can be extremely violent and dangerous places (Huebner, Martin, Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2016; Sharkey, 2006).

Street corners and other public gathering areas host both *intragroup* processes that develop *esprit de corps* and collective identity (often aligned to geographical location) and *intergroup* interactions that reinforce group cohesion (Dion, 1979; Thrasher, 1927). These group processes, in turn, allow for the construction, reproduction, and/or expression of local street and gang culture. Peers congregate, telling stories and jokes, gossiping, insulting adversaries, and generally socializing each other to the meaning of street and gang life (e.g. Hannerz, 1969; Lauger, 2012, 2014). These communicative events provide insight into systems of norms and meanings that influence how gang members interpret both social events and their consequences (e.g. Decker, 1996; Horowitz, 1983; Lauger, 2014; Papachristos, 2009). They also reveal both the open expression of intergang hostility and cultural meanings used to justify violence (Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, 2013).

One example is the “code of the street,” which permits the acquisition of deferential treatment through an orientation to violence (Anderson, 1999). In spaces where the street code thrives, the street corner constitutes what Anderson (1999, p. 76) calls a “staging area,” that is, a space or site where young people evaluate the authenticity of those around them and campaign to gain expressive rewards like honor or respect (Horowitz, 1983). Congregating peers play the role of both actor and audience in this context, manipulating their appearances and mannerisms to conform to local expectations (Garot, 2010) or make the unseen seen (Densley, 2012). The corner, in turn, can be a place where individuals “do gang” by performing an idealized identity during interpersonal rituals like “hitting up” (Garot, 2015) or through routine communicative events (Lauger, 2012).

The literature is ripe with examples of gang identity as social performance (e.g. Garot, 2010; Lauger, 2012; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007), or what Goffman (1959) termed “impression management” (see also, Felson, 1982). However, far less has been written about the qualities of *internet-mediated* impression management among gang members on the virtual corner. Moule et al. (2014, p. 2) found that gangs use the internet to “enhance the brand name.” Van Hellemont (2012, p. 159) found that gang members use social networking sites to “communicate ‘gang-ness,’” often playing to pop culture stereotypes about what the public thinks gangs look or sound like. These “performances” are largely audience-oriented and consciously deployed to attract attention (Surette, 2015).

The implication is that Goffman’s (1959) impression management approach applies online, in part because individual postings to social networking sites are even more *deliberate* acts than informal behaviors in “everyday life.” To some extent, social networking sites make public what once was private, eliminating the distinction between Goffman’s well-worn dichotomy of the “front” and “back” regions, or, more colloquially, the “front stage” and “back stage” (see Hogan, 2010). Social networking sites also provide a window into the ways in which the *expressive* work of the gang (done online) contributes to the *instrumental*, at times violent, work of the gang done on the street, and vice versa (Storrod & Densley, 2017). Prior research (e.g. Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Storrod & Densley, 2017) suggests much of this expressive work is done through rap music videos.

Local Rap Music and Online Space

Rap is, in many ways, an example of what Fine (2004, p. 278) refers to as “identity art,” a medium in which the value of the work is judged not by its quality, but by the perceived authenticity of the artist (see also, Morgan, 2009, p. 191). Authenticity is itself a subjective concept, largely defined by the extent to which the performance conforms to or differs from audience expectations (Armstrong, 2004; Kelley, 2004; McLeod, 1999), and participants

in the local art community construct the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate products (Fine, 2004). In rap, authenticity generally hinges on whether or not the artist is true to his or her self—which explains the prominence of the phrase “Keepin’ it real” in rap culture (see Clay, 2003; Cutler, 2003)—and is sufficiently connected to the “streets” where the culture first emerged.

As Alim (2004) observes, the closer an artist is to the “street”, the more authentic that artist is perceived to be. The street is “the center of hip hop cultural activity,” not simply a physical space, but a “site of creativity, culture, cognition, and consciousness” (p. 391). For this reason, rappers, like gangs, often are associated with a particular location or place and will promote local allegiances and territorial identities (e.g. east coast versus west coast) (Armstrong, 2004). Rappers may exaggerate “ghetto” ties (Lee, 2016: 139), but the aim is to cultivate a “streetwise identity” based on a “working knowledge” of inner-city life and criminal experience (Cutler, 2003).

Mainstream rap contains themes consistent with the cultural writing of Anderson (1999) and others regarding the code of the street (Kubrin, 2005, 2006; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), such as nihilism, misogyny, respect, and retaliation. However, the “violent esthetic” (Loza, Alvarez, Santiago, & Moore, 1994) speaks more to “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) because it lacks local, intimate messages that address face-to-face relationships directly (Neal, 1999). Mainstream rap is heavily filtered through music industry decision makers likely concerned more with profits than maintaining the authentic voice of the artist (Belle, 2014; Light, 2004; Oware, 2014). This is especially true of gangsta rap, a subgenre of hip-hop music (see Chang, 2005; Keyes, 2002), which has been celebrated as a medium for minority youth worldwide to explore their collective marginalities and commonalities (Motley & Henderson, 2008; Osumare, 2009), but also criticized for promoting deviance and depravity to such an extent that its followers become instruments of their own oppression (Stephens & Wright, 2000).

