Crime Facilitation Purposes of Social Networking Sites:
A Review and Analysis of the "Cyberbanging" Phenomenon

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Executive Summary

There have been growing claims in media circles and law-enforcement settings that street gangs and criminal organizations are turning to Internet-based social networking sites for various reasons, ranging from the showcasing of their images and exploits to the suspected recruitment of members. The present study investigates whether such a trend is, in fact, in place. The presence of street gangs on these Internet sites is referred to as *cyberbanging*. While there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that gangs are turning to social networking sites, there is little available research on exactly how street gangs and criminal groups use the Internet. The few studies that are available acknowledge the importance of the Internet as a key channel of diffusion for street gang values and general subculture. The presence of social networking sites has been documented, but no signs of proactive recruitment have emerged. Instead, past research has demonstrated that street gangs are primarily using social networking sites for bragging about their exploits and sharing their plights with law-enforcement and criminal justice with a wider, often supportive public.

That street gangs are not recruiting members through social networking sites is not a surprise. It is often assumed that street gangs are cohesive groups, but network research on this issue has found otherwise. Street gang culture and organization is in many ways an individualized phenomenon and this feature ties in directly with recent assessments of the Internet as a setting that is governed by a process of networked individualism. This theoretical link between the individualized street gang setting and the presence of street gang members on social networking sites helps us understand why recruitment is improbable even in a context where people are openly diffusing their image and exploits to a growing number of Internet users.

The empirical segment of this research adds to this general outlook. Based on a keyword search of over fifty street gang names, the three main social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace) were monitored for street gang presence. Results illustrate that gang presence on social networking sites is linked primarily to promoting a general gang or street culture through individual displays. In most cases, the sites are designed and managed by members and associates who emphasize their allegiance to reputed groups, such as the MS-13, Crips, Bloods, or Latin Kings. These gangs are the most prominent across the social networking sites that were monitored. There are some exceptions, such as the the Hells Angels, which were also very prominent, but which exist on-line as chapters or groups and not as individuals. Unlike the majority of street gang groups that were monitored in this study, the Hells Angels did not display their criminal or violent exploits. In regard to the visitors to such sites, there is no evidence that they are being tricked or manipulated in any way. They are, however, showing their curiousity in regard to such groups and, for those who share their comments and opinions, signs of support are evident.

Street gangs are thus not proactively using the Internet to convert anyone into being gang members. Social networking sites are, however, creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come

together. These sites are will have an impact on street gangs and other criminal organizations because they allow such groups to advertise their activities and diffuse their reputations through conventional outlets. More importantly, these sites create a new convergence setting for street gang members to interact with a wider number of people who would probably never have been exposed to their lifestyles and exploits through physical interactions. Thus, while recruitment is not taking place, social networking sites have made street gangs a more accessible phenomenon to a larger portion of the population, thus increasing the scope of favourable definitions that are transmitted around them.

Law-enforcement agencies have been closely monitoring the emergence of street gangs on social networking sites over recent years. Some have also begun using MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook for intelligence gathering and targeting. Law-enforcement officials have also turned to social networking sites to promote their efforts, encourage aid during their investigations, and diffuse their values across a wider community. Little, however, is known about the success of law-enforcement use of such sites. We are clearly at the early stages of this phenomenon and police investigators are still trying to assess how social networking sites will help them achieve their respective goals.

As law-enforcement continues to explore the various avenues offered by such technology, it is recommended that more formal links be created with the principal administrators of social networking sites in order to learn more about how such sites are constructed and how suspects and general activity could be backtracked on a systematic basis. Increasing police cooperation across different jurisdictions is also essential in order to contain this misunderstood and growing problem. Such preparation would also allow law-enforcement officials to rely more on well planned strategies and less on the accidental findings or massive searches that are more likely to be at the root of many of their recent successes in such areas.

Introduction

This discussion paper is intended to enhance our knowledge and understanding of how social media can assist in understanding the functioning and activities of criminal groups, the magnitude of the current and future threats posed by such groups' usage of new communications technology, and potentially provide a reasonable set of options for combating this problem. The study investigates how criminal groups, such as street gangs or criminal organizations, have turned to the Internet and its various resources in order to facilitate their illicit activities, self-promote, and potentially recruit members. The main objective of this study is to assess whether such a trend is, in fact, in place. This is addressed in seven separate sections that follow.

