



# Gang violence on the digital street: Case study of a South Side Chicago gang member's Twitter communication

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## Abstract

Social media connects youth to peers who share shared experiences and support; however, urban gang-involved youth navigate 'the digital street' following a script that may incite violence. Urban gang-involved youth use SNS to brag and insult and make threats a concept known as Internet banging. Recent research suggests Internet banging has resulted in serious injury and homicide. We argue violence may be disseminated in Chicago through social media platforms like Twitter. We examine the Twitter communications of one known female gang member, Gakirah Barnes, during a two week window in which her friend was killed and then weeks later, she was also killed.

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We explore how street culture is translated online through the conventions of Twitter. We find that a salient script of reciprocal violence within a local network is written online in real time. Those writing this script anticipate, direct, historicize, and mourn neighborhood violence.

### Keywords

Gang Violence, social media, twitter, African American youth

## Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter and Facebook are widely popular, particularly among youth and emerging adults, who use them to share information, identify and form communities, and curate their identity. Such high levels of connectivity have raised concerns that cyberbullying and online harassment represent a growing public health issue (David-Ferdon and Hertz, 2007). However, discussions regarding cyberbullying and online harassment may not accurately reflect the lived reality of marginalized youth, whose offline experiences with violence and trauma may uniquely affect how they communicate online.

Marginalized youth post messages online from street corners, schools, apartment complexes, and other neighborhood spaces embedded in a local ecology of violence (Patton et al., 2013). As youth cope with neighborhood stressors and trauma, the pervasive nature of SNSs affords them access to an online community of peers who, in some instances, may live down the block. In high-stress violent neighborhoods, SNSs have been shown to fuel conflict between individuals and peer groups and incite violence in the community. Research suggests that gang-involved youth are using SNSs to brag, post fights videos, and insult and threaten others, a phenomenon termed *Internet banging* (Patton et al., 2013).

Internet banging was first described in an article in which researchers conducted a textual analysis of social media communications from individuals perceived to be gang involved (Patton et al. 2013). The analysis identified three gang-like behaviors in those communications: (1) promoting one's gang affiliation; (2) reporting one's part in a violent act; and (3) networking with gang members across the country. The article argues that Internet banging resembles more well-known forms of electronic aggression similar to cyberbullying or trolling in that the anonymous nature of the medium creates a disinhibition effect, leading to behaviors that damage one's own or another's self-image (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012).

To extend and enhance new media studies' understanding of how street life overlaps on digital platforms, this study conducts an in-depth examination of how marginalized youth in Chicago, who claim to be gang affiliated, communicate grief and violence on Twitter. Since the characteristics of Internet banging appeared to resemble urban gang behavior, we decided to further explore the extent to which Internet banging resembles or is a function of gang violence. As such, we operationalized Internet banging in traditional mechanisms of gang violence espoused by [Papachristos et al. \(2013\)](#): intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking.

Chicago, Illinois is a promising locale to explore Internet banging for several reasons. Chicago has garnered extensive attention for its youth (aged 12–24 years) violence epidemic. In 2012, Chicago reported 500 homicides—the nation’s highest rate (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). In 2013, an estimated 2328 shootings and 415 murders occurred in the city (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014).

For decades, many Chicago neighborhoods have been steeped in gang culture, resulting in turf conflict and entrenched gang-related violence that has become weaved into the social fabric of communities. Such crime persists, especially in socially and economically disadvantaged parts of the city. One such neighborhood, Parkway Gardens, a.k.a. “O Block,” was recently named the “most dangerous block in Chicago” by the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Main, 2014). The name “O Block” memorializes 20-year-old Odee Perry, a Black Disciple (BD) gang member who was murdered at that location in 2011. Perry was allegedly shot by Gakirah Barnes, a well-known rival Gangster Disciple (GD) gang member who had an active and large Twitter following (i.e. 2000 followers). Similar to many gang-involved youth growing up on Chicago’s South Side, Gakirah herself was fatally shot on 11 April 2014, at the age of 17 years, in the same neighborhood where Perry was killed 3 years earlier (Swaine, 2014).

### *Gakirah Barnes: “teen queen of Chicago’s gangland”*

We learned of Gakirah Barnes from on-the-ground fieldwork in Chicago that was supported by extensive media coverage surrounding her death. We were intrigued by her young age, high-profile status as a female gang assassin, and Twitter popularity. An article in the *Guardian*, which was circulated in Chicago as part of her public renown, termed her the “teen queen of Chicago’s gangland,” and her mother described her as a “protector,” wanting to keep everyone safe (Swaine, 2014).