Some argue industry decision-makers have hijacked gangsta rap, profiting from hyperbolic and stereotypical depictions of ghetto life and “hustler protagonists” (Lena, 2006) that are primarily marketed to suburban youth (Hagedorn, 2008; Neal, 1999; Samuels, 1995). As a result, popularized gangsta rap, though rooted in the streets, may not accurately reflect local street “consciousness” and culture (Keyes, 2002). Instead, a more accurate reflection is found online, on sites like YouTube, where non-industry artists can receive millions of views for a single raw, unfiltered song about parochial street life (Cayari, 2011). On YouTube, gang members particulate in, and at times escalate (see Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016), the lyrical battling at the heart of hip-hop culture (Morgan, 2009).

Local underground rap scenes contain miscroscenes, which involve a musical subgenre that is connected to real or virtual spaces and contains a unique ideoculture among participants (Harkness, 2013, 2014), refashioning hip-hop in

their image (Marshall, 2015). "In Chicago and elsewhere", Harkness (2014) argues, "gang members now regularly post videos on YouTube and other sites that promote their gang, insult adversaries, and wage war against other gangs" (p. 57). Although such performances are a non-violent means for gang members to wage symbolic wars (Harkness, 2013) by crafting, at times hyperbolic, statements for their peers to consume, and presenting their social and collective identities to enhance their status or street capital (Harding, 2014), they can also fuel "street beefs" between gangs and facilitate interpersonal violence (Harkness, 2014, p. 58–67). Yet, uncertainty abounds. Similar to performances on the street corner (see Lauger, 2012), "doing gang" in virtual spaces blurs reality with fiction and rappers authenticate gang membership through subjective cultural cues that do not fully legitimate (Harkness, 2014), which places more importance on the art of the performance.

Current Study

Although its content is often incendiary, designed to disrespect and antagonize rivals, music and images emanating from local gang microscenes certainly provide insights into localized gang cultures. Hagedorn (2008) argues one cannot truly understand the culture of street gangs without first understanding their music, and underground rap microscenes, characterized by peer-to-peer performances, provide a more authentic reflection of the culture, especially local culture, than the generic gangsta rap genre that is mass produced by record labels. Relative to other culturally significant activities, like storytelling or gossiping (Harding, 2014; Lauger, 2012, 2014), underground gang rap videos posted on YouTube are deliberately rehearsed and edited to portray the rapper's intentional representation of self and group. Exaggeration, inherent to rap music but often misinterpreted (see Kubrin & Nielson, 2014), merely highlights elements of local culture that align with the rapper's desired image. Thus videos reflect general tendencies of local gang culture, and, given that multiple gangs within a city post multiple rap videos on YouTube, they provide a unique opportunity to observe and analyze cultural performances from between and within gangs in a given location—Buffalo, in our case. We are able to determine what is important locally by analyzing how gang members present themselves on the virtual corner.

The purpose of this study is to use YouTube gang rap videos to examine how gangs and gang members perform personal and collective identities in a virtual and public space. Following studies that have successfully used rap as a qualitative data source (e.g. Stephens & Wright, 2000), this study examines how local gang members express themselves through this unique medium. It relies on content and cultural analysis of 78 rap videos posted on YouTube by gang members from eighteen gangs in Buffalo, NY between 2009 and the first few months of 2015. These videos are produced and made public by local artists

and are untouched by mainstream music labels seeking to sell to a mass audience.

Methods

Videos used for this study are by definition “underground” and not connected to a centralized list of Buffalo rappers. We therefore relied on a snowball sampling strategy, which began by searching keywords on YouTube until we found a few relevant videos from different Buffalo rappers. We began searching phrases like “Buffalo, NY gang rap,” “Buffalo, NY gang rappers,” “Buffalo, NY trap rap,” and “Buffalo, NY rappers.” We also relied on community members and police intelligence to identify some names of Buffalo rap groups that may be affiliated with gangs (e.g. 1069 hitsquad or EMG) and searched accordingly. Given that YouTube videos are linked via common artists or producers, these original videos initiated a snowball sampling strategy that led to the discovery of 78 qualifying videos. To reduce the possibility of sampling bias, we searched YouTube exhaustively, ending only after we could not find any new videos. Videos were selected for analysis if they were from Buffalo and included gang members.

We determined if a video came from Buffalo by looking for specific geographical markers like street signs in the videos, verbal references to Buffalo in the lyrics, and indicators (i.e. 716 area code) written on YouTube discussion threads. As the data will later indicate, most rappers openly identified themselves as gang affiliated or called their group a gang. They also showed gang colors, hand gestures, or tattoos and identified their gang affiliation in the videos. Self-identification allowed for the inclusion of sixty-one videos, but a few other groups/rappers were not as clearly aligned with street gangs.

Although self-nomination is a valid and reliable method (Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule, 2014), we are mindful that during rap video performances, rappers may falsely claim gang affiliation to enhance their street legitimacy. To validate self-nomination and to ensure that other videos were not being ignored, we consulted both law enforcement intelligence officers and referenced the local FBI’s unpublished gang task force book on Buffalo gangs (FBI, 2015a). Law enforcement records are likely imperfect, but research indicates gang intelligence lists are relatively accurate (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; Katz, Web, & Shaeffer, 2000). Local law enforcement intelligence officers confer with confidential informants to determine the authenticity of posted videos and do not identify gang members solely from rap videos. We further triangulated the validity of gang membership by consulting with a member of the research team who is familiar with local street life and personally knows some of the rappers in the videos. These efforts eliminated videos from consideration due to a general lack of evidence that rappers were gang-affiliated.

