Computers in Human Behavior 29 (2013) A54–A59

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Internet banging: New trends in social media, gang violence, masculinity and hip hop

Desmond Upton Patton [a,*], Robert D. Eschmann [b], Dirk A. Butler [b]

[a] School of Social Work, 1080 S. University, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA
[b] School of Social Service Administration, 969 E. 60th Street, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 18 January 2013

Keywords:
Social media
Gang violence
African American males
Hip hop

ABSTRACT

Gang members carry guns and twitter accounts. Media outlets nationally have reported on a new phenomenon of gang affiliates using social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to trade insults or make violence threats that lead homicide or victimization. We term this interaction *internet banging*. Police departments in metropolitan areas have increased resources in their gang violence units to combat this issue. Interestingly, there is little to no literature on this issue. We argue internet banging is a cultural phenomenon that has evolved from increased participation with social media and represents an adaptive structuration, or new and unintended use of existing online social media. We examine internet banging within the context of gang violence, paying close attention to the mechanisms and processes that may explain how and why internet banging has evolved. We examine the role of hip-hop in the development of internet banging and highlight the changing roles of both hip hop and computer mediated communication as social representations of life in violent communities. We explore the presentation of urban masculinity and its influence on social media behavior. Lastly, we conduct a textual analysis of music and video content that demonstrates violent responses to virtual interactions.

1. Introduction

Gang members carry guns and twitter accounts. Recently, media outlets have reported on a relatively new national phenomenon of Internet behavior in which individuals that are associated with gangs or neighborhood factions use social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to incite dares, trade insults or make threats of violence which may result in homicide or victimization. We term this interaction *internet banging*. Metropolitan police departments have increased the officers in their gang violence units and online presence to combat this growing issue (Hays, n.d. http://www.komonews.com/news/national/Social-media-fueling-gang-violence-in-New-York-172282191.html). There is little to no empirical or conceptual literature on this growing problem.

In this conceptual article, we argue that internet banging is a cultural phenomenon that has evolved from increased access to and participation with social media and represents an adaptive structuration, or new and unintended use of existing online social media. We examine internet banging within the context of gang violence while paying close attention to the mechanisms and processes that may explain how and why internet banging has evolved. We critically examine the role of hip-hop as a conduit by which internet banging occurs and highlight the changing roles of both hip hop and computer mediated communication as social representations of life in violent communities. In addition, we explore the extent to which the presentation of masculinity influences and is affected by social media behavior. In order to explore and identify how violent messages are communicated, we also conduct a textual analysis of music and video content that demonstrates violent responses to virtual interactions. Important questions are: (1) how is internet banging explained by the computer mediated communication literature, and how does it represent a departure from established theory; (2) what changes in our culture have led to this trend in social media; (3) who is affected and why; and (4) how do social constructions such as hip-hop and masculinity interact with social media?

In the next section, we provide a definition for internet banging. We then turn to the computer mediated communication literature to explore the theoretical concepts that guide research on new trends in social media. Next, we further describe the internet-banging trend, and connect it to theories of collective identity and masculinity. We conclude by suggesting a connection between hip hop and internet banging, and analyzing examples of this trend.

2. Internet banging defined

Internet banging is a term used to describe a trend in online behavior among individuals perceived to be gang affiliated in the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 734 763 6582.
E-mail addresses: dupatton@umich.edu (D.U. Patton), rdeschmann@uchicago.edu (R.D. Eschmann), dirkabutler@gmail.com (D.A. Butler).

0747-5632/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.035

United States. Some reporters have referenced this behavior as "ganging banging on the internet" or "cyber banging," but scholarly writing around the topic is sparse. Across the country, newspapers and blogs in cities like Chicago and New York City have reported on young people, usually African American and male, using social media sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube) or chat rooms to broadcast their gang affiliation, brag about a recent fight or murder and communicate threats. Reports from local newspapers suggest the following key elements of internet banging: (1) promote gang affiliation and/or communicate interest in gang activity; (2) gain notoriety by reporting participation in a violent act or communicating an impending threat; (3) share information about rival gangs or network with gang members across the country. At this point it is unclear whether or not internet banging is strictly a male phenomenon. Media has reported on male gang members as internet bangers and thus for the purposes of this article we structure our conversation around the behaviors of men who engage in internet banging. However, there is no evidence that this is solely male or an African American behavior. After reviewing the relevant literature on computer mediated communication, we will use a socio-historical conception of masculinity as a lens through which we theorize internet banging's origins.