Fellow gang members agreed, referring to her as “hitta,” or killer (Swaine, 2014). Gakirah had a tough guise; peers perceived her as a willing, able fighter, and rumor had it that she killed or shot up to 20 rival gang members between 2011 and 2014 (Swaine, 2014). But Gakirah’s mother stated that putting on a tough front and being the “biggest and baddest” is a part of social life in Chicago (Swaine, 2014).

Gakirah Barnes grew up in Woodlawn, a South Side neighborhood that has been deeply impacted by poverty and the effects of violence and trauma for decades. Similar to many urban youth in distressed neighborhoods with gang activity (Jencks and Mayer, 1990), Gakirah was routinely exposed to violence. Gakirah’s father was shot and killed before her first birthday, and two of her close friends died during her formative years. At the age of 14 years, she was introduced to a group of boys in the Woodlawn neighborhood who belonged to a faction of the GDs. Shortly after, Gakirah joined the neighborhood GD splinter group known as Fly Boy Gang (FBG) or St. Lawrence (STL) Boys—the former refers to their rap music group, the latter to STL Street, which runs directly through the Woodlawn neighborhood. From 14 to 17 years, she established herself as a prominent member of FBG/STL (Swaine, 2014).

## Neighborhood violence on Twitter

On 29 March 2014, one of Gakirah's close friends, Rasan "Lil B" Patterson, was shot and killed by a Chicago police officer (Swaine, 2014). At that point, Gakirah renamed her Twitter account @TyquanAssassin in his memory.

Less than a month later, a tweet from Gakirah's account gave the address of a STL Street apartment frequented by FBG/STL and was accompanied by a picture of Gakirah and her friends posing on the steps of a home in the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago. Later that day, Gakirah was killed blocks away from this address. At the time of her death, she had amassed 2585 Twitter followers, which placed her Twitter following in the 98th percentile for all users (Bruner, 2013). She posted over 27,000 tweets from the time she created the account in December 2011 until her death in April 2014.

Our study acknowledges that the social ecology of urban neighborhoods influences the nature of online interactions; therefore, we begin by introducing literature on urban youth violence that guided our coding and analysis of Gakirah's Twitter communications. Then, we discuss recent research on networked communication on the street in order to incorporate aspects of inner-city street life. Next, we explain our methodology and its results. We conclude by situating our findings within the literature on electronic aggression and explore how SNSs can be used to mediate interpersonal conflict and support the social-emotional well-being of youth in violent communities.

## Literature review

### Urban violence

Most youth will not engage in or be victims of violence because violence among youth is typically concentrated in small social networks and organized under a system of turf enforced by gangs or other street-corner groups within the same local ecology (Jacobs, 1961; Suttles, 1968). But, if youth affiliate with a gang, their likelihood of engaging in or being a victim of violence increases precipitously. According to Howell (2012), gang-related homicides account for 20–50% of all homicides in major US cities.

Papachristos et al. (2013) emphasize three mechanisms of violence in the gang literature: intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking. *Intergroup conflict* refers to the "us-versus-them" mentality by which gangs form group identity in opposition to other gangs (Decker, 1996). *Reciprocity* indicates groups are embedded in ongoing exchanges of violence with a mutual expectation of retaliation (Decker, 1996; Hughes and Short, 2005; Papachristos, 2009). Retaliatory violence doubles as both preemption and revenge, what Black (1983) calls "self-help." Finally, the gang is a resource for local social status against a backdrop of socioeconomic marginality (Cohen, 1955). Inter-gang violence can be seen as a *status-seeking* behavior (Gould, 1999) that protects face and amplifies one's social capital.

These group processes operate in accordance with the *code of the street*, an explanation of inner-city violence introduced by Anderson (1999) and supported and expanded upon by research both statistically (Stewart and Simons, 2009) and ethnographically (Dance, 2002; Garot, 2010; Harding, 2010; Jones, 2009; Lane, 2016). "At the heart of the

code is the issue of respect” (Anderson, 1999: 33). Young people earn and hold respect on the street through willingness to fight, an expectation that falls not just on boys but on girls as well (Jones, 2004, 2009).

Jones (2009) finds that girls in distressed tracts of Philadelphia are known to their peers and the adults around them as either “good girls” or “girl fighters.” While good girls protect themselves by practicing *situational avoidance* (restricting travels and staying home) and *relational isolation* (shunning close friendships), girl fighters court conflict and seek revenge on behalf of their friends. A reputation as a girl fighter perpetuates itself the further estranged she becomes from school and other institutional protections. Gakirah appears to represent an extreme case of this phenomenon: a young woman known not merely as a fighter but as an assassin. In contrast to the girl fighters in Jones’s study, who refrain from acts of gun violence against one another, Gakirah seems to have been involved in shootings with boys’ gangs.