The remaining 17 videos included in this study involved rap groups that contained gang members. They are not videos produced by street gangs.¹

We transcribed videos and cleaned rap lyrics multiple times to ensure accuracy. The primary researcher sent transcriptions to a second researcher, an avid fan of underground rap music, who listened to the videos and fixed errors and clarified the meaning of confusing, culturally specific terms and phrases. The initial researcher reviewed the new transcriptions to ensure agreement and sent them to a third person who both grew up on the streets of Buffalo listening to local rap and personally knows some of the gang members in the videos. This third person further cleaned the lyrics and settled any confusion or disagreements about the content and meaning of the lyrics.

We then thematically coded both the lyrics and the visual images in the videos. Visual coding emerged as the primary researcher observed repeated efforts by rappers or other people in the video to engage in an activity or gesture at the camera. The researcher then counted the number of times shooting gestures, smoking (marijuana), cash, sexualized women, liquor, guns, police, and drugs appeared in the videos. Importantly, the researcher relied on a conservative definition of an event and did not count anything ambiguous. This is especially important for events like shooting gestures, which are likely undercounted in this analysis, as many individuals made vague gestures towards the camera. Some events like cash, smoking, and sexualized women involved reoccurring entities throughout an entire video. To accurately account for the intensity of these “events”, the researcher counted their presence in each frame.²

The primary researcher also coded each line of the lyrics by inductively creating categories for emergent themes, which led to categories about behaviors (e.g. violence), cultural ideas (e.g. fatalism), and general topics (e.g. women/-sex). The researcher then counted the number of times these themes occurred within a song and entered the data into SPSS. Given that violence was the most dominant theme in the data-set, the researcher inductively recoded lyrics about violence into more nuanced categories. This led to data on types

1. The decision to include these groups in our analysis influences the findings of the study by reducing the intensity of violence in the videos. These 17 videos referenced violence only 7.3 times per song and showed no guns in any of the videos, both figures are much lower than the entire sample (see Table 1). Given that we wanted to examine how “gang members” and not just “gang rap groups” use YouTube rap videos, we decided to include them if they involved gang members. The focus on violence would be even greater if we had excluded them from the sample.

2. Objects often occurred repeatedly in videos so that we likely counted the same gun, wad of cash, or liquor bottle many times in some videos. This was essential because it would have been impossible to discern which objects had already appeared in videos. We were also more concerned about the intensity of events, and counting, for example, a reoccurring gun one time when it occurred multiple times did not accurately reflect the intensity of guns in the video. This approach was generally effective except in some rare cases when frames transitioned too quickly to account for. Another problematic anomaly occurred with a video that showed a stripper for about four minutes with the use of only a few frames. We could not adequately account for the intensity of this visual event with our current methodology.

of violence (guns, physical fights, use of other weapons, killing, shooting, non-shooting injury), the logic or motivation for violence, and identity (I, we, or no identity claim). Analysis of our secondary codes led us to focus the rest of our study on the intersection of violent identity claims in local online rap videos.

Analysis: Gang Performances

Table 1 includes the prevalence of ten themes in the rap lyrics and eight common visual events in the videos. Violence was the most dominant and consistent theme in the videos. Violent lyrics occurred an average of 16.97 times per song, which are two-and-a-half times higher than the next highest category of women/sex. The median number of violent lyrics is also more than four times higher than other themes. Only five songs failed to mention violence in their lyrics. The videos were also visually violent. We recorded an average of 15.26 shooting gestures per video, which is about 37% higher than the next category of "smoking." Shooting gestures are a standard feature of the videos. Only 11 videos do not contain a shooting gesture and the median number of gestures

Table 1 Lyrical and visual content of Buffalo rap videos

	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Min	Max
<i>Lyrical content</i>					
Violence	16.97	13.00	14.72	0	64
Women/Sex	6.65	3.00	10.07	0	52
Selling drugs	5.19	3.00	5.90	0	57
Money	5.32	3.00	8.63	0	29
Affiliation	4.46	2.00	6.64	0	33
Fast lifestyle	2.49	1.00	4.63	0	32
Legitimacy	2.45	1.00	5.32	0	42
Nihilism/Fatalism	2.41	.00	7.31	0	53
CJ system	2.26	1.00	4.21	0	26
Drug use	2.00	1.00	4.28	0	33
<i>Visual content</i>					
Shooting gesture	15.26	13.50	14.36	0	75
Smoking	9.65	6.00	12.44	0	60
Cash	7.28	2.00	14.85	0	88
Liquor	4.54	.00	10.83	0	66
Sexualized women	4.52	.00	18.36	0	100
Guns	4.18	.00	8.69	0	49
Police	2.06	.00	12.05	0	104
Drugs	.79	.00	1.77	0	9
<i>Views</i>					
Total views by 6/30/16	40,687.33	2,978	254,195.96	113	2,224,615
Views per day	32.26	3.09	180.44	.12	1,571.06

per video is 13, which is more than two times higher than the next category. The videos also contain 326 guns, many of which were held by gang members and pointed at the camera. Relative to shooting gestures, guns are not as evenly distributed throughout the videos. Only 27 videos contain guns, but 13 contain ten guns or more. Although the themes of women, selling drugs, money, gang affiliation, and living a fast lifestyle are also prevalent, violence is the most consistent and intense theme in the videos. Table 1 also includes data on the total views and the number of views per day for the videos in this sample. Videos vary dramatically in how much attention they receive, but median number of views per video is just under 3,000, and the median number of views per day is slightly above three.