The first section presents various cases of gang presence on social networking sites that have been uncovered by law-enforcement and media sources over recent years. In popular circles, this emergence of gang activity on the Internet has been referred to as *cyberbanging*. The second section provides a review of studies that have addressed this area. This review allows us to reframe the cyberbanging phenomenon and move beyond the typical recruitment claim by including signaling and mimicking processes as the principal phenomenon emerging from this issue. The third section retraces the history of the three main current social networking sites: Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace. This section is followed by a description of the methodology that was used to probe these three sites with a keyword search of street gangs and their illicit activities. The fifth section presents the results from this analysis. The final sections provide the main conclusions from this study and a series of recommendations that the authors feel law-enforcement officials and other criminal justice actors should consider, as they become increasingly familiar with this growing phenomenon.

Cyberbanging?

The idea that recent technological advancements in social networking may influence how criminal groups operate is consistent with the general facilitation framework that has emerged as a key theoretical pathway in organized crime research. Facilitation refers to various ways in which non-criminal actors, situations, or contexts may shape the actions and outcomes of crime. Research in this area has been concerned with the many pull factors that may attract, trigger, or shape the formation of criminal groups in a given territory (Morselli, Turcotte, and Tenti 2010; Van Dijk 2007; Van de Bunt and van de Schoot 2003; Jacobs 1999). One context that has been consistently overlooked across such research is the Internet setting.

It would appear that organized crime has entered the realm of cyberspace. Williams (2001) noted a "discernable trend" in areas as varied as stock fraud, cyber-extortion, money laundering, the propagation of computer viruses, and the networking of hackers with various types of offenders. Similar trends were also raised in the most recent report by Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC), who sounded the alarm in regard to the rise of more sophisticated e-criminals and the use of *malware* or *botnets*, the consumption of Internet-based black market products such as pharmaceutical goods and firearms, identity theft, and computer fraud (CISC 2010). At least in the area of fraud, the

CISC report claimed that offenders were turning to various social networking sites to recruit new accomplices.

Some may argue that the "techno-crimes" described by Williams and CISC fall beyond traditional organized crime parameters, but such crimes nevertheless reflect the extent to which criminal groups and wider networks have increasingly exploited cyberspace for their own purposes. Over recent years, media sources and law-enforcement agencies have publicized cases in which street gangs and criminal organizations have used social networking sites for various reasons ranging from the mere diffusion of their images and exploits to the suspected recruitment of members. In a *Seattle PI* article on Seattle and Tacoma street gangs, Gutierrez (2006) described what law-enforcement authorities referred to as *cyber* or *net banging*, in which gang members use social networking sites to *"showcase their illegal exploits, make threats, and honor killed or jailed members"*. While most experts acknowledged such publicity, they did not perceive this as a recruitment process. One expert who was interviewed for this story, however, did fear that such sites would lead to eventual recruitment. As in other cases, it was often believed that interactions through such sites would lead to physical encounters which would eventually lead to possible co-optation into the gang. In another media report, Vasquez (2008) is much more explicit on the recruitment claim. However, he is also clear that such a claim emerged from law-enforcement sources who maintained that youth who visit social networking sites that project gang members' experiences can *"unwittingly"* become potential recruits. In what is arguably the most striking example of criminal group recruitment over the Internet, at least one media source (London's *Daily Star*) reported a direct experience which involved a website visitor who was explicitly invited to join a criminal group—none other than the Sicilian Mafia. It seems that an 18-year old joined a Facebook group dedicated to reputed Mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano and was subsequently approached by a man who told him that they were looking for Sicilian-born men to collect protection money. The 18-year old politely declined and removed his profile from that page, but it appears that some of his friends took up the offer and became involved in this business.