### Networked streets

A literature on the convergence of digital and urban spaces tells us that people on the street are “no longer limited to the perceptual horizon” (Gordon and De Souza e Silva, 2011: 3). Online, the street “contains annotations and connections, information and orientations from a network of people and devices” (Gordon and De Souza e Silva, 2011: 1). Scholars of social media increasingly study locality as the basis of communication (De Souza e Silva and Sheller, 2015). “[T]his geographic turn in networked interaction” (Erickson, 2010: 1194) may operate top-down, as when social media companies include geocoding in the demographic data they sell to advertisers (Van Dijck, 2011; Wilken, 2014), or bottom-up, as when consumers use their smartphones to manage the uncertainty they experience in their movements through the city (Sutko and De Souza e Silva, 2011; Van Den Akker, 2015) or signal attachment to physical places online (Liao and Humphreys, 2014; Schwartz, 2015; Varnelis, 2008).

Researchers of the locational aspects of social media often study people with the status and income to move freely about space. This study population uses networked platforms to manage travel and leisure (De Souza e Silva and Sheller, 2015; Gordon and De Souza e Silva, 2011; Humphreys, 2007; Humphreys and Liao, 2011). These studies show how consumers experience urban space and use commercial location-based services and social media to shop, dine, play, date, socialize, and use transportation in efficient and/or interesting ways. In other words, social media may be used to facilitate the management of people in public space, helping users to find the right people in the right places.

But in cities rigidly segregated by race and class (Massey and Denton, 1993), residents of distressed areas experience curtailed mobility, related to a variety of factors, including gangs’ territorial boundaries and neighborhood violence. Based on his fieldwork in Harlem, Lane (2015) finds that street life is characterized by its flow online, for which he uses the term “the digital street.” For teens in Harlem, social media affords new ways to manage neighborhood rivalries. This study explores how networked youth embedded in gang violence in Chicago express and geocode those conflicts on Twitter, expanding further the literature on locality and social media.

## Research questions

We focus on two traumatic gang-related deaths to understand how gang violence is written and mapped on Twitter. We ask the following questions: How do gang members use Twitter to write about the deaths of fellow gang members? How are mechanisms of gang violence articulated on Twitter? And how is conflict rooted in geographic space encoded digitally?

## Methods

In this study, we use qualitative methods—in particular, an inductive textual analysis—to examine a relatively small subset of Twitter data. We decided to examine a small data set because urban, gang-involved youth curate a unique, complex, and multifaceted communication style within and between social networks that warrants careful and attentive coding by hand. The language represented in these tweets exhibited significant sociolinguistic variation from “standard” English, the use of which represents a key part of how urban youth construct their identity (Alim, 2004). Such communications not only use unusual words, phrases, and grammatical constructions, but also reference neighborhood identities, rival gangs, and local music. Given linguistic variation by city regions and gang factions, these tweets would be difficult to decipher using automated scripts, network analysis tools, or crowdsourcing. Indeed, a computational approach to such analysis has been deemed inadequate by law enforcement agencies critically studying online communications of urban youth and gang members (Geofeedia, 2012).

To increase our chances of correctly deciphering the language, we assembled a team of researchers who study urban-based youth violence, including a data scientist with expertise in cyberbullying and research assistants with experience conducting qualitative studies. Our approach involved the data scientists and qualitative researchers contributing equally to the development of the coding scheme, coding individual results, and vetting the accuracy of one another’s coding (Ford, 2014).

## Twitter’s personal-communication mechanisms

While Twitter is foremost a microblogging platform, by which users post short public messages and can “follow” other users to receive the messages they post, the service also has mechanisms for targeting communications at specific users. Users can “reply” to another Twitter user by starting a post with @ and the recipient’s Twitter name, or “mention” another user by placing that user’s Twitter name (preceded by @) at another position in the post. Mentions are received by the sender’s followers, when retweeted, and can be viewed in the “Mentions” section of the receiver’s private “Notifications” tab. Replies are only received by followers of both sender and receiver. Twitter also allows users to *retweet*—to quote or repost another user’s tweet. Typically, a retweet begins with the characters *RT* and the handle of the user who made the original post.

## Obtaining and coding @TyquanAssassin Twitter communications

Using the following procedure, we collected a set of tweets that represented personal Twitter communications by and with Gakirah Barnes, a.k.a. TyquanAssassin. First, we used

Radian6, a social media tracking service, to obtain all tweets posted by @TyquanAssassin or containing “tyquanassassin” in the tweet between 29 March and 17 April 2014. We stopped a week after Gakirah’s death because of prior research (Anderson, 1999) that suggests individuals must threaten to retaliate soon after a prior threat in order to maintain respect and reduce the risk of future harm. We wanted to observe whether or not the same behavior was mimicked on Twitter.