Table 2 includes findings from the second round of coding that focused only on violent lyrics. Statements about social identity ("I") and collective identity

Table 2 Violent content in rap lyrics

	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Min	Max
<i>Identity</i>					
Collective: "We"	5.14	2.00	7.93	0	40
Personal: "I"	5.13	3.00	5.65	0	25
No identity claim	.68	.00	3.15	0	23
<i>Type of violence</i>					
Shooting	6.40	3.00	3.00	0	33
Guns	5.64	4.00	5.58	0	25
Killing	2.77	1.00	1.00	0	32
Non-shooting injury	.19	.00	.46	0	2
Physical fight	.09	.00	.33	0	2
Non-gun weapon	.06	.00	.25	0	1
<i>Reason for violence</i>					
Unspecified conflict	1.16	.00	4.54	0	34
Talking "shit"	.40	.00	1.20	0	7
Specific threat	.29	.00	1.32	0	10
Not from hood	.19	.00	1.03	0	8
Snitching	.18	.00	.42	0	2
Fronting/arrogance	.13	.00	.38	0	2
Money	.06	.00	.30	0	2
Disrespect	.03	.00	.16	0	1
Drug deal	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Hard look	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Messing with family	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Avoid death	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Reputation	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Protection	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Claimed affiliation	.01	.00	.11	0	1
Retaliation	.01	.00	.11	0	1

("we") frequently accompanied lyrics about violence, but violent lyrics independent of an identity claim were almost nonexistent.³ Rappers used these videos for symbolic or expressive purposes by announcing their ability or their gang's ability to engage in extreme violence. They focused on gun crime by referencing shootings, guns, and killing much more frequently than other forms of violence and rarely mentioned non-shooting injuries, physical fights, and other weapons. Rappers did not explicitly use concepts like respect, retaliation, and reputation, which are prominent in research (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Jacobs & Wright, 2006), though such ideas are likely implicit to unspecified conflicts.

Identity Matters and Expressive Performances

Rap videos are orchestrated performances that express prominent or idealized features of social and collective identities so individuals and groups can gain symbolic advantages in street life. The virtual life of videos play continuously for an undefined but likely local audience, and each gesture, posture, and lyric is an opportunity to make an impression, per Goffman. Yet, the "virtual corner" differs from the physical street corner. Individuals can talk tough and even insult peers without immediately engaging in face-to-face "character contests" that may cause them to back down from a conflict or become victims of violence (see Luckenbill, 1977; Sanders, 1994, p. 35). Rappers emphasize salient cultural ideas through exaggerated lyrics and imagery while they perform a violent identity.

Social identities situate a person within social space through categories that embody stereotypical ideas rather than nuanced statements about one's personal identity or sense of self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Snow, 2001). The social category of "gang member" is an idealized role (Garot, 2015), or what Goffman calls a "collective representation" (1959, p. 27), that is source material for a social front or public performances. Rappers present their "claimed selves" (what they would like others to think they are) (Vigil, 1988, p. 425) to the audience by "doing gang" through imagery and lyrics that emphasize violent personal attributes. If rap is identity art (Fine, 2004), then rap videos likely leave viewers aware that reality does not perfectly reflect the images they see. Still, convincing performances successfully sell the image of the violent gang member to the audience.

Rappers perform their gang identity in this online arena, typically by communicating authenticity with intense lyrics about their willingness to engage in

3. Our coding does not fully capture the context surrounding violent lyrics. Frequent use of identity claims in conjunction with violent lyrics expresses the general tone of the songs, as rappers repeatedly say, "I do violence" or "we do violence". However, four songs include violent lyrics as form of social commentary, but these songs average just over ten violent references per song. Similar lyrics are rarely included in other songs.

gun violence. Even in the few songs that do not focus on violence most rappers proclaim their capacity to kill. Thus a song about partying and chasing women contains lyrics like “Dead nigga trying to come and front, I got the blicky [gun] on me” (Fast Money Gang, “Swaggin on em”). Another song disrupts its primary focus on drug money to state, “Macaroni, he gonna roll up and everybody know that if I shoot you back up I won’t give you a chance to shoot back” (Macaroni, “No Lamez”). While rapping about his street hustle, one rapper, who was murdered in 2013, reminds his audience, “Yeah my name is Studii Mac. Them shots, yes I keep a mac. Big shots, yes they hit your hat. Now your momma got to live with that” (EMG, “How you liven’?”). More commonly, however, violent lyrics saturate songs, developing a primary theme designed to convince the audience that a rapper or gang is willing to engage in gun violence.

One method of invoking a violent gang identity is to align personal characterizations with labels and imagery that highlight a rapper’s crazy nature. Wilkinson (2001) argues that the social identities of being crazy, wild, or a killer, which enhance status in the streets and allow individuals to better negotiate interpersonal encounters, arise out of repeated performances during face-to-face interactions that communicate how a person will be known to peers. Rap lyrics articulated by Buffalo gang members lend support to Wilkinson’s observations, though performances occur in a virtual rather than physical space. A member of the Pookie Boys raps:

It’s a rap for these fucks, they think I’m crazy when they see the ratchet [gun]
I bust flow.
I’m a psychopath yo I’m nuts, I’ll leave a nigga head cracked like pistachio
nuts.
And the doctors ain’t wrappin’ you up.
You in the casket and this body too fat for this tux.
I left his ass to think about something so he can think twice the next time they
come through here frontin’ [acting tough]—nigga.

