

‘Going viral’ and ‘Going country’: the expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media

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Abstract

Based on social media content analysis and focus groups with young people, the current study explores expressive and instrumental uses of the internet among street gangs. ‘Trap rap’ videos posted on YouTube and orientated around life as a drug dealer are identified as the ultimate cultural artefact for denoting London, UK, gang culture. These videos serve an expressive purpose in terms of reputation building, but also shed light on the instrumental business of gangs – specifically, illicit drugs sales via ‘country lines’. Looking beyond the artefact toward how these videos are created, disseminated, and consumed, reveals the instrumental organisation of gangs and how social rules and behaviours within them are monitored and enforced. The current study thus contributes to gang research from the UK, and the growing body of literature on gang and gang member use of the Internet, with implications for research and practice.

Physical spaces, like the corner (e.g. Miller 1958; Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga 2013; Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1955), have historically been the primary arenas for gang life. In recent years, however, the emergence of smart phones and social media have enabled gangs to exist in a virtual world where face-to-face interactions in geographical and social space are not necessarily required to foster collective identity and collective action (Décary-Hétu and Morselli 2011; Patton, Eschmann, and Butler 2013; Patton et al. 2014; Sela-Shayovitz 2012). Extant research on this phenomenon is largely foundational and theoretical; and is almost entirely grounded in the US experience (e.g. Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2013, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015). Questions remain about the expressive and instrumental uses of social media among gang-involved youth. In the interests of comparison (Klein 2006) and contribution to the empirical record, the current study asks to what extent gangs’ use of social media is expressive, instrumental, or both, drawing on social media content analysis and focus groups with youth from gang neighbourhoods in London, England.

The current study explores the rituals of multi-platform social media use among gang-involved youth. ‘Trap rap’ – a genre of hip-hop music characterised by synth and string

swells with tight, bass-heavy digital drumming – posted to YouTube, is identified as the gang’s primary cultural artefact. The term ‘trap’ refers to the place where drugs are manufactured and distributed (‘trap houses’), the act of drug dealing (referred to as ‘trapping’ in the UK), and how easy it is to get ‘trapped’ in the drug lifestyle. Trap rap thus serves an expressive function – it allows gang-involved youth to broaden their status-seeking activities beyond localised social networks, publicly presenting trap identities to larger, at times invisible, digital audiences. But trap rap also highlights an instrumental purpose among gangs, specifically illicit drugs sales. In short, the internet is a space where a combination of ‘digital artefacts’ (e.g. video and audio files, images and photographs), arranged and interacted with online, encapsulate and denote an offline gang culture, which in turn both reinforce that culture and breathe new life into it. Looking ‘beyond the artefact’ (Stern 2008, 99) toward how content is made, coordinated, and distributed, reveals the extended organisation of gangs and how actions taken online incur consequences offline and vice versa.

Gangs in the United Kingdom

The term ‘gang’ is highly contested in the UK context (e.g. Alexander 2008; Hallsworth 2013; Smithson, Ralphs, and Williams 2013). Most researchers identify a gap between perception and reality about street gangs (Howell 2007; McCorkle and Meithe 1998). Some see this as derived from crime control agents (e.g. Fraser and Atkinson 2014; Ralphs, Medina, and Aldridge 2009), others as a consequence of ‘gang’ research itself (e.g. Hallsworth and Young 2008; see also, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004). Part of the problem lies in prejudiced labelling of socially marginalised friendship groups whose shared behaviours, such as congregating in public spaces, are deemed by wider society to be antisocial (Deuchar 2009; Holligan and Deuchar 2009; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Still, some young people in Britain do self-nominate as ‘gang members’ (e.g. Densley 2013; Harding 2014) and groups exist in Britain that fit the criminological definition of gangs as durable, street-oriented youth groups whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity (Klein and Maxson 2006, 4). Hereafter, ‘gangs’ refer to such groups. Further, there are groups in London, specifically, that can be described as self-formed associations of peers that have adopted common names and other discernible signs of membership. Groups comprised of individuals who recognise themselves (and are recognised by others) as being ‘members’ of ‘gangs’, and who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity – to the extent they cannot call the police to settle their disputes (see Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Pitts 2008).

Hence the truth about gangs in Britain lies somewhere between fantasy and reality. After the 2011 ‘summer of discontent’ (Briggs 2012), when legions of work-starved young people took to the streets and smashed up their neighbourhoods, ‘concerted, all out war on gangs and gang culture’ became Britain’s ‘national priority’ (Cameron 2011). This policy stance has drawn sharp criticism (see Cottrell-Boyce 2013; Densley 2011; Fraser and Atkinson 2014; Ralphs and Smithson 2015; Shute and Medina 2014) and only intensified debate about the expressive and instrumental activities of UK gangs (e.g. Densley and Stevens 2015; Deuchar 2009; Fraser 2015). Since it was (wrongly) claimed gang members coordinated the 2011 UK riots using smart phones and social media (see Fuchs 2012), for instance, research has examined both the expressive and

instrumental functions of internet use among UK gangs, from promoting individual and collective reputations to organising drug deals (Densley 2012; Harding 2014). The current research seeks to build upon this foundational work and more clearly articulate the relationship between the two functions.

Instrumental versus expressive gang activity

Gang scholars have long debated whether the activities of gangs are primarily instrumental or expressive (for a discussion, see Decker and Pyrooz 2013). Instrumental actions are intended to advance the material interests of the gang or its members. They pertain to economic functions such as drug sales. Expressive actions show gang pride and demonstrate the group is adept at defending turf, avenging past injuries, and so on. They arise from ongoing conflicts and rivalries between gangs and related issues of disrespect and symbolic dominance (Decker 1996). Scholars have used these concepts to describe the nature and extent of gang organisation, gang crime, and gang violence, among other features (e.g. Sánchez-Jankowski 1991).