Our strategy was designed to capture all @TyquanAssassin’s tweets, all mentions and replies directed toward @TyquanAssassin and retweets of @TyquanAssassin’s tweets for this time span. We chose this period because it encompassed two critical traumatic events: the death of Gakirah’s friend, Lil B, and the death of Gakirah herself. Thus, we collected data on how Gakirah and followers in her network responded to Lil B’s death and how Gakirah’s network responded to her death.<sup>1</sup>

Because @TyquanAssassin’s posts were retweeted by many users, and we did not consider retweets to constitute personal communication with @TyquanAssassin, we removed them from this set by filtering out common retweet formats (e.g. tweets beginning with *RT*). We also removed advertisements or promotions for music albums and videos. This left us with 408 tweets, mentions, and replies for analysis.

In some cases, the collected tweets originally included small graphical symbols known as *emoji*, but Radian6 lacked the ability to accurately represent them. Often, we were able to retrieve original tweets with accurate emoji from the Twitter website by following links Radian6 provided for each tweet. However, occasionally, the original tweet had been removed from Twitter. In these cases, we analyzed the tweets without emoji. Three coders worked together to develop the key content areas and themes based on a subset of tweets, which were then applied to the entire data set. Coding discrepancies were then discussed and reconciled (Naaman et al., 2010).

We isolated the tweets coded for aggression to further examine and identify any emergent themes that might explain how aggression is communicated on Twitter. We used work by Bushman and Huesmann (2010) to identify and categorize types of aggression:

Descriptions of posts that include different types of aggression:

Indirect aggression: Individual posts overt threat or insult directed *broadly* toward individual or entity.

Direct aggression: Individual uses @ symbol or other methods in posts to *directly* insult or threaten individual or entity.

Proactive aggression: Individual *initiates* aggressive post in offensive, seemingly abrupt manner.

Reactive aggression: Individual primarily *responds* to provocations with an aggressive post.

### *Most-frequent-communicators analysis*

To understand Gakirah’s peer network and those with whom she communicated on Twitter, we went on to identify the Twitter handles that communicated most frequently

with @TyquanAssassin. We used the following procedure: First, we obtained all tweets by all Twitter users that contained the string “tyquanassassin” in the body of the tweet from 14 January to 17 April 2014.

After retweets and @TyquanAssassin’s own posts were filtered out, this set captured all mentions and replies directed toward @TyquanAssassin. Using number of replies to and mentions of @TyquanAssassin as proxy measure of a Twitter user’s personal interaction and communication with @TyquanAssassin, we calculated the Twitter handles that were leading contributors to this set of posts and identified her five most frequent communicators during this period.

For each top communicator, we used the same procedure (obtain all tweets posted by the communicator’s handle or containing the handle in the post) and filtered out retweets to obtain all the user’s communications for the period of 3–17 April 2014—1 week before Gakirah’s death to 1 week after. We obtained 2142 tweets, mentions, and replies for analysis. To protect the identities of Gakirah’s most frequent communicators, we modified their Twitter post and decided to only present comments that are no longer identifiable via a Google search.

## Results

Prior to Gakirah’s death, Twitter messages (tweets) from her account referenced feelings of isolation in a violent environment, where death at an early age was expected and discussed colloquially among peers. Our analysis found that examples of aggression in Gakirah’s Twitter network closely aligned with Anderson’s code of the street and resembled the three mechanisms of gang behavior identified by [Papachristos et al. \(2013\)](#). We categorized our findings according to those three mechanisms: intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking. We also identified emergent themes unique to the convergence of geographic and digital space that Gakirah’s network represents—including group tweeting and spatial referencing. We propose that the group processes and gang violence mechanisms [Papachristos et al. \(2013\)](#) identify are not fixed or categorical but rather fluid, reflecting the dynamic interaction of networks, local ecology, and social-emotional and behavioral characteristics embedded in urban street life.

### *Intergroup conflict*

Intergroup conflict was a prevailing theme in Gakirah’s network. Individuals posted messages about harming opponents, whether rival gangs or the police department. Two distinct forms of interpersonal conflict emerged in this sample: proactive and reactive aggression.

*Proactive aggression* occurred when a user initiated a threat of violence toward an individual or group:

“@TyquanAssassin: If We see a opp Fuck it We Gne smoke em 🐻” like sum j 🇸🇲

An *opp* describes opposing people, groups, or institutions. Based on our textual read of the Twitter posts, opps are primarily rival gangs, neighborhoods, blocks, and law enforcement. A proactive aggressive tweet often referenced firearm use (e.g. “smoke em”), which articulates a willingness and perhaps preparedness to defend oneself or

one's group against a rival faction at a moment's notice. The decision to "smoke em" appears to be triggered by the mere perception of a rival group posing a threat.