Gangs, Networks, and the Virtual World
While there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that gangs are turning to social networking sites to recruit new members, there is little publicly available research on exactly how street gangs and criminal groups associated with organized crime use the Internet. Decker, van Gemert, and Pyrooz (2009) have noted that the spread of such groups across Europe has been partially due to the transmission of gang culture across the Internet, but they also warn us not to reduce such proliferation to this single cause. Indeed, the Internet is not the sole channel for such imagery and the transmission of popular hip-hop fashion and street gang lifestyle is also heavily diffused via television, movies, music, and video. Womer and Bunker (2010) also examined the extent to which the Internet has emerged as a key diffusion outlet for street gangs. They assessed the use of social networking sites for Mexican narco gangs by scanning such sites with a keyword search. Their search revealed that gangs related to the Surenos were using social networking sites to brag about their exploits and diffuse their images. Other gangs that were also prominent in their search included the MS-13 and 18th Street. Sites dedicated to

such gangs also included images of members holding guns, showing hand signs, and flashing tattoos. As in the present study, Womer and Bunker also set out to verify if gangs were using these sites to recruit new members. They pointed out that agencies, such as the FBI, interpreted the substantial glorification of gangs on the pages of members as a recruitment measure (p.85). However, no explicit evidence of any form of proactive recruitment strategy was found in their extensive keyword search.

There is also considerable research that has documented the importance of recognizing gang activities and formations as a network phenomenon. Such research provides important insights for the present study. Results from past studies have brought us to question the premise of an organized gang subculture. Klein and Crawford (1967) laid the groundwork for network studies of street gang settings. They studied interactions between core and fringe members of a single Los Angeles gang who were part of an intervention program and found that gang settings were not cohesive, leadership was volatile, and that not all members in a single gang were in equal interaction with each other. These findings are relevant after more than three decades of gang research (see, for example, Weisel 2002; Fleisher 1995; and Skolnick, Bluthenthal, and Correl 1993) and should be taken into consideration when thinking about the presence of gangs in the Internet era.

In many ways, the gang setting is highly individualized and network approaches within such contexts have confirmed this to a considerable extent. One of the more notable research designs to include this approach was part of the Boston Gun Project, a problem-solving research initiative that was designed to confront increasing trends of violence amongst youths in that city. Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl (1997) report their results from field interviews and mapping exercises conducted with street gang experts amongst Boston police officers, probation officers, and street-workers. The fieldwork was designed to arrive at a representation of the social networks of alliances and conflicts between street gangs in the Boston landscape. The authors reported that the gang setting was not highly centralized, but those gangs that were found to be central within the network also matched those referred to as the more troublesome gangs during interviews with law-enforcement officials.

Others have built on where the Boston Gun Project left off. Tita, Riley, Ridgeway, Grammich, Abrahamse, and Greenwood (2003) applied social network analysis to assess various strategies to reduce gang-related violence in a Los Angeles district. Turning to a mix of law-enforcement officials and community group members, the authors derived a network representation of rivalries and violence amongst 29 street gangs. Results illustrated how individual and collective attacks were dispersed and largely contained within a geographical space divided by the San Bernardino Freeway. Rivalries crossed the freeway only by one bridge within the network that was created through the positioning of one gang. Once again, cohesion was weak within this gang setting.

Another research study that was inspired from the Boston Gun Project took place in Newark. McGloin (2005) reported the results of her study conducted in collaboration with the New Jersey Gang Task Force. Her research began with a search for hot spots in

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gang activity and interactions in Newark and its surrounding area. A series of 32 focus group sessions with police experts who identified gang members and their respective associates revealed that four large gangs (the *Bloods*, the *Crips*, the *Latin Kings*, and the *Netas*) dominated Newark, but that they were dispersed across the landscape rather than concentrated in hot spots. Overall, there was no single encompassing gang network.

Most recently, Morselli (2009) analyzed interactions between gang and non-gang members in a drug distribution operation that was targeted by Montreal law-enforcement investigators and found that while gang members were present within the network, they were largely operating as autonomous individuals and were not the most pivotal participants in the network. That gang members are not directly central in gang settings is not a contradiction in itself. For example, Katz, Webb, and Schaefer (2000) found that non-gang members are often central and important participants in settings that are initially believed to be structured around gangs. In many ways, such research confirms the experience of one of Klein's (1971) early interview respondents: "*We got no leaders, man. Everybody's a leader, and nobody can talk for nobody else*" (p.96).

The individualistic nature of street gangs is likely to be enhanced even further when carried into the Internet context. Wellman (2004; 2001) recognizes the community feature of Internet interactions, but has stressed that this new communal frontier is largely governed by *networked individualism*. What Wellman is referring to is that while individuals are increasingly coming together in Internet communities, the speed, ease, and relational transiency with which this is possible makes this an individualized phenomenon, one in which the individual (and not the group or network) is at the centre of his own world.