(Pookie Boys, “House Party”)

A rapper from Fast Money Gang depicts himself as a savage capable of using weapons to rob, injure, and possibly kill people.

Bitch boy, you talk tough, get bumped up, and get put to sleep.
I’m a savage nigga, you an average nigga.
Could be bare faced so you know it’s me.
The gun work. The knife work.
If the boy live he need surgery.
I don’t play games, and I hate lames.
I just smoke dope and hit stains [rob people].

(Flyboyz/FMG, “Chriaq Buffalo Remix”)

Both rappers characterize themselves as not just violent but murderous and allude to their callousness by invoking the labels of psychopath and savage. Such labels are common, as rappers consistently use terms like savages,

psychopaths, shooters, hitters, killers, goons, wolves, soldiers, sharpshooters, drillers, thumpers, henchmen, and gangstas to convince an audience that they or members of their gang are capable of indiscriminate violence. If the audience believes such characterizations, rappers successfully maintain an appearance of “quasi-controlled ... craziness or wildness” that matches local expectations (Vigil, 1988, p. 438).

Most rap videos include statements about the gang’s collective identity, or the shared sense of “we” within a group (Furtrell & Simi, 2004). Collective identities are often expressed in cultural materials, including music, which allows groups to stake claim to their symbolic place in the world (Futrell, Simi, & Gottschalk, 2006; Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Street gangs operate in an uncertain social environment that produces questions about authenticity and legitimacy, which causes them to publicly express who they are and what they do (Lauger, 2012). Thus, performances target an audience outside the group to elevate the gang’s stature on the streets, warn outsiders about the consequences of antagonizing the gang, and mark that they are firmly within the boundaries that distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate.

Collective identity is also a process, under constant construction, that organizes and invites collective action through statements about how groups behave, what they pursue, and how they relate to relevant outsiders (Melucci, 1995; Snow, 2001). Efforts to compare the group with outsiders communicate collective identity by identifying distinguishing traits of the group (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995; Goldman, Giles, & Hogg, 2014). Members of the same gang perform for each other, as songs and videos are collective endeavors that define the group relative to peer groups. Rappers express or develop collective identity by using “we” or “us” statements and invoking gang names or hood affiliations to align their group with violent behavior though extreme and stereotypical imagery that is often contrasted with the conduct of outsiders. The videos express “we are violent because we do violence unlike those other people/groups who are not violent.”

The following lyrics come from a video that emphasizes the collective ability of a gang to shoot and kill people. Fellow gang members displaying red bandanas surround the rapper, who refers to being affiliated with the bloods in other songs. The group also claims Lombard St., calls itself 1069 Hit Squad and Zulu gang, and is also affiliated with the LRGP gang, a conglomeration of four smaller groups that was recently sentenced under federal RICO laws (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). This video is one of the most violent in the sample. It contains thirty guns, twenty-five shooting gestures, and fifty-five references to violence in the lyrics.

Shots fired, my niggas they will lay you down.
Shooter.
Niggas talking reckless and they ain’t around.
Shooter.

Potato on the barrel, nigga not a sound.
 Shooter.
 Fuck niggas fuck with us, we will lay you down. (x2)

Shouts out to my home squad, home squad—we eatin'.
 1069 Hitsquad.
 Fuck with us we Lombard.
 Lombard going to come hard go dumb hard on you fuck niggas.
 Fuck niggas don't fuck with em, like "ah" [gun shot sound effect].
 That chopper [automatic weapon] out of that window. Go brraaaaa.
 Cushy role to my dutchy [type of marijuana wrapped in a cigar].
 That stinky shit, that musty [marijuana].
 Got it on me, better bang back—Got guns nigga.
 My team with me we all strapped—Don't play with us.
 Fuck niggas, you get wacked—Stay straight Nigga.
 (1069 Hitsquad, "Shooter")

By transitioning between the use of "my" and "we," "us," or "they," the rapper aligns himself with a group of individuals who will murder people with firearms. The chorus initially distances the rapper from the use of violence by stating that his "niggas" will shoot. Rappers in other songs articulate similar messages by stating specific people in the group, who are often identified by name, will shoot but the collective group and the rapper are not mentioned as shooters. As the chorus continues, however, the rapper transitions to a more general statement that "we," the group, will shoot. The first verse more explicitly develops a collective identity noting the squad is "eatin'," which means they are sustaining a vibrant lifestyle on the street, and aligning both 1069 Hit Squad and Lombard affiliations with the capacity to engage in drive-by shootings. The rapper then transitions to a more specific statement about his use of guns and violence, implying that he shoots out the car window while smoking marijuana. More explicitly, he carries his gun, as does his whole team.

The rap also highlights two culturally specific categories of "shooters" and "fuck niggas" that distinguish types of street participants. Shooters are, quite simply, individuals who shoot people, thus elevating their status in violent street worlds. By contrast, "fuck niggas" is a generic insult commonly used in Buffalo rap lyrics to denote inferiority on the streets. A warning that the group will react to insulting or threatening behavior with gun violence connects these cultural labels. The song states that as shooters, "we kill 'fuck niggas,'" which is not only a symbolic resource that expresses collective identity by contrasting the gang with a negative label but may also deter gang outsiders and prevent future conflict. Visual elements of the video show gang members pointing numerous firearms at the camera, affirming that the group has access to guns and is willing to use them.