A proactive aggressive tweet may also be more specific, laying out exactly how and where an individual plans to harm another person or group:

**@TyquanAssassin:** Jst Brought A Crate Of Guns I'm on my way Thru Lamron shoot u n Whoeva nxt 2 u Nigga dats a And1

Gakirah warns her Twitter followers that she has purchased several guns and is specifically headed to Lamron, or Normal spelled backwards, a street located in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago where the rival BDs street gang is located. It also appears that she does not have a specific target but rather anyone located in this specific geographic area would be susceptible to injury or death.

Gakirah and her network also sent *reactive aggressive* tweets. These were written in response to the murder of a Twitter user's follower or followee connection (e.g. friend, fellow gang member, or neighborhood resident). For example, Twitter users who communicated frequently with Gakirah threatened retaliation for her death:

**Follower:** Think You Know We Coming On These Niggas This Summer 🚗 🐱 🔫 🌿 💰  
#RipTyquan @TyquanAssassin

Reactive aggressive tweets perpetuate or prolong a violent event, although in cases like the above example, the intended audience may not be clear (i.e. an indirect threat). Furthermore, users thoughtfully use symbols such as emoji to imply a threat. Here, the series of emoji include a gun pointed at an angry face, which could be interpreted as a murder; and a car and a bag of money, which may also suggest how and why this murder will occur.

Other reactive aggressive tweets are more directly threatening:

**Follower:** Killed my nigga @TyquanAssassin..... On GD Its a Drill! Imma kill you! @vell300 #BDK

"GD" refers to the Gangster Disciple faction and "Its a Drill! Imma Kill You" suggests that the GD faction is ready to kill the person responsible for Gakirah's death. "#BDK" stands for "Black Disciple Killers"; gang-involved youth commonly use "killer" following a rival gang's name to represent contempt toward that group. Thus, the user is directly threatening individuals associated with the BDs, a prominent Chicago gang and long-standing rival of the GDs. Additionally, the tweet includes the mention "@Shurvell300," indicating the post was directed at Twitter user Shurvell300. Shurvell300's Twitter profile indicates affiliation with a BD faction, suggesting the post is a violent direct threat targeting a specific member of an opposing gang.

## Reciprocity

After the death of Gakirah's friend Lil B, Gakirah expressed anger at the Chicago Police Department and a desire to retaliate:

**@TyquanAssassin:** Police took my homie I dedicate my life 2 his revenge 

“Homie” refers to Lil B, and police “taking” him refers to his death at the hands of a Chicago police officer. This post is further enhanced with a red numerical 100 emoji which is emblematic of the colloquial phrase “keep it 100,” a common phrase among youth in urban contexts to emphasize the truth and integrity of one’s statements.

Tweets often referenced violence against law enforcement and a desire to seek justice for what many of Lil B’s peers perceived as unlawful, deadly force:

**@TyquanAssassin:** DA Police I'd kill u Faster Dan niggaz on Da Corner Rip King Lil B   
       CPDK

The set of emojis that follow the Twitter post along with the acronym “CPDK” which refers to “Chicago Police Department Killers” are used to place further emphasis on the threat made against the police. When the “K” is applied to a group name, it expresses contempt for that group. The CPDK hashtag (#CPDK) is popular among gang-involved youth in Chicago who are heavily surveilled and harassed by police in their neighborhoods.

Although Gakirah threatened violence against the police, most police-directed threats are not carried out. Interestingly, all of Gakirah’s tweets mentioning the Chicago Police Department were deleted from her account. (The source of deletion is unknown.)

Gakirah’s Twitter network also expressed desire to retaliate against the rival group rumored to have killed Gakirah:

**Follower:** Might Be Next To Go Cause It’s Fuck dem Opp Niggaz I’m T’D  For @TyquanAssassin Won’t Let A Nigga Or Bitch Pull My Card 

This tweet suggests a strong desire for retaliation against Gakirah’s perceived killer(s). The user’s desire to retaliate outweighs the potential for injury or death associated with the violence. Such retaliatory desire has a transitive nature in which gang identity is a salient aspect of reciprocity; thus, youth may dedicate their lives to the group’s betterment.

In addition, following Gakirah’s death her network received messages from rival groups mentioning revenge:

**@TyquanAssassin:** YO ASS JUST AS DEAD AS #bloodmoney REVENGE

This tweet proclaimed revenge for the death of Blood Money, a South Side rapper killed in West Englewood 3 days before Gakirah (Lansu, 2014). Gakirah’s gang was rumored to be responsible for Blood Money’s death. In fact, the day after he was killed, one of Gakirah’s fellow gang members, Lil Jay, taunted the rival gang, posting a video of himself drinking a red beverage, singing “Sippin on Blood Money.”