While the individual takes centre stage, Burt (2010) would add that as in the real world, the virtual world is subject to the same social homophily processes that bring individuals together. But in as much as people with similar tastes, attractions, and achievements may converge with each other through virtual channels of communication, Burt also emphasizes that trust and reputation are radically distinct from real world experiences. In many ways, he argues, these familiar devices may disappear (p.11).

What this suggests for street gang presence on the Internet, and particularly on social networking sites, is that: (1) the presence of already individualized gang members in such an individualized setting suggests that interactions are more likely occurring around members and not as a collective objective for the gang itself; and (2) because trust and reputational features are weakened, the idea that gang members are truly recruiting new members or co-offenders is not likely—it would seem that even gang members would be wary of such risks.

What is more likely to be occurring is a social homophily process in which people of similar tastes and lifestyles converge on a website that triggers key signals. Gang members using such sites may be signalling and, thus, provoking visitors to join the gang. Gambetta (2009) defines such signals as the "stuff of purposive communication" and "any observable features of an agent that are *intentionally displayed* for the purpose of

altering the probability the receiver assigns to a certain state of affairs or event" (p.xv). However, it remains to be established whether gang members are intentionally signalling wannabes and potential recruits or whether they are simply expressing their freedom, as provocative as that may be. For now, such expressions are subject to considerable interpretation. The image and interpretation surrounding this phenomenon is also addressed by Felson (2006), whose work on street gang signalling strategies must also be considered. He finds that many less reputed street gangs or criminal groups will adopt the hand signs, colours, language, clothes, and even the name of a reputed gang in order to enhance their image. Such mimicry is at the core of the many myths and stereotypes surrounding street gangs and that are propagating in media and law-enforcement circles. Thus, even in cases where the signalling strategy is intentional, it may well be that the gang or group behind the message is not established in any serious way.

Given the large degree of ambiguity surrounding the precise reasons why street gangs and other types of criminal networks utilize social media, this study proposes to examine this phenomenon by directly surveying accessible traffic on social media sites. Similarly to Womer and Bunker (2010), a keyword search was devised to examine whether gangs or individual members are currently using the three main social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, or MySpace) to proactively recruit new members, communicate between existing members and associates of a common gang, or diffuse their images in search of support from a small portion of the population that is sensitive to such signalling. Before describing the keyword search that was at the core of the study, a brief overview of the three social networking sites will illustrate why and how such channels of communication have become immensely popular sources of communication beyond the street gang issue.

The Rise of Social Networking Media
Social networking websites have come a long way since their inception during the mid-1990s. The first expression of such services can be found in the 1980s Bulletin Board System (BBS) (Zhongbao et al., 2003). These systems were built around computers to which a limited number of people could dial in and leave messages and exchange files. This very basic (and text-only) interface was popular amongst underground computer enthusiasts (Craig, 2005). The mid-1990s saw the rise of the Internet and new communities. Geocities and Tripod were amongst the first to seize the idea of online communities and they provided their users with a way to find resources on any given subject. The first "recognizable social network site" was SixDegrees, which was launched in 1997 (Boyd and Ellison 2007). These services were very easy to use for neophytes and free of charge. In 2002, Friendster was launched. Such sites were major milestones in that the people behind the website offered their users the possibility to create online profiles where they could connect with friends and the friends of their friends. In a matter of months, websites such as Friendster had more than three million users (Rivlin, 2006).

The success of these early sites did not go unnoticed. Employees of an Internet start-up recognized the potential behind social networking sites and, in a matter of days, created another website which they called MySpace. This website was similar to

Friendster in that it asked its members to create profiles and network with their friends online. It went even further by allowing users to change the layout of their page to reflect their personalities. It also provided a venue for musicians to share their music with millions of people. The flash music player on MySpace is now known to music lovers all over the world and the social networking site even has its own record label. The success of MySpace was instantaneous (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). In 2006, it was the most popular social networking site on the Internet. This was in large part due to the fact that all profiles were, by default, open to everyone. This ensured that people could easily find each other. Such openness did, however, lead to some problems and the website was criticized because it allowed stalkers to follow their victims or children to be harassed by others (e.g., "cyber-bullying"). While Myspace is now concentrating on music promotion, it still has a substantial number of users who share personal views and photos as well as connect with friends and family members.