Gang organisation exists on a continuum (Densley 2014), with ‘instrumental-rational’ (organised) groups at one extreme, and ‘informal-diffuse’ (disorganised) groups on the other (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998; Decker, Katz, and Webb 2008). Instrumental-rational depictions of gang organisation include group ends, age-graded levels of membership, leadership roles, coordinated drug sales, and rules and codes of conduct (Decker and Pyrooz 2011a, 2013). These descriptions find support in research from Chicago to Detroit, London to Los Angeles (Densley 2012, 2014; Harding 2014; Mieczkowski 1986; Padilla 1992; Pitts 2008; Skolnick et al. 1988; Venkatesh 1997; Venkatesh and Levitt 2000), incidentally all large cities with more entrenched or ‘chronic’ gang problems (Spergel 1995, 180).

The informal-diffuse perspective, by contrast, finds gangs as ‘self-interested’ groups with ‘functional and situational’ leadership and ‘freelance’ members who distribute drugs for individual, not collective, ends (Decker and Pyrooz 2011a, 2013). Examples of these descriptions are widespread in the literature (e.g. Decker and Curry 2002; Decker, Katz, and Webb 2008), including UK-based studies of gangs (Aldridge and Medina 2008; Windle and Briggs 2015a). From this perspective, gangs fulfil a variety of expressive functions – including friendship and revenge – that are largely independent of instrumental concerns such as making money. Here ‘gang crime’ is rarely commissioned or directed by gang leaders or the gang as a whole, and ‘gang violence’ tends to be expressive and retaliatory in nature rather than instrumental (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Papachristos 2009; Pizarro and McGloin 2006).

Sometimes, however, expressive processes in gangs have instrumental outcomes. Take ‘storytelling’ in gangs (Lauger 2014), which contributes to group cohesion (Klein 1971). Gang-involved youth talk about violence far more than they engage in it, but by embellishing violent events (Lauger 2014), gossiping about peers, and manipulating information (Harding 2014), they still obtain a strategic advantage on the streets (Lauger 2012). Felson (2006) argues gangs deliberately create myths as part of what he calls their ‘Big Gang Theory’, invoking fiction to make people believe they are real (see also, Densley 2012). Violent myths build a collective reputation for violence, which is a common and transferrable asset for all group members (Gambetta 1993). A reputation for violence,

derived from expressive actions, allows gangs as producers of violence to save on the actual production of violence itself. In other words, the primary utilitarian end of ‘senseless’ (Blok 2001) violence – from Mexican drug cartel ‘corpse messaging’ (Lantz 2016) to video recordings of gang fights spread via the internet (Décary-Héту and Morselli 2011) – is the instrumental expression of power itself.

Gangs and the internet

The internet is both a product of culture, a ‘cultural artefact’ (Woolgar 1996), and a space in which ‘culture is formed and reformed’ (Hine 2000, 9). This includes gang culture (Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015), which, in turn, is its own cultural artefact (Hagedorn 2008). Gang ‘cultural production’ is particularly evident on social networking sites, where young people ‘are linked through shared sociality and identity and are also seeking to direct attention through actions online’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 176, 166). Social networking sites are ‘user-generated’ and ‘public-mediated’ (Boyd 2014, 137). Examples include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube, which are popular applications for youth to ‘hang out’ and ‘hold court’ (Boyd 2014, 91).

Gangs use social media for expressive purposes, to promote general street culture (Morselli and Décary-Héту 2013), ‘enhance the brand name’ (Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2014, 2), and engage in forms of what Goffman described as ‘impression management’ (Van Hellemont 2012). As an ‘extension of the street’ (Decker and Pyrooz 2011b), social media also helps structure gang members’ ‘criminal and routine activities’ in pursuit of expressive ‘status goals’ (Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015). Whilst many gang members have similar online behaviour as compared with those who are not involved with gangs, ‘surf and turf wars’ can result from time logged on (King, Walpole, and Lamont 2007). Gangs monitor online spaces much like physical territory, for instance, ensuring taunts or acts of disrespect are responded to without losing face (Lim et al. 2013; Womer and Bunker 2010). Patton, Eschmann, and Butler (2013) specifically highlight the role of hip-hop music posted to social media in this ‘net banging’ phenomenon, and how unfiltered songs that aim antagonistic slants at rivals and invoke themes consistent with the ‘code of the street’ (Anderson 1999; Kubrin 2005) enhance status within local music ‘micro-scenes’ (Harkness 2013), but also incite violence (Décary-Héту and Morselli 2011; Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016).

Whilst most studies conclude gang members are not using the internet instrumentally to commit or promote criminal behaviour (e.g. Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015), these same studies suggest gang members use social media to ‘flame wars’, which Johnson and Schell-Busey (2016) argued is technically an instrumental, ultimately violent, purpose. On the subject of instrumental internet use among gangs, Knox (2012, 47) further argued gangs are ‘making something pro-social into something anti-social’ by using the internet to commit cybercrimes such as hacking, phishing, fraud, money laundering and selling stolen goods (see also, Hanser 2011). Evidence suggests gangs have also used social networking sites to coordinate street-level illegal activities, such as drug sales, plan recreational riots and fights, even recruit new members (Reilly 2011). Levels of gang-related cybercrime are of course contingent upon levels of technical proficiency (Sela-Shayovitz 2012), just like the size and sophistication of a gang’s online presence is commensurate to its actual size and sophistication on the street (Moule, Pyrooz, and

Decker 2014). Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker (2014) observe, for example, higher levels of gang organisation increase the likelihood that gangs use the internet for instrumental activities, such as recruitment.