### Status-seeking

Several Twitter posts from Gakirah and her network resemble status-seeking behaviors. To preserve face, Gakirah and those in her network engaged in interpersonal conflict,

exhibiting a willingness to fight or retaliate if challenged. In our sample, most youth assumed a “tough front” (Anderson, 1999), sometimes depicting themselves and their allies as more brazen than their opponents:

**@TyquanAssassin:** u Grab yo Shootaz I Got My Killaz wat u Niggaz wanna Do 🗡️ 😡

Here, Gakirah issues a modern-day call to arms in what appears to be an impending battle between what Gakirah refers to as “Killaz” and an opposing group of individuals who perhaps have shooting prowess as well. The statement is supported by the use of a gun emoji and a bright face that appears to be angry.

In another post, Gakirah indicates that individuals who make negative comments about her would not be bold enough to disrespect her in person:

**@TyquanAssassin:** All while mfks sneak dissing on me, u kno u would never..do it to my face  
# BOSS KIRAH LIVES TOOKAVILLE, STL,EBT

The tweet implies that Gakirah differs from her rivals because she courts conflict on Twitter that she backs up face to face. In addition, Gakirah’s use of the colloquial term “BOSS” and her willingness to specify her neighborhood and gang affiliation express how she views herself and her connection to the gang.

### *Extension of neighborhood violence online*

In addition to observing signs of intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking, we note two additional potential mechanisms of neighborhood violence vis-à-vis Twitter communication: group tweeting and spatial referencing.

### *Group tweeting*

As opposed to social media designed for threaded communication with specific interlocutors, Twitter requires its users to distinguish “conversations” from person-to-network broadcasts through its syntax of @usernames (Erickson, 2010). Gakirah and her top five Twitter communicators often directed and received threats on the basis of the @ symbol. These tweets used @usernames to tag multiple urban youth affiliated with rival streets gangs from Chicago’s South Side.

To address the challenge of audience specification, while keeping posts within Twitter’s strict 140-character limit, users directed group threats that could evoke strong emotional reactions in only few words. For example, a user tweeted the following threats toward Gakirah and her network:

**@3hunnetkill @FBG\_DUCK @DutchitSHOOT @Stl\_TV\_TaTDDIC @TyquanAssassin @Ww\_Deja:** kill yourself

**@yougodmb @dutchntshoot @fbg\_ck @stl\_tell @tv\_ddic @tyquanassassin @wdc\_deja @dr600rose** we out here #ONBD #GDK

@3huorgetkill @yougodumb @DutchntSHOOT @FBG\_DCK @Stl\_ell @TV\_DDIC @TyquanAssassin @WDc\_Deja @Dro0Rose goofy ass opp

Group tweets are often directed at people in opposing gang factions and include threats, insults, and sometimes a hashtag (e.g. #ONBD) that represents the author's gang affiliation (i.e. BD). Group tweeting appears to quickly and concisely convey an aggressive message targeted to specific people and groups within a broader gang universe. The structure of this networked public space allows youth within the same gang ecology to rapidly disseminate group tweets via the *retweet* function. Among teens in Harlem, Author (forthcoming) found that Twitter served as a platform for neighborhood conflict that excluded adult family members, teachers, mentors, and other elders in the community that were sometimes connected to youth on Facebook.

*Spatial referencing.* Twitter posts do not automatically include the user's location, thereby leaving it up to the user to decide whether to share this information (Erickson, 2010). In this study, we found that referencing street locations may take the form of status-seeking behavior and intergroup conflict. Gang-involved youth often referenced their location in home territory as a boast and/or challenge to rivals; they also stated opponents' geographic locations and disdain for those areas:

@TyquanAssassin: If u Ion Want Dat Foreign Cum Ride Dwn St.Lawrence 📍📱📺📺

@TyquanAssassin: 800 must of changed dey location but if i catch em out dere im sending @Arrogant\_Bubba thru to relocate em

@TyquanAssassin: Fuck Oblock Dats A Hoe Block Turn Dat Mf into a No Block talm Bout Yall making Noise nigga we ain't Heard No Shots 📍📍

@TyquanAssassin: Fuck Da Whole Cottage Grove 67th-60th 📍📍📍

Spatial referencing could be variously interpreted. On one hand, by tweeting their location and taunting rival members, gang members could escalate already volatile situations by drawing rivals to a mutual location. On the other hand, by claiming space online, youth may convince their rivals to stay away, thereby averting presumptive violence. In Harlem, Author (forthcoming) found that teens involved in neighborhood violence sometimes posted locational updates online to mobilize outreach workers and to facilitate ways around violence.