The problems with MySpace led many users to move to a trendier social networking site, Facebook, which initially had profiles that were private by default. Facebook is a site that offers its members a rich environment to stay in touch with others through messages, photos, videos, and games. Although this social networking site was initially limited to college students, it was gradually made available to everyone over the age of 13. As with MySpace, Facebook's strength soon became its weakness. The website was becoming increasingly crowded with new applications, messages, warnings, and media. Over time, Facebook also tried to open the profiles to a greater extent. Indeed, this website has changed its default privacy settings numerous times over the last two years and has created many problems for end users looking to keep their data private. This led many Facebook users who were ready for something else to stray toward the latest social media contender.

Twitter was launched in 2006. Unlike Facebook and MySpace, this site was better integrated with cellular telephones and thus more accessible. Twitter's unique feature was the *tweet*: a 140-character message that is shared with readers throughout the world. Such tweets were at first quite mundane, but over time a new form of art was created—call it the *art of concision*. It became a challenge for Twitter users to deliver the most punch while using as few characters as possible. Tech enthusiasts were the first to adopt the service when it was launched and they loved the pure interaction with others. There was no application, no pictures, no gifts, or other distractions—only messages exchanged between one person and a network of contacts. All tweets are public which means that, while a person can follow (receive all the messages from) a specific user, it is possible to see all the messages from all users. Such openness created a strong sense of community amongst the members of this social networking site.

Method

A systematic keyword search was devised to execute the empirical segment of this research. The search was restricted to active users on the three main social network sites: Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These were the main sites in which awareness was initially raised in regard to a suspected *cyberbanging* problem. Also, and as demonstrated by a recent survey, these three sites are also the most popular (Nielsen

Company 2010). All three social networking sites also offer the ability to perform a search on archived user traffic. Each site, however, varies in the level of privacy that it offers its users and in the amount of information that it provides. These two aspects must be taken into consideration when searching through the mass of information that was 'mined' for the present research.

To create a list of keywords, online forums, newspapers, and government websites in search of names of street gangs and criminal organizations which are active in and beyond Canada. The same names often emerged and the list was based on the most common.[1] The keyword search was made up of the following list:

> Bloods, Crips, Crack Down Posse, Kazee Brezze, MS-13, Mara Salvatrucha, Bo-Gars, Bad Boys, XVIII, 18th Street, Playboy Gangster Bloods, West Side Ballaz Gang, Dark Family, Blood For Life, Black Eyed Crips, Outlawz Nation Cripz, Baby Boy Crips, Blue 450z Crips, Blue 450z Crips, West Sidaz, Young Pimp Ganster Crips, Gun Clappin Crips, St-Laurent Crips, Asian Young Bloods, Asian Blue Crips, Jamestown Crips, MNM (Mother Nature's Mistakes), Mount Olive Crips, Ghetto Boys, NBC (Net Born Crips), Junior Crips, 18 Buddhas, Ak Kannan, Malvern Crew, Galloway Boys, Regent Park Crew, One Love Crew, Ruthless Russians, Ardwick Blood Crew, McCormack Boys, Hells Angels, Asian Boys, 14k Triad, Almighty Vice Lord Nation, Big Circle Gang, Mara Salvatrucha, Latin Kings, Luen Group, Mickey Cobras, Shower Posse, VVT, Wo Shing Wo, West End Gang, Wah Ching, Red Scorpions, Independent Soldiers.

When searching for gang names with multiple referents and that often referred to entities beyond the street gang context (e.g., Blood for Life, 18th Street), the scan was reduced with an additional query using terms such as *gang, drugs, violence*, and *crime*. Since each social networking site has different features, search capabilities, and user interface, the methodology employed for this research was different for each of the networks.

That Facebook has reduced the privacy of its sites over recent years has led to a goldmine of information for researchers in that many groups, events, photos, and profiles that were meant to be private are now made public without the owner's knowledge or consent. The keyword search was conducted with Facebook's built-in and powerful search engine. Since Facebook profiles are private by default, it would have been useless to index the individual profiles themselves. Instead, the Pages and Groups on Facebook were monitored. Pages are generally open profiles that are created to support an idea or an organization. People can then 'like' this page and link up accordingly. Groups are more content-heavy hubs where people can discuss various personal and social issues,

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[1] One important limit of this approach is that many street gangs and criminal groups will not go by a particular name even though they operate as a collective. Such groups would not be detected by this study's search.

create events, and share media. Users can become members and the creators of these Groups are listed on the page. Both *Pages* and *Groups* can contain public messages, discussions, statements, pictures, videos, and events.