Current study

The current study asks to what extent gangs' use of social media is expressive, instrumental, or both. We specifically examine the relationship between ostensibly expressive trap rap YouTube videos and the instrumental drug trade among street gangs in London – that is, how, if at all, gangs use social media to promote illegal enterprise, make connections with potential new markets, and monetise their brand. Further, we explore the utility of social media for gang-involved youth, the consequences of social media use for gangs, and its capacities to supplement current gang relations. The two groups described in the current study as 'gangs' meet the consensus Eurogang definition of durable, street-oriented youth groups whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity (Klein and Maxson 2006, 4). Both groups have common names and other 'conventional signals' (Gambetta 2009) they use to communicate with others and identify each other, and their members use the term 'gang' in their online correspondence. They are also well known to crime control agents and residents of the communities in which the research took place.

Data and methods

Data are derived from two sources: (1) focus groups with young people in an area prioritised as one of the 33 Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) local authority areas across England and Wales (see HM Government 2011); and (2) systematic social media content analysis of 'digital artefacts' shared by members of two gangs in this same area through social networking sites.

Focus groups

Between January 2015 and June 2015, 12 focus groups were conducted in five secondary schools and one Pupil Referral Unit¹ (i.e. two groups per school) in the EGYV area. Levels of crime and deprivation in the area fell within the average of all EGYV sites and although the area was racially and ethnically diverse it was not atypical of EGYV sites in London. EGYV designation is a potential bias, but it facilitated access to schools via an EGYV service provider and ensured the study was located 'where the action is' (Goffman 1967, 217), thus situating understandings and experiences of gangs within a specific local context.

Each focus group consisted of 16–26 students (20 on average), which is larger than recommended for focus groups (Alderson 1995), but reflective of regular class sizes. Within mainstream schools, one final year Key Stage 3 (Year 9) class and one of either a middle year Key Stage 3 (year 8) or first-year Key Stage 4 (year 10) class were chosen to participate at random. The PRU provided mixed-age groups. In total, 240 young people (115 males and 125 females) aged 12–15 (mean age, 14) participated. Their racial and ethnic backgrounds were diverse, indeed majority minority, reflecting the demographics of the EGYV area.

During the focus groups, some young men self-nominated as gang members, which is a reliable and valid method to distinguish gang youth (see Decker et al. 2014), and others ‘vouched’ for the membership status of their peers (Densley 2013). Young women mentioned being relatives, friends, or girlfriends of gang members. Nevertheless, regarding gangs, we acknowledge the focus group data are more perception-based than experiential. This is deliberate, and important, for it speaks directly to the expressive qualities of gangs and ‘beliefs and social rules’ of young people who encounter them in both physical and virtual space (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 10). Young people living and attending school in gang neighbourhoods are conscious social actors and ‘experts in their own lives’ (Emond 2005, 135).

All focus groups were led by the same co-leaders and used the same semi-structured format to explore young people’s perceptions of gangs and use of social media. Discussions, lasting 90 minutes on average, were audio-taped but selectively transcribed, which Bryman (2012, 486) argues is valid when ‘there were large sections of the interview that were not relevant or not of use’. Transcriptions were reviewed independently by two researchers, who determined major themes and concerns. Importantly, a systematic coding process was followed and the researchers showed substantial agreement; although, consistent with prior research (e.g. Armstrong et al. 1997), there was initially some variation in the language used to package some of the coding. Comparisons were made and discrepancies resolved, however, through discussion until consensus (i.e. high inter-coder reliability) was reached.

Content analysis

Focus groups were used to gain insight into young people’s perceptions of gangs and experiences with social media, but also provided key direction, language, and techniques used by young people on social media that the first author was then able to use to examine the same social media content. In order to avoid labelling young people as gang members or subjectively selecting gangs to study, our sampling strategy began with locating the two ‘most viewed’ YouTube videos featuring the two most ‘talked about’ gangs from the focus group sessions. One of these videos was posted in direct response to the other. The two gangs involved were rivals engaged in a virtual (and physical) conflict that had received police and mainstream media attention.

We recognise ‘gang talk’ (i.e. public discourse on gangs) reflects both myth and reality (Hallsworth and Young 2008) and gangs with a large digital footprint likely have a large physical footprint (Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2014), thus the two gangs are not necessary representative of gangs *per se*, which is a limitation. Still, as Plato once said, ‘You cannot conceive the many without the one’ (or two, in our case). Given that YouTube videos are linked via ‘up next’ recommendations, keywords, and common people, the original videos initiated a snowball sampling strategy that led to the discovery of 21 other rap videos tied to both gangs – 15 featuring members of the first gang and 6 featuring members of the second. Videos ranged from 1 minute and 58 seconds to 7 minutes and 27 seconds in length, with an average of about 4 minutes. To reduce the possibility of sampling bias, we searched YouTube exhaustively, ending only after we could not find any new videos pertaining to the two gangs in question. In the videos, amateur rappers openly identified themselves as gang affiliated or called their group a gang –

the label was not placed upon them by outsiders. They also showed gang names, colours, hand gestures, or tattoos, and made verbal and visual references to rival groups and specific territorial markers like street signs or postcodes.