## Discussion

This study deepens our understanding of electronic aggression and violence on SNSs by gang-involved youth. We show that expressions of gang violence in the form and content of Twitter messages convey not only the locational possibilities of social media in the most marginal sections of the city, but also to approximate the mechanisms of gang behavior described by Papachristos et al. (2013). In marginalized urban areas, Internet banging becomes a way in which youth utilize social media to provoke, anticipate, or

dodge potentially violent encounters in person. If violence transpires and results in death, the same Twitter networks may serve to mourn and memorialize the deceased, as well as legitimate retribution.

Our in-depth analysis of Gakirah Barnes's Twitter communications suggests that youth embroiled in neighborhood violence utilize Twitter to work out who goes where in public space. While the movements of freely mobile residents are also informed by a digital topography of the city (Erickson, 2010), gang-involved youth claim spaces based on presumptive violence. In this context, sociolocative references on Twitter appear to be about who *gets* to go where rather than where one *wants* to go. Spatial referencing provides a way for youth in urban neighborhoods to mark and navigate gang territory.

Consistent with previous research into gang members' online behaviors, our findings indicate that Chicago gang members (e.g. GDs and BDs) use Twitter to threaten rival groups (including police), posture, and "campaign for respect" through the incitement of violence (Anderson, 1999). In our study, posturing was most commonly communicated through proactive aggression tweets. These tweets appear premeditated, with the intent of inciting anger among rivals. Thus, based on our findings, we argue that the same gang violence mechanisms—intergroup conflict, reciprocity, and status-seeking—on the urban street (Papachristos et al., 2013) unfold online (Author, forthcoming).

Enacting these behaviors on SNSs may offer heightened consequences for urban gang members. In distressed, tightly bound urban neighborhoods that experience poverty and chronic violence, navigating the physical landscape can be dangerous (Sharkey, 2006), particularly for gang members. Unscheduled interactions with rival gangs can quickly spiral into serious, sometimes lethal interpersonal violence for which there is limited time to prepare or react by rallying peer support. SNSs like Twitter may also provide a space for youth to seek status and initiate intergroup conflict with rival gang members in controlled space. Thus, we theorize that Internet banging (Author, 2013) may allow gang members to engage in reciprocal acts of violence when one feels threatened on social media or to regain control in environments characterized by unpredictable violence. For example, online rival gang members can confront and challenge one another without the immediate threat of violent retribution (e.g. shooting, stabbing, physical fighting) present in face-to-face neighborhood challenges (Author, forthcoming).

On the other hand, Twitter allows marginalized gang-involved youth to broaden their status-seeking activities beyond localized social networks by publicly presenting tough personas (Anderson, 1999) to larger, invisible digital audiences. Although this tough front may protect face and expand social resources, it may also lead to online deindividuation and disinhibition (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012), which can heighten violent exchanges between rival gang members. *Deindividuation* disconnects users from individuality and reality, making them less likely to feel risk and danger and allowing a single person to escalate tensions in an area or between gangs simply by tweeting at the group. And *disinhibition* reduces behavioral constraints, as users perceive that online anonymity frees them from social norms and consequences governing interpersonal interactions (Author, 2013; Leets, 2001). This behavior can become toxic when it damages images of the self or others (Author, 2013; Leets, 2001).

Toxic disinhibition on Twitter, particularly among adolescents whose development limits their ability to evaluate long-term consequences of behavioral decision-making, may also produce protracted threats that can trigger street violence long after the initial tweet is sent. Our study suggests that a distinct feature of electronic proactive aggression is the persistence of gang members' social media threats, which can remain public indefinitely. Similarly, a violent act on the neighborhood street can achieve permanence via retweets and continued conversation about the incident. Thus, some proactive aggression tweets may actually be delayed, well-crafted reactivity to past aggression immortalized by social media. Some analyzed tweets contained future threats, which require urban youth to anticipate violence rather than simply react to it.

Findings also suggest that aggression between gang members on Twitter can be reactive in nature. We found that many of the reactive aggressive tweets responded to a friend or gang member's death. These tweets sometimes permitted digital catharsis: gang members grieved the death of their murdered peer. However, many tweets also conform to social protocols of urban violence (Anderson, 1999; Papachristos et al., 2013) and communicate desire for violent retribution to avenge death. And according to *cathartic-effect theory* (Florea, 2013), purging aggressive emotions, particularly in public forums such as SNSs, can actually cause *more* aggressive behaviors. By releasing tension through social media, gang-involved youth on Twitter could trigger (intentionally or unintentionally) violent reactions among network followers sharing the loss. This could contribute to online aggression spilling into street violence.