Profiles on MySpace are by default public. Users may keep their material private, but most tend to use the default settings. This allowed a search through the millions of profiles available. As with Facebook, the built-in search engine was used, but the focus was kept on the images and videos that were tagged with the name of specific criminal groups. Unfortunately, the integrated search in MySpace is not very useful to researchers. The results are not clearly labeled and it seems to be missing many of the profiles it should be able to find. The Google InSite option proved to be more effective for locating MySpace profiles associated with any of the keywords. This option orients Google to only look for pages within a specific domain—in this case: *myspace.com*. Google indexes all the public profiles on MySpace as well as the title of the private ones. This provided a more comprehensive and valid dataset than would have been obtained with the built-in MySpace search.

Twitter offered the most accessible data of all the websites. All the messages posted on the site are public and can be subjected to thorough searches. The site provides a clear and useful built-in search which offered access to all tweets posted over the past few months. The limit of the Twitter database is that these messages are restricted to such a small number of characters, thus providing very little information each time.

Results
It is apparently public knowledge that street gangs and organized crime members are using new technologies to commit crimes, communicate, and recruit new members. Social networking sites seem to be one of the preferred tools. The present research suggests that, while recruitment does not emerge in any explicit way, such groups do have a strong presence in the virtual world beyond the anecdotal stories that have been published in newspapers. The three social networking sites that were probed provided three distinct datasets.

Twitter
Twitter is the most recent of the social networking sites and the least used by criminal groups. The keyword search led to little evidence pointing to the presence of criminal groups for any reason. As Table 1 indicates, only eight groups were found to have a presence. Some of the keywords (18th Street, Asian Boys, Bad Boys, Dark Family, VVT, and XVIII) did result in a considerable number of hits due to non-gang entities, but revealed no link with the gang itself. For example, results for VVT were primarily linked to discussions about cars. For some gangs, the search led to largely trivial features. One user, for example, simply posted a link to a newspaper that had a story on the 14k Triad. There was no way of knowing if the person behind the tweet was a member of that gang. Other users tweeted their support for various organizations and the more stereotypical aspects of a gangster way of life by using considerable profanity, degrading women, and emphasizing their personal views on the importance of money.

Table 1
Presence of Gangs in Twitter Tweets

Keyword Hits
Hells Angels
Shower Posse
MS-13
Latin Kings
Crips
Bloods
14k Triad
Mickey Cobras

While most groups did not have a presence on this specific social networking site, some organizations did leave a bigger footprint. The Hells Angels are amongst the most notorious of the groups within the Twitter forum. This is not surprising since the Hells Angels have an official corporate status and many chapters have official pages where members may discuss their way of life and the events surrounding the club. The club also has a high number of followers and supporters within and beyond the population of biker enthusiasts. Many tweets are from such supporters who publicize their praise for the Hells Angels. Except for one user who asked another user if they were planning on joining the Hells Angels, no explicit content on recruitment was identified. For this single case, it was difficult to establish whether the invitation was to join the group for a night of drinking or as a potential member: *"Are we joining the hells angels? Better get that sorted!"*

A few street gangs are also active on Twitter. The Shower Posse, a Jamaican gang, seems to draw a lot of attention, mainly due to the A&E documentary *Gangland*. One member publicized his debauched way of life. He praised the group while talking about alcohol, drugs, and women. This boasting of a wild lifestyle was quite present amongst members of the MS-13 or Mara Salvatrucha. Their pages have background images that include money, guns, and their gang colours. Some use Twitter to emphasize their strong identification to a gang. Similar content was found for members of other major gangs, such as the Latin Kings, Crips, and Bloods. All flaunt their images and lifestyles online. There were also a small number of private profiles related to such gangs for which messages were not accessible. The visual features of these profiles, however, were consistent with those for which there was access. Overall, the dissemination of gang culture was the principle driving force.