Hundreds of comments directly attached to these videos, moreover, initiated referrals to the profiles of 46 young men (29 from the first gang and 17 from the second gang), who either directly featured in the videos or claimed the identity of a gang member on Twitter or Sound Cloud (a popular audio distribution platform that enables its users to upload, record, promote, and share original content). Again, for these young people, the 'gang' label had objective meaning outside the pages of academic and press articles. For obvious reasons, we do not know the precise ages of the youth online, but estimate they were between 13 (the minimum age requirement for anyone signing up for a new account on Twitter) and 25-years-old. Multi-platform or 'polymedia' use was common (Madianou and Miller 2012), thus tweets, retweets, replies, and mentions included data from other social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine, creating a 'web of communication' (Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016, 73). Only content that was publicly available and accessible (i.e. not 'hidden' or password protected), however, feature in the study. Content that was ambiguous with regard to gang affiliation was excluded.

Videos had comments. Comments had videos. Videos led to Twitter feeds. Twitter feeds led back to videos. Approximately 60 hours were spent online until informational saturation was reached. We transcribed videos and cleaned rap lyrics multiple times to ensure accuracy. We then thematically coded the lyrics in the videos, inductively creating categories (e.g. violence) and subcategories (e.g. guns) for emergent themes using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The researchers counted the number of times these themes occurred within a song and entered the data into an Excel file. We did the same for words and images posted in YouTube discussion threads and on other websites. Just as with the focus group data, the coding scheme was refined and revised throughout the coding process, and when necessary, the authors discussed content to consensus, resulting in high inter-coder agreement. Any data presented in descriptive form represent generalised patterns that came out of the research. Any idiosyncrasies noted in relation to these generalised patterns are identified as such.

Ethics

This research obtained university ethical approval. School and EGYV administrators served as gatekeepers and acting *in loco parentis* provided informed consent for focus groups to take place. The research was announced to parents and guardians with an offer of dissent in school bulletins and students were also provided opportunities to opt out. This approach is consistent with the ethics of childhood studies (Alderson 1995; Morrow and Richards 1996) and Article 12 of 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which states children have a right to 'take part in research that considers matters affecting them'. Following consensus Eurogang research protocols (Weerman et al. 2009), the exact communities, schools, websites, and gangs in this study cannot be named. This is to avoid stigmatisation. Demographic information relating to the sampling frame is also not disclosed because it would *de facto* reveal the geographic location of the study. Names of the participants have been removed to preserve confidentiality.

‘Hashtag sociality’ (Postill and Pink 2012, 9) and the same techniques our focus group participants used to access and search social networking sites, provided a native pathway through the social media landscape that facilitated understanding of the processes, time, and attention youth pay to social media content. The approach was not ‘voyeur or a disengaged observer ... but to some extent a participant with some of the same concerns, emotions and commitments of the research subjects’ (Hine 2000, 47). Reading comments, conversations, and reactions posted online enabled observation of gang-related activity in real time, including items that were explicitly discussed in the focus groups. Appropriate steps were taken to eliminate bias, but we acknowledge the social positions we occupy in regards to age, class, gender, and ethnicity affect the data and interpretation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 15), not least because an inherent power imbalance exists when adults interpret the lives of children (Alderson 1995).

Findings

Gambetta (1993, 129) posits there are three ways of dealing with the symbolism of groups such as gangs: (1) take it all at face value, understanding the mythology of the gangs as a realistic representation of the actual thing; (2) disregard the whole complex of symbols as an ‘elaborate fiction’; or (3) reach for a middle path, acknowledging ‘the myth lends force to a reality which would not otherwise be able to manifest itself’. Nowhere is the image of gangs as related to reality (even if this relation is in many ways manipulated or instrumentalised) and used in constructing reality (in the sense that real gang members draw on and take advantage of myths) more visible than on social networking sites. YouTube ‘trap rap,’ a genre developed in the US city of Atlanta in the mid-2000s and popularised by artists such as T.I. and Rick Ross, was the ultimate digital artefact for denoting gang culture. The way in which trap rap videos are shared across platforms, the conversations they inspire, how they are made, what they are made for, and who audiences are, are central to understanding the expressive and instrumental aspects of gang life.

Youtube and trap rap

It would be easy to reduce the trap rap videos posted by gang members to hyperbole and braggadocio. There is certainly a lot of ‘impression management’, per Goffman, happening on YouTube. Two-thirds of the videos we watched, for example, were high definition with visibly high production values. In the era of ‘internet as a record label’ (Patterson 2014), 15 of the 23 videos (65%) were produced, directed, and posted by professional online music channels, such as GRM Daily and Link Up TV, and included pop-up advertising or product placement. This was all part of the expressive work of the gang, or ‘brand strategy’, as one respondent called it (Male, 14, Group 2). In the focus groups, one young person who had performed in one of these videos explained, ‘You rehearse first, decide what you want the video to look like and you just call them [hosting sites] and they will like turn up, film, produce and hype the video’ (Male, 14, Group 10). Online credits revealed rival gangs worked with the same producers, however, suggesting gangs may not like each other, but they do like the same means to an end.

Professional videographers and editors cost money, which was where the expressive parts of the gang began to overlap with its instrumental elements. The ‘money made

through gang business' – a reference to 'trapping' or illicit drug sales – had been 'reinvested into something that makes legitimate money', like trap rap, which, in turn, helped 'promote gang business', namely illicit drug sales (Female, 15, Group 9). It was a cycle. Trap rap videos contributed to a gang's most valuable asset – its 'good name' or reputation (Gambetta 1993, 43). Whilst the vision of success was at times grandiose, *virtual* reality boosted the gang's reputation as a quality provider of illicit goods and services, said our focus groups, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts in *actual* reality, they added, because, as in business, consumers put a premium on quality products and services that give them a positive experience. Tweets such as 'Trappin and rapping don't work no time see my people' (Profile 6) and 'rappin and trappin same time same place easy life' (Profile 19), for example, illustrate how the mythical 'trap' on YouTube overlapped with the real trap on the streets.