The next rap is also one of the most violent videos in the sample, and the rapper is again joined with members of his gang (Guilford St.) who posture and flash gang signs as he raps. The lyrics first focus on the rapper's violent proclivities before transitioning to the collective capabilities of the gang.

Although the lyrics lack a rationale for violence, mentioning only that violence occurs over street conflicts, the video does include the words, “If u come past the park with that bullshit u won’t make it back across that park,” and previously mentions killing people when they will not surrender money/drugs during a robbery. This rap relies on embellished descriptions of the rapper, the gang, and their guns to celebrate homicide.

It’s a homicide, nigga it’s a homicide. (x6)
 Ak-47’s, 100 shot clips
 Twin glocks ooo-ops I’m on my hot shit.
 Go ahead and pop [shoot] shit, I’ll go beast mode
 100 guns, grand theft auto cheat code.
 Ain’t got to reload, I just switched weapons.
 Another homicide, moms and your bitch stressin’.
 Hot slugs in your chest burn like indigestion.
 Run up on you do your dishes at the intersection.
 We got beef [conflict] over cheese [money], call it chopped burger (simulated
 dead person in car with bullet wounds in chest).
 Over onions [quantity of drugs], get your whole block murdered.
 Official Glock squirters it’s fun to us.
 Guilford ave, Rachetville, nigga Gun R Us.
 We murder peeps and we murder lames.
 Bang Bang team Brolic it’s the murder gang.
 We let our nuts hang and the chains danglin’.
 I load the coups start to shoot with the things blazin’.
 It’s a homicide, nigga it’s a homicide. (x6).

(C-Nellz, “Homicide”)

Another rap expresses a similar message by repeating the following lyrics and describing gun violence committed by the gang.

It’s SOS and hood connects pump faking [acting/false claiming] going to lead
 to death.
 Keep 30 guns and an extra one.
 It’s gun club with a trey one [gang affiliation].
 It’s a gun club with a trey one.
 You can join up or you can catch some.
 This .45 going to lay some.
 With a muzzle on it you don’t hear nothin’.
 Got little niggas don’t fear nothin’.
 Rifles on them like they deer huntin’.

(HC Kush & Dogg/SOS boyz, “Stack or Starve”)

Guns hold a vaunted status in the streets for both symbolic and functional reasons (e.g. Wilkinson & Fagan, 2006). Buffalo rappers commonly refer to guns, identifying the types of weapons they carry and any modifications, like an extended clip, that enhance performance. Although rappers are more likely to mention handguns, and about 70% of all gun homicides are perpetrated with handguns (FBI, 2015b), semi-automatic weapons are referenced frequently and symbolize an enhanced or indiscriminate capacity for violence within the gang.

The rapper in the first song develops this image for himself and his gang by not only emphasizing possession of sophisticated assault weapons but also exaggerating the volume of weapons at his/their disposal. His reference to the video game *Grand Theft Auto* paints a picture of the rapper roaming the streets using his arsenal to kill people en masse. Such cartoonish imagery highlights not the real capabilities of the gang, but the desired image they want to project onto the cultural landscape they inhabit—the murder gang that “murders peeps” and “murders lames.” The second rapper develops a similar collective identity by comparing his gang to a gun club and underlining the volume of guns at their disposal.

Developing Identity Through Cyberbanging

The presence of threat permeates gang life to the extent that gang members must remain aware of emerging or engrained intergroup hostilities that can produce sustained intergroup violence (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Papachristos, 2009). Conflicts also allow rappers to enhance their identities by challenging peers in a highly visible space. Whereas only bystanders can witness interpersonal conflicts on the street corner, a vast audience can repeatedly observe them on the virtual corner. Thus cyberbanging is an efficient way for gang members to spread their social and collective identities to a curious audience, assuming that performances are convincing.

Some songs revisit past events that help rappers develop social or collective identities while also challenging other groups or people. Fight narratives allow storytellers to reinterpret events for the audience and control characterizations of involved parties. This is a highly subjective endeavor, as personal stories about violence alter events to make the storyteller look good within their cultural milieu (Shuman, 1986). Although rap music enables violent content and is even *defined* by its violent themes (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014), narratives in Buffalo rap videos resemble those found in less public social routines like gossip and storytelling among gang members. Lauger (2014), for example, demonstrates that narrative structures used by gang members unfold in a scripted manner that highlights the justified and rational conduct of the storyteller while disparaging the actions of the adversary. Gang members emphasize and exaggerate their capacity for violence, justify their nonparticipation in violence, and highlight the cowardly actions of their adversaries to a limited audience. The viewing audience is potentially much larger on the virtual corner, maximizing the potential for identity development. The following rap, which has been viewed about 19,000 times in just over two years or twenty-three times per day, demonstrates how some videos use narratives for such purposes.

Grant gave my nigga on Gardner lettin' semi spray [shooting semiautomatic weapon].
Catch a Riverdale goofy, long bullets hit his face.