Social media accessibility can extend the reach of threats and, thus, reactive action, particularly in tightly bound urban spaces. Our findings suggest that because gang-involved youth and adults in urban contexts adhere to a street code (Anderson, 1999)—one that expects them to fight and die for their gang if physically confronted in their neighborhood about online behavior—opportunities for violence may be created or staged through group tweeting and spatial referencing.

Considering all these factors, our findings depart from studies that examine disinhibition among neighborhood residents who responded to neighborhood criminal activity by anonymously posting virulent comments online, but demonstrated tolerant, peaceful behavior in face-to-face town-hall meetings (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004). This study also broadens our understanding of gang mechanisms and social media by examining the gendered use of Internet banging from the Twitter account of a female Chicago gang member. To our knowledge, this is one of the only studies that examine female gang communication on Twitter. Our results show that electronic aggression may be an important resource for female gang members, allowing them to affirm identity within gangs, campaign for respect, and assert positions of power.

Many of Gakirah's tweets implied that she was a prominent gang member who may even have been leading the STL Boys faction of the GDs. Several factors suggest Gakirah's high standing: people referred to her as "boss" and knew her as an "assassin." Furthermore, Gakirah publicly referred to fellow gang members as "my Killaz," indicating her high position in gang hierarchy. Her status could have been the result of her demonstrating prowess as an able fighter, as the rumors of her involvement in gang killings might suggest. It might also have been a persona she chose to assume because it afforded her respect and legitimacy within her gang and in the broader community—hence her publicized

messages about her willingness to enact violence against the police and rival gang members.

### *Implications*

Study findings have implications for developing innovative prevention and intervention strategies to address electronic aggression via SNSs. For example, the ability to call out someone's neighborhood in a derogatory or demeaning way via social media may trigger the sort of territory defense that characterizes gang conflict (Author, 2013). Given the online presence of gang-involved youth, scholars and practitioners should consider developing online intervention techniques for this population. Social media researchers and designers could pair qualitative and computational approaches to support urban youth exposed to violence, by facilitating emotional processes critical to well-being and physical safety. Among men who face significant stigma against seeking such assistance, the anonymity of online interventions may reduce masculinity-related barriers to mental health care.

Developing innovative online strategies could support violence-intervention programs such as Cure Violence (Ransford et al., 2012) that work to preempt violence. Violence prevention programs could be alerted when specific threats are tweeted in their geographic intervention areas. Digital *interrupters*—specialized violence interventionists—could be trained to mediate electronic aggression by disrupting its transmission from cyberspace to street. Additionally, when youth indicate specific locations in threats, interrupters could be alerted and dispatched to prevent and mediate violence. However, these strategies would require careful development of balanced, ethical strategies that honor self-determination, privacy, and free speech rights, particularly among this population of youth and young adults who have been subjected to coercive and unlawful management for decades.

### *Limitations*

This study advances understanding of new media literature, computer-mediated communications, and urban violence, but it is not without limitations. First, our study focuses on the Twitter account and network of one gang member in Chicago. Future studies should identify multiple gang members and gang networks (including rival groups), to gain a more comprehensive understanding of electronic aggression, mechanisms of violence, locational uses of social media, and the relationship between digital threats and street violence among gang-involved youth.

Although the killing of Chicago teen Gakirah Barnes has been allegedly linked to gang violence, the narrow scope of our data limits our ability to demonstrate a direct relationship between threats made by Gakirah's network and specific incidents of violence offline. In addition to ethnographic research that follows the same set of research participants in person and online, future research could pair local crime data with trends in electronic aggression to better unpack these relationships.

Furthermore, because Radian6 limited our ability to capture the emoji symbols gang members tweeted in some cases, future research should consider other software better

able to capture emoji, as it may offer insights about gang-involved youth's emotional states and reactivity. Finally, there are challenges with studying Twitter content versus individuals involved in violence on Twitter because we lack the ability to discern how electronic aggression may vary by age, gender, race, ethnicity, and other demographic identifiers. In addition, retweets are structured in many ways by third-party applications that use Twitter's application programming interface (API), and recently Twitter has implemented *native retweeting*, a retweet that requires no special formatting. This diversity of retweet structure occasionally creates difficulty in distinguishing retweets from other kinds of posts.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest the importance of research concerning mechanisms of violence and electronic aggression by gang-involved youth using SNSs. Understanding how electronic aggression occurs, transcends cyberspaces, and manifests on city streets will support the development of violence interventions and programming to promote mental health, physical and social-emotional well-being, and safety of youth in violent, marginalized urban communities.

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## Note

1. We debated whether to include the Twitter handles of her followers. Because Gakirah herself and her online presence have been covered extensively in mainstream news sources, we use her real name and handle here; we anonymize her followers' handles.

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