That 'youngers need seed money from gang olders to get their videos produced' (Female, 15, Group 10) spoke to the hierarchical organisation of gangs. One trap rap performer observed:

You have to pay them (producers), but the olders do that, comes out of gang business, they sort it all out, time and place. We don't get paid, but you got to be in them when they ask as after it might get you places. They (the olders) must think I'm good for business, init. (Male, 15, Group 5)

The above highlights a gang structure in which more senior or 'embedded' (see Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013) gang members, known as olders, were responsible for coordinating and casting the music videos.

Going country

The most dominant and consistent theme in the videos we watched was 'trapping' (with an average of 16 mentions per song), followed by violence (12 mentions). Young people used rap videos, and related content, to promote their skills in drug sales and question their rivals' success in the industry. 'Your not trappin if I see mans on the block broad day light you just rap about it' (Profile 28) and '@[username] be a good yute play your computer tryna make it out why do you think were selling good food (drugs) for @[username]' (Profile 29), are but two examples posted on Twitter. Online discussions were full of references to drug dealing and 'working the country lines', that is commuting from London to sell drugs in other British towns (see Windle and Briggs 2015b; National Crime Agency 2015). Photos of money supposedly made from trapping, train tickets to towns visited 'going country', motorways and scenery they had come across on their travels, even comments about people's accents (e.g. '@[username], these sides aint like the endz they chat weird out here #24hrtrap' (Profile 7)) and the size of houses filled the internet. #Backondamotorway, #ringringtrap, #24hrtrap #abando (abandoned building) were all Hashtags tied to the idea of '#going cnt'. Intentionally or not, such expressive actions reinforced for our focus groups the claims made on rap videos that gangs were genuine providers of illegal goods and services – an instrumental function.

Focus group participants argued money was the key motivator for gang membership and violence was primarily used when 'business' interests, specifically those tied to the drug trade, were threatened. One young person explained, 'Real violence only happens when it needs to and there has got to be a good reason for it now'. He added, 'It's not

like the old days, it's all about the money now' (Male, 15, Group 4). We heard statements like this a lot, for example: 'Money, money, money that's what it's all about now. It ain't about all this violence and shanking anymore, that was like 2008. You gotta prove your trap now, be business men' (Male, 15, Group 1). Whilst this all could be gang hype, the sentiment was reflected in a number online comments, such as, 'This bad boy ting is out of date now just get money @[username]#24hr #trap' (Profile 35), lending veracity to the claims.

The shift away from expressive to instrumental violence was attributed in part to a high profile 'joint enterprise' case where students from rival schools were sent to prison *en masse* for organising a murder online (Bell 2013). Respondents claimed this case forced gang members to 'get smart' about posting expressive threats online. As one explained:

You just can't do that shit anymore, be like shank you this and that, you have to be real careful. Maybe set up fake profiles to do that because police can do us all like they did those yutes [sic] from the train station. (Female, 14, Group 4)

It also changed how gang members used social media to achieve or accomplish an action. Some used *closed* Twitter handles and social steganography (i.e. coded messages similar to journalist's 'wink' that only a few or maybe one person can understand), for example, to relay messages and instructions regarding the logistics of their drug lines. Focus group participants described being invited into exclusive online groups as something that was 'earned', indeed 'being asked to step up to the next level of business' (Male, 14, Group 8) or 'a privilege and sign of trust' (Male, 15, Group 1).

Gang organisation

Focus group participants reported searching for gang members online using 'street names' or 'tag names' (Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Pitts 2008), some of which were trending Twitter hashtags. In addition to nicknames, name modifiers such as 'OG' (original gangster), 'YG' (young gun), 'Yunger', 'Lil', 'Tinie', and 'Baby', were employed frequently on social media to denote position within the gang. For example, '#[gang name] @[username] you cant diss [name] 5 years later when he was alive you wasn't involved at all youd been a tinie then literally say things in gangs to get ratings' (Profile 3) and '@[username] just watch og [name] dis niggas live on stage' (Profile 14). Name modifiers also revealed rules of interaction within the gang. Lower ranking members typically did not post or comment online unless first engaged or tagged by older or more senior members, for example. Further, 'youngers' generally communicated with other lower ranking members and girls to help build presence but, again, only in ways that conformed to the gang's 'brand strategy' (Male, 14, Group 2).

Focus group participants confirmed younger gang members had to be especially careful about what they posted online to ensure they were not claiming the 'ratings' (i.e. peer affirmation) of other gang members or using the 'main (gang) hashtag in the wrong way' (Male, 14, Group 6). Rules of engagement were strictly enforced online, subjects claimed, and there were sanctions for anyone who broken them; all features of instrumental gangs. We found examples online of young people virtually 'outed' for making fraudulent claims, including claims about being part of the gang, which would suggest social networking sites do not 'enable those on the periphery to claim association', as

Harding (2014, 147) argued. Comments attached to music videos would label people ‘snitches’ or ‘snakes’ for sharing too much information about the original artist(s). People deemed to be asking too many questions in online forums would be shut down and accused of being ‘feds’ (law enforcement). Accounts that looked new or with too few followers, pictures, or details would be deemed ‘catfish’ (false or deceptive) accounts. We even found Snapchat and Vine videos of violent assaults, ‘punishment beatings,’ or people being ‘shamed’ and ‘stripped’ naked by their own gang, embedded in Tweets designed to send a deterrent message to the viewing public. Such content was shared under hashtags such as #fakers, #wiggas, #snitchesgestitches.