Caught Onyx at Save a Lot he didn't want no fight.
 Security came out, oooh boy he saved your life.
 He bitched up real quick you know I was going to do him shots.
 He lucky I ain't have it on me cause I'll let my uzzi fight.
 Cicellio said when catch me he gonna let it rip.
 Niggas seen me at the mall, he ain't even sayin' shit.
 I walked through the whole crowd, on my dolo [solo] gang shit.
 (Snookum Ft. Tech'0/Zelmer St., "Hang with me")

The narrative structure of the song humiliates the rapper's adversaries by discussing specific events that highlight both his own willingness to engage in violence and the inaction of his adversaries when given the opportunity to fight. Onyx acted scared and backed down from a confrontation, a posture to be mocked in the streets. The rapper then justifies his own inaction towards Onyx by stating he was unarmed and their confrontation was interrupted by security—but he would have otherwise killed Onyx. Further, Cicellio is called out for failing to follow through on promises to act violently towards the rapper even when his group outnumbered the rapper, who demonstrated his fearlessness by walking through an adversarial crowd at the mall.

Overt threats to other gangs did not frequently occur in Buffalo videos, but they are notable for their intensity, potential for inciting future violence, and theatrical value for performing gang identity. The following rap proclaims to group members and outsiders that the gang's proclivity for violence undermines their adversary's willingness to go to war. Members of the gang surround the rapper and make frequent shooting gestures at the camera, display guns, and reveal gang hand signs. The group calls itself BFL, claims "Gem block," represents GBE, identifies with "5 gang," and, in other videos, references an apartment complex just east of downtown. Intensely violent lyrics accompany an ominous warning to adversaries on Shirley Avenue, which is a short, six-block road a few miles northeast of downtown. The video was posted in December 2014, and by June 2016, a span of only eighteen months, it had been viewed nearly 21,000 times or about thirty-seven times per day.

They don't really want war with us, they don't really want war with us—
 squad.
 Gem block is 5 gang pull up we turn it up.
 They don't really want war with us fuckin' talk put ratchets up—put them up
 nigga.
 They don't really want war with us pull up let the bangers bust [shoot guns].
 They don't really want war with us they don't really want war with us. (x3)
 They don't really want war with us on the side of my town we let chopper
 bust.
 Head shots, necks shots, face shots, motherfucker we will light your ass up.
 Came fit from the fucking fifth?
 Catch murders bitch I ain't buck shit [I don't avoid consequences].
 Runnin' up on Shirley bitch we ain't drivin' by we hoppin' out.
 Poppin out shoot his ass in his face now.
 Head shot my niggas really young now.

We ain't playin' with 2000 bitch we on shit.
Catch nigga leave his ass in the toilet [dead].

(BFL, "War")

The song's chorus is a collective performance, with multiple members singing on camera, developing or reinforcing internal confidence that an adversarial group does not desire a gang war with BFL. It also sends a message to adversaries on Shirley Ave. and beyond. A single rapper then begins the verse by focusing on the violent capabilities of BFL and the consequences that will ensue in the event of a gang war. By threatening to hop out of the car, the rapper intensifies the threat of violence for Shirley Avenue. Approaching on foot to shoot rather than just engaging in a drive-by shooting is a "costly signal" (Densley, 2012) that BFL is fearless and such actions will ensure shootings lead to murders.

BFL threatens Shirley Ave. again, this time using the name Ronnie Gang, in a video that includes members of the gang holding and/or pointing guns at the camera 47 times. The chorus emphasizes the threat, making it a central theme of song.

BFL we the winning team got big guns get knocked out.
I'm five gang that's gem block if you Ronnie gang get shot down—bop.
BFL that's bro's for life, they ain't from my side of town.
They ain't from my side of town, if you Ronnie gang get shot down.

(BFL, "My Side of Town")

These threats are not one-sided. Shirley Ave. has its own rap group that threatened BFL in an earlier video. BFL also claims GBE in some of its videos, which may imply a connection it has to a Chicago-based rap group. The 201 Shirley Boyz threaten GBE in a video that has received over 51,000 views in just over three years, about forty-five times per day, and refers to actual shootings between the group.

We come and get ya, we come and get ya,
You reppin' GBE? We come and get ya. (x4)
...Talkin' bout that static [conflict], well I'm a let you have it.
Shirley make it happen.
Y'all know about my ratchet from when I got y'all back.
Shirley niggas savage, savage screaming "fuck you faggots."
You all know how I rag [respond aggressively] you when niggas get to ratin'
[talking to police].
That shit be so tragic.
You talking about them 30's but not ready for static.

(201 Shirely Boyz, "Come and Get Ya").

Harkness (2013) argues that gang affiliated rappers in Chicago direct incendiary, threatening lyrics at other gangs as a nonviolent means to disrespect adversaries and wage symbolic wars. These hostile lyrics are certainly indicative of real and pervasive conflicts between gangs, but their theatrical value

for developing web-enhanced identities transcends salacious details about actual violence between gangs. Real events make for a good backstory, but expressive rewards stemming from fictitious statements about violent events enhance status if they convince the audience, consistent with Felson's (2006) "Big Gang Theory." Public performances could reflect a false swagger, as gang members may make no effort to pursue conflicts beyond this virtual space. However, adversaries operating in a cultural setting that encourages retaliatory violence may take note of these threats and respond aggressively (see Harkness, 2014; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Threatening another gang in virtual space may be a nonviolent act that maintains the momentum of a conflict, intensifies hostilities, and leads to future violence. Both the rapper and the audience cannot fully predict if a conflict will end in extreme violence or remain only a virtual beef.