Twitter remains a fairly new service that has been gaining momentum in the mainstream over the last few months. Not too long ago, few users had hundreds of thousands of followers. Twitter members are usually older and more sophisticated and this may not be the typical profile matching street gang or criminal organization members. It is therefore not surprising to see that smaller groups are not present in this medium. Only the major and international players emerge with some level of

prominence. Overall, there were less than ten interesting profiles for each of these groups. Such results are largely insignificant when we consider the millions of people using Twitter. Unfortunately, the search engine for tweets is fairly limited and some keywords, such as 18th Street, generate a high noise to signal ratio meaning, with potential tweets lost within the high number of tweets linked to other more commonplace referents. Even with such a high number of tweets, gang links were still not retrievable. A last point that is relevant for gang presence on Twitter sites is that, consistent with the creative plight of creating a 140-character tweet that offers considerable punch, many of the texts written by gang members or their contacts are indeed concise but essentially incomprehensible for any outsider who is not accustomed to their specific argot.

Facebook

The Facebook search revealed similar patterns as found with Twitter. Table 2 provides the overall number of fans or members each gang in the keyword list had on Facebook. As with Twitter, not all gangs were present. However, the number of gangs that did emerge from the analysis was much more important than in the Twitter search (18 versus 8).

Almost all these groups had pages with pictures of members holding guns, showing their gang colours, and hand signs. Most sites also included pictures with violent scenes. Their aim was really to show the strength, the size, and the toughness of the gang. Their walls were filled with messages praising the gang. On some pages, there was some debate about which gang was most powerful (e.g., Crips and Bloods pages). Very few pages had discussions. Only the Hells Angels hosted meaningful and pertinent exchanges, mostly in regard to arrested bikers (e.g., how unfair it was for them to be in prison) and how to deal with law enforcement agencies (e.g., what to do when arrested or questioned). In one rare case (a Bloods page), an event was publically announced for all to attend. Through this online channel, the time, place, and people to attend were provided. This exception is either an illustration of considerable bravado or complete carelessness on the part of a criminal group.

There is some overlap between the two social networking sites in that the groups that were present on Twitter also had the most members/fans on Facebook. The Almighty Vice Lord Nation was the only exception. For these overlapping groups, fan or member numbers varied considerably, ranging from 297 for the Shower Posse to 14 775 for the Hells Angels. Once again, it would seem that well established international groups draw the most onlookers. At the same time, such numbers may seem impressive, but must be approached with caution in that there is no way of establishing if such fans or members are real members of the group. This is largely because of the privacy of such profiles. At least in the case of the gangs attracting the highest number of fans, it would be difficult to believe that more than only a small percentage are actual members and that the strong majority are simply people who share some form of curiosity or admiration for the gang. Of course, it may also be that some are also law-enforcement members who are tracking online communications between street gang members.

Table 2
Distribution of Fans/Members Amongst Gangs on Facebook

Gang/Group	Number of fans/members
Hells Angels	14775
MS-13	5923
Crips	4598
Bloods	1993
Latin Kings	1255
Almighty Vice Lord Nation	555
Shower Posse	297
14k Triad	121
Malvern Crew	97
18th Street	93
Mickey Cobras	45
Bad Boys	12
VVT	7
Wah Ching	6
Red Scorpions	6
Wo Shing Wo	5

Many groups also had pages where the content was linked to Wikipedia and other online services. Such services generally addressed the history of the gang, the achievements of its most prominent members, and an estimation of its size and power. Little material was presented that could be described as propaganda or recruitment effort.

Facebook is mainly used to diffuse information about gangs and to parade their power through pictures of their colours and guns. Aside from one profile that was posted by the Bad Boys, there were few messages that could be interpreted as an attempt to recruit, but gangs were insistent on spreading their collective message and *raison d'être*. For the most part, the presence of a gang on a Facebook site was an attempt to confirm the gang's presence amongst the elite. In only a small number of pages did the message go beyond a gang's claim to fame. For example, the Hells Angels presence on Facebook was aimed particularly at arguing that they are a legitimate biker club with no criminal ties. They also include some elaborate pages for their arrested members all over the world and orient fans and members on how each and everyone may help to confront such perceived injustices.

MySpace
MySpace is the social networking site with the youngest members of the three social networking sites that were monitored for this study. It is also the oldest of such sites. Because of its young user base and history, MySpace seemed to be a more suitable venue to track gang member presence in the social networking world. This was certainly

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the case. Table 3 presents the total number of friends for members of each gang and, when available, the number of times their profiles were viewed.

Table 3
Distribution of Friends Amongst Gangs on MySpace

Organization	Number of friends	Number of profile