A minority of imprisoned gang members were part of this broader gang structure and, if anything, their status within the gang was elevated by the traction their social media accounts received whilst inside. ‘@yung[username] Free my lil bro [name]. Its been a full 3 years since we had @[username] @[username] @[username] @[username] on road at the same time free up man [dollar, gun, 100% emoji]’ (Profile 41), is an example of a Tweet citing at least four gang members serving time in prison or young offenders’ institution. Another example read, ‘Got niggz doing time in jail don’t worry dem clocks don’t stop’ (Profile 33). Mentions on social media helped incarcerated gang members stay relevant and achieve expressive goals, as the following exchange from focus group 6 highlights:

Female, 15: I didn’t even know him before he went pen (penitentiary) then when you saw that snap baiting young [name] in the cell and it was like, ‘boy how did I not know you?’

Male, 14: I know! And when he was out he was on big man tings.

Male, 15: Yeah, he making a bunch of money now, not just yg (young gun) no more.

Having members imprisoned, in turn, boosted gang reputations, validating their ‘criminal credentials’ and perceived capacity for instrumental activity (Densley 2013, 124). Prison selfies, videos of prison violence or rival gang members being forced to denounce gangs or disrespect gang colleagues, photos of prison life or makeshift weapons in the hand of the account owner, even sound bites of inmates rapping from inside were just some of the digital artefacts we found posted by supposedly incarcerated gang members. Inmates used social media to sustain their position within the gang and stay connected to day-to-day gang processes, although we suspect some social media accounts were maintained by ‘proxy users’ like girlfriends and siblings (Lim et al. 2013, 11), not concealed mobile phones. Still, a ‘man on the inside with a phone is peak’ (Male, 15, Group 3) because he can ‘bridge the gap between the pen and street [and] work out some new business opportunities’ (Male, 15, Group 6).

Remote mothering and online collateral

Regarding another instrumental goal – recruitment – we found evidence, in contrast to Windle and Briggs (2015a), that older gang members were grooming younger boys for participation in instrumental gang activities, initiating contact then outsourcing tasks and errands via social media that got progressively more difficult or risky. During the focus groups, for example, young people showed us a WhatsApp instant message that invited recipients to ‘call if you want to make some money,’ connected to an image of a

pile of cash. Calling the number listed ‘links you up with someone who will help you start shooting (selling drugs)’, explained one boy (Male, 13, Group 12). Obviously the gang already knew the recipient(s) because they had his or her telephone number, but in light of the ‘quasi-celebrity’ status gang members occupied in the community (see Densley 2013; Harding 2014), the excitement young people felt in receiving an invite such as this was palpable. We found similar messages and memes on Twitter and even a profile picture on YouTube that doubled as an advertisement for making ‘quick and easy money’ from drug dealing.

Our respondents also talked about gang members ‘monitoring’ who had ‘liked’, ‘tagged’ or ‘retweeted’ content they had posted online, then reaching out to their so-called ‘admirers’ and ‘groupies’ to recruit them into performing ‘one off jobs’ for the gang (Female, 15, Group 2; Male, 13, Group 4). Young women were especially vulnerable to this sort of thing, we were told, because they found attention from gang members flattering, as the following exchange from focus group 1, demonstrates:

Female 1, 14: “Yeah, if you tweet them or get them lots of shares, they gonna contact you.”

Female 2, 15: “True story, you know you’re gonna get gassed (excited) too.”

Female 3, 14: “Yes, yes, especially when they do it publically, like on your feed, lets everyone else see.”

Female 1: “Oh my god, yes, that is the one.”

Female 2: “If they do that you know they are serious so you can go on with their PM’s (private message), you know what I’m saying.”

Tweets from gang members to girls that read, ‘always nice when good girls share your beats @[username]#sweetness’ (Profile 3) or ‘you like my snap yeah’ followed by emoji’s such as the 100% symbol or ‘xoxo’ denoting hugs and kisses (Profile 11), showcased this idea. However, many respondents cautioned that gang members befriend girls only to later take advantage of them for criminal or sexual purposes. Often girls are sent first to ‘test’ the viability of certain county lines, for instance. Positive attention did not last long online either, as sexism and sexual harassment via tweets, retweets, videos, and memes was commonplace.

Beyond the means of communication, therefore, social media facilitated the control and manipulation of certain young people. We observed online an extreme form of what Wessells (2010, 142) describes as ‘remote mothering’ – that is, the ability to monitor where someone is, what they are doing, and who they are with at all times via locations tags, GPS tracking, pictures and video calling. Real time data were being integrated into aspects of gangs’ instrumental activities. Gang elders tracked gang youngsters. Gang boys tracked their girlfriends. ‘They always got to know where you at’, explained one respondent (Male, 14, Group 3). Gang boys might be instructed to ‘meet up with someone to give them something’ or ‘get to a train station to get a train somewhere’ (Female, 15, Group 6). Gang girls might be told or ‘get to some boy’s house and be ready to beat (have sex)’ (Female, 14, Group 1). The response had to be instantaneous or there would be sanctions in the form of physical or sexual violence – sanctions that young people generally rationalised: ‘If your battery died or you just aren’t quick then we could be losing money innit so you just gotta make it work’ (Male, 15, Group 5).