Conclusion

Our analysis of 78 gang videos posted on YouTube by Buffalo gangs/gang members indicates that online spaces allow gang members to perform their gang identities for a public audience. Rap videos emphasize lethal gun violence in both their lyrical and visual content more than any other topic. Rappers develop social and collective identities, which are grounded in the capacity to shoot and kill adversaries, by characterizing themselves as "savages" or "psychopaths" and presenting their gangs as "gun clubs" or killers. Intergang conflicts also provide dramatic fodder for identity development, as rappers enhance their public image by mocking or threatening adversaries. Whereas gang members have used traditional staging areas like street corners to develop local reputations for violence and street capital (e.g. Harding, 2014), online forums like YouTube attract large numbers of viewers, offering a more public means to acquire symbolic advantages in the streets. In this sense, the internet trumps the street corner in terms of being "where is the action is" (Goffman, 1967, p. 217).

The current study adds thick description to the foundational, theoretical work that examines how technology intersects with group processes and collective violence (e.g. Moule et al., 2016). One important contribution is further evidence in support of what Pyrooz et al. (2015) called "web-enhanced" gang identities. Our data suggest that online social networks *supplement* face-to-face sociability, rather than replace it, allowing gang members to carefully craft their role and participation in gang life. People still "do gang" away from the traditional, physical, constraints to perform. Beyond the criminological literature, therefore, we provide tangible examples of what Turkle (1999, p. 647) defined as people using "the virtual to reflect constructively on the real." Like the rest of us, gang members use the internet for "identity play," but the constructions of lived experience and the systems within which gangs

exist and operate provide added emphasis to Turkle's clarification that "it is very serious play."

One further contribution is this study highlighted the untapped potential of YouTube rap videos to reveal gang culture in action, specifically gang members' "will-to-representation" (Yar, 2012). The current study builds upon existing analyses of street culture in commercial, "platinum" selling, rap music (e.g. Kubrin, 2005; p. 367), to showcase gang members as producers, and not merely consumers, of culture. Owing to the fact that most cultural events are difficult to access, online rap videos are widely available and ideally situated for cross-city or international comparisons of gang culture, which merits further research, consistent with the approach of the Eurogang project (e.g. Klein, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

Our methodology allowed for content and cultural analysis of lyrics and visual images, but was limited by the lack of access to gang members in the videos, which is consistent with studies that use music to access and understand elements of culture (e.g. Kubrin, 2005, 2006). One resulting limitation is that we cannot provide insight into how or if identity performances on the virtual corner facilitate violence on the street. The literature on social and collective identity implies that such performances can lead to personal and collective action. According to Hennigan and Spanovic (2012), for example, a gang's collective identity influences individual behavior if a person perceives the gang to be a distinct group and strongly identifies with that group. These factors cause a person to align their personal identity with the prototypical social identity found within the gang and displayed during performances (see also Wood, 2014). The pressure to "do gang" via actual violence may also increase the more a gang member cultivates a violent social identity when performing for peers (e.g. Lauger, 2012). Backing down from a conflict looks especially bad after a person publically proclaims how violent he or she is. We suspect, but cannot confirm, that performances in virtual space have a similar affect on gang members. Videos may also function as a precipitating event that increases group cohesion after a gang is threatened and initiates or perpetuates retaliatory violence between gangs (Decker, 1996).

We are also unable to capture the full extent to which Buffalo gangs use rap videos. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2015a) conservatively estimates that Buffalo was home to fifty-three gangs and 622 gang members in 2015. Despite our efforts to authenticate gang membership claims, the subjective nature of such claims on the street may mean that videos include gang or groups that are not universally recognized as gangs (Lauger, 2012). Although our analysis includes 78 videos from 18 gangs, and the use of rap videos is both new and becoming more common. We accessed nine videos posted in 2009 and 2010, but that number increased to 26 videos in 2013 and 29 videos by 2014.

Our data begin when gangs started posting rap videos on YouTube and end as the practice was becoming more common. We cannot properly assess the extent to which gangs use YouTube and can only suggest that these videos are a more prominent fixture of gang life today than five years ago (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016).

Further, our analysis confirms that gang members perform violent identities in an online space, but it says little about the degree to which rappers truly embrace and internalize their performances. Our inability to fully examine the gang member's sense of self mirrors the experiences of viewers who lack intimate knowledge of performers. Access to the artists themselves would likely lead to new insights and further inform our analysis of the rap videos (see Harkness, 2013). As it stands, and despite our best attempts at triangulation, the degree to which rap videos distort reality is hard to determine. Conversations with law enforcement confirm that videos reflect reality and the personal experiences of rappers, as some of the gangs in this sample are heavily involved in local violence, but this tells us very little about how fully individual rappers embrace their public gang identity.

Beyond analysis of violent content online, future research is needed to understand the conditions conducive to gang members responding to situations and posts online that they believe to be threatening. While some argue the ritualized violence of rap battles reduces the need for real violence (Lee, 2016), the ability to call out someone's neighborhood in a derogatory or demeaning way via social media may still trigger the sort of territory defense that characterizes gang conflict (Patton et al., 2013). Future research with young people in general and gang members in particular must include a component addressing social media usage because, this study demonstrates, it provides a new staging area for gang life and new means for broadcasting gang identity.

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