3. Trends in social media

Overall, youth are spending more time on the Internet in recent years. Specifically, over 66% of 4–9th graders access the Internet from their bedroom (ChildrenOnline, 2008). Youth have always founds public spaces to gather and gossip, provide support, compete for social status, collaborate and share information. Websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have sparked new communication modes for young people that are instant, intersect public and private domains and are readily available (Wolff, McDevitt, Stark, 2011). While these virtual hangouts create new spaces for engagement for young people, they provide a challenge for adults and those concerned with monitoring content and behavior. Moreover, adults and authorities find it challenging to stay abreast of the new ways in which youth communicate.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is defined as "communication that occurs within the context of the Internet or internetworks" (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3039). The past two decades have witnessed a growth of research on the Internet, social media and CMC. With over 2.4 billion users on the Internet in 2012 (retrieved from internetworldstats.com), CMC has never been more relevant for social scientists.

In 2000, McKenna and Bargh, discussed the potential social consequences of increased CMC and provided a balanced discussion of both positive and negative implications. Over the past decade empirical work has both disproven and confirmed their propositions. Some argue that CMC can have a positive effect on identity formation. As individuals feel free to express themselves without social repercussion, they take on alternative social roles and marginalized groups are capable of finding others with like characteristics and form online communities. CMC can also be a supplement for face to face (FtF) interactions. By studying impression management on online social networking sites like Facebook, researchers have described the connection between how one is presented or how many friends one has on social status in the real world (Lim, Chan, Vadrevu, & Basnyat, 2013).

Researchers have also documented some more negative aspects of CMC. The online disinhibition effects refer to a lessening of behavioral inhibitions, and toxic disinhibition refers to behaviors that damage one's own or others' self-image (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). When online users perceive themselves to be free of social norms, their activities are no longer bound by society's standards. One example of this is the proliferation of extremist and hate websites (Leets, 2001). Individuals are more likely to express extremist views online, where there is no social cost for adopted unpopular ideologies. Because the internet allows those with similar views to find each other, group polarization theory suggests that these communities will only increase the strength of subgroup ideologies. *Group polarization* is the tendency for like-minded individuals to become more extreme in their views in group settings (Christopherson, 2007). Research has shown that this tendency is stronger in CMC interactions than in FtF interactions.

The anonymous nature of CMC partially explains this disinhibition phenomenon. Christopherson (2007) distinguishes between two relevant types of anonymity. *Technical anonymity* refers to an actual lack of identifiers, while *social anonymity* refers to the perception that one is unidentifiable. This means that even users who can be identified by their email addresses, screen names, or real names, enjoy a false sense of anonymity online. They perceive the internet to be an environment that is completely separate from the physical.

This anonymity frees individuals from "normative and social constraints of behavior," and is evidenced by increased hostility and inappropriate behavior (Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012). An example of the impact of anonymity on hostile and aggressive behavior is provided by Coffey and Woolworth's research on online newspaper posts (2004).

These authors conducted research in a small city that had recently experienced a stream of violent crimes, culminating in a homicide, with the suspected perpetrators being black and Hispanic youth. The authors described two venues provided for residents to respond or vent about this issue: an online discussion board and a town hall meeting. The authors found that the online posts were filled with racist and hateful language that advocated vigilante justice and violence towards minority youth. In contrast, the town hall meetings were peaceful, and no residents verbalized race-based resentment rooted in these attacks. The anonymous nature of the virtual space freed posters from norms of respect, due process and justice, and led to residents making incendiary comments that may not be consistent with the values they acknowledge as acceptable. There is a separation between the virtual and the real, CMC and FtF interactions. The internet is understood to be a social space conducive to increased hostility, greater disinhibition and increased social freedom. With internet banging, we see a link between virtual hostility and actual violence. If increased online hostility is correlated with increased violence, there are real-world consequences of the online disinhibition effect.

3.1. Cyberbullying

Understanding internet banging requires determining its place in the broader virtual aggression literature. Cyberbullying is a CMC occurrence modeled after real-world bullying, yet remains conceptually distinct. Most cyberbullying occurs during adolescence and in contexts where there is less supervision (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013). It also has a greater potential audience, which could intensify the negative mental health consequences of being victimized (Slonje et al., 2013). Researchers continue to debate whether or not cyberbullying is similar to traditional bullying; but cyberbullying is distinct from actual bullying in several ways. First, there is a smaller power differential in cyberbullying. While real bullies are often physically imposing, there are no physical or social requisites to be a cyberbully. In fact, traditionally defined geeks may have the added advantage of technical skills and proficiency in CMC. There is some agreement that cyberbullying is an umbrella term that includes online bullying, electronic bullying and Internet harassment. The various terms used to describe