The above explains in part why young people so often are glued to their smart phones and why, when adults tried to take phones away or demanded they be turned off, we watched young people get angry, upset, and even violent. As one girl stated, ‘I tried to tell them I needed my phone but they wouldn’t listen, what are they going to do, give me an afterschool (detention)? Oh well better than getting slapped up because I didn’t show up’ (Female, 14, Group 8).

Online collateral, or ‘hostage taking’ (see Gambetta 2009), was also used to bind people to the gang. As one participant explained:

You can’t get caught slipping (being in a rival area) even if it’s far, like, in country, because you know someone going to catch you and take a photo or video or something and that’s it you’re done, you best hide or run or something and gets pics of you with police well you better get yourself some protection or something its over. (Male, 14, Group 6)

Hostage taking advanced gang members’ material interests by deterring descent. Embarrassing or incriminating images, videos, screen shots of messages, and voice notes were used to ensure compliance, especially among subordinate gang members and girls. Online collateral for girls took the form of graphic sexual images, including photos where the name of a particular gang or gang member was written across the breasts or buttocks of the victim, symbolising possession. Girls’ fear of being ‘exposed’ online was visceral during the focus groups, helping maintain an exploitative gang structure oriented toward instrumental goals (Densley, Davis, and Mason 2013).

The fans of gangs

We learned some gang members, inspired by celebrity vloggers (video bloggers), had enabled the monetisation feature in YouTube, allowing the site to place pre-roll, in-search, and in-display ads in their videos, and pay them based on the number of clicks or views received. This may sound ambitious given the average person has 208 followers on Twitter (Beevolve 2012) and the average unsigned artist has only 27,000 views on YouTube (Marshall 2015). However, some of the profiles we found online had between 500 and 10,000 followers on Twitter. One YouTube video we watched gained almost 900,000 views in eight months. The reply from the rival gang gained 135,000 views in five months. Suffice it to say, both gangs had a wide reach.

We recognise this is the exception not the rule. Still, some gang members were even ‘verified’ on Twitter owing to their online popularity. Twitter (2015) states, ‘Verification is currently used to establish authenticity of identities of key individuals and brands on Twitter,’ adding, ‘We concentrate on highly sought users’. Gang members also engaged in their own form of verification, by tagging or linking to mainstream media coverage of their gang and its deeds. We found links to newspaper articles and television broadcasts naming the gang and its members in the comments sections of YouTube videos, for example. This was a cyber-enhanced ‘vouching’ mechanism as described by Densley (2013, 102): ‘The news helps gang members. It’s marketing. If your name’s in the paper, if you’re on *Crimewatch*, your ratings go up’.

Gang members were not necessarily looking to ‘go viral’ (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). Instead, they wanted to be respected by their peers, namely other trap rappers in the area that had ‘made it on YouTube’ (Male, 14, Group 11). The mentality was, ‘yeah if I

get enough views maybe [name] will notice and they will hook me up with their scene and put me in their video' (Male, 13, Group 5). As an addendum to Harding's (2014, 250) work on 'rumour and gossip' in gangs, therefore, some gang members lived 'soap fandoms', wherein their peers consumed daily instalments of updates, videos, conversations, and pictures which, in turn, 'facilitates rituals of sharing and debate' (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 167). Schools were sites of this soap gossip – before and after our focus groups, young people would gather around cell phones to digest what had happened the night before on social media, send links or screen shots to each other as evidence, and watch other people's conversations unfold.

Real discussion about virtual happenings not only increased traffic to and from the original online artefacts, but also give those on the periphery of gangs an opportunity to work on their own reputations by filling in the back story, their own involvement in it, or links they had to the people involved. It is at this point where 'hyping the situation to point of escalation' (Female, 15, Group 10) or embellishing stories to boost reputation may come, a digitally enhanced version of traditional gang 'mythologizing' (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). For the first time, however, the stories gang members share can be instantly fact-checked:

If you're gonna say something on like Twitter then you best be able to back it up with a video or picture or somethin', it can't be from when you're lookin' about 12, it's gotta be from now or after you know something's gonna happen. (Male, 15, Group 4)

Densley (2013, 102) argued, 'when gangs post something typically the only people who notice are police and other gang members'. The current study suggests this has changed. Trap rap has a broad fan base, which explains the large number of followers and views gang members receive. Some focus group respondents said they used social media as a means to learn and practice the culture for when they do participate (for similar arguments, see Hine 2000; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Wessells 2010). Consistent with 'big gang theory' (Felson 2006), however, even passive observers or 'lurkers' give material strength to gangs just by being present, thus potentially contributing to gangs' instrumental goals. In the end, the expression of gangs serves the audience as much as it does the gang itself.

Discussion and conclusion

The current study asked to what extent gangs' use of social media was expressive, instrumental, or both. To answer this question, we first harnessed the instrumental/expressive typology prominent in gang research to examine the role of trap rap videos. We found these videos were associated with the drug trade among London street gangs, who have turned to social media to boast, make connections with potential new markets ('going country'), and occasionally monetise videos on websites such as YouTube. Second, drawing on focus groups of gang-involved youth and residents of communities characterized by gangs, and analysing the web of social media sites, videos, hashtags, involved users, cellular phone applications, etc., the current study explored the utility of social media for these groups, the consequences of social media use for 'gang business,' and its capacities to supplement current gang relations (both within the group, and between groups). The current study thus contributes to a nascent body of gang literature:

first, to gang research from the UK, and second, to the growing body of research on gang and gang member use of the internet.

Our findings add to a predominately American scholarship (e.g. Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015) and demonstrate the popular instrumental/expressive dichotomy is far more complex than is currently treated in the literature. The current study demonstrates a convergence of expressive and instrumental behaviours online; for instance, how reputation building can potentially be leveraged into new drug markets. We see demonstration of this mutually reinforcing relationship as an important contribution and springboard for future research. No doubt individual and collective myth-making remains a central component of ‘cyber-banging’ (Haut 2014; Morselli and Décarry-Héту 2013), but the present research highlights ways in which ostensibly expressive activities also achieve instrumental goals, such as facilitating drug sales, recruiting new members, and punishing rule violations. Prior research (e.g. Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016) has shown how gang-involved youth use the internet expressively (e.g. trading insults) in ways that result in instrumental action (e.g. violence), but the current study goes beyond gang ‘surf and turf wars’ (King, Walpole, and Lamon 2007). We find trap rap videos enable gang-involved youth to launder the proceeds of crime, particularly money made selling drugs, into legitimate ventures that, in turn, promote criminal deeds. Tales of ‘going country’ thus enable gangs to ‘go viral’. The instrumental and expressive are intertwined.

Trap rap videos are cultural artefacts intimately connected to youth culture in London and are instrumental for understanding local gang culture. Rappers likely embellish the intensity of trap identities according to cultural expectations that align success in crime with status and legitimacy (e.g. Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Lauger 2012), but this does not diminish the important role of social media in the life of the gang. Gang members similarly elevate their perceived status among peers by exaggerating their participation in the crime during less public communicative endeavours like gossiping and telling stories, for instance (Lauger 2012, 2014). Such social routines and events allow scholars to examine the expressive culture of gangs in relation to its instrumental goals. Most cultural events are difficult to access, yet online rap videos and twitter feeds are widely available and ideally situated for cross-city or international comparisons of gang culture, which merits further research.

Social media, like gangs (Lauger 2014), has a ‘strong tradition of appropriation, transformation, performativity and (local) identity expression’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 186). Our data have little to say about the degree to which gang-involved youth truly embrace and internalise their online identities. This is an obvious limitation. Our inability to fully examine gang member’s sense of self, however, mirrors the experiences of the consumers of this content (i.e. youth in our focus groups), who may lack intimate knowledge of YouTube ‘performers’ (Van Hellemont 2012). Social media help build personal and group myths but the degree to which they distort reality is hard to determine. The focus groups added some external validity to the content analysis, whereby youth influenced by gangs confirmed that the digital artefacts we found reflected reality. Still, this tells us very little about how fully individual gang members embrace their public gang identity – a gap to be filled by future research.

Another possible limitation is we found the online behaviours of gangs were indicative of gang structure (see also Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2014), but by analysing only two

gangs with already well-established social media campaigns, located in a designated EGYV area, bias toward more organisation might have existed already. To this end, we see the current study as contributing to an emerging literature on gangs' use of the internet (e.g. Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2013, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015)—a literature that requires regular updating, say Decker and Pyrooz (2011b), because technology moves so fast. As with all exploratory, qualitative studies, generalisations are limited. Only by studying more gangs, in more communities, will we be able to identify concordant and discriminant findings. Just as Klein (2006) once insisted that gang measures be included in all longitudinal studies of delinquency, therefore, we advocate that measures of social media usage be embedded in all future studies of gangs.

Existing empirical research on gangs' use of the internet has involved adults aged 18 and over or incarcerated *offenders* (e.g. Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker 2013, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule 2015). These trends likely reflect the practical and ethical challenges of studying insular groups such as gangs. Nevertheless, adult/researcher interpretations within content and/or discourse analyses are rarely triangulated with the voices of the primary producers and consumers of gang-related content – young people. Another contribution of the current study, therefore, is the inclusion of the interpretations of youth who routinely experience gangs both online and in person; from whom we learnt we must be careful not to reduce gang-involved youth to online *offenders*, thus denying the victim-offender overlap in gang life (Pyrooz, Moule, and Decker 2014) and the inherent risks of victimisation people in gang neighbourhoods face. Gang-involved youth are not *other* to *normal* young people, as Hallsworth (2013) and others remind us. Locating gang research within the broader cyberbullying literature (e.g. Patton et al. 2014), therefore, might help shift the focus away from instrumental *organisation* toward instrumental *exploitation*. The current study reaffirms there are 'winners' and 'losers' within gang life (Harding 2014), both online and offline, and from a practice standpoint the losers need safeguarding and the winners need intervention. There are plenty of 'digital fingerprints' for law enforcement to follow (Marsico 2009) – if we can find them 'open source', so can they. As one user who trolled the sites behind the name and profile picture of a fictional police officer from the soap opera *EastEnders* wrote, 'I watch all this trap music bullshit to gather evidence and send these lot to the bin'.

In conclusion, the findings presented here show adults need to take the expressive aspects of young people's social media usage seriously and not trivialise them because they fail to conform to conventional standards of communication. Some of comments, videos, and images we found online, particularly those related to instrumental sanctions, hostage taking, and the mechanics of trapping, were extremely troubling. 'Gang industry' professionals (Densley 2011) must quickly decide whether social media constitutes a private space for young people to be left alone or a public space to be intervened in. In the context of traditional outreach with gang-involved youth (e.g. Klein 1971), we need an agenda for streetwork where no street (or only a 'digital' one (Lane 2015)) exists. Further implications include the need for traditional media to stop naming gangs and providing them with fodder to 'like' or 'link' to. Likewise, the music industry professionals behind some of the gang-related rap videos must ask themselves whether the benefits of 'going viral' are worth the costs of reifying gangs and tacitly endorsing 'going country'.

Note

1. A school that accommodates children who are excluded, sick, or otherwise unable to attend a mainstream school, fulfilling local authority obligations to educate all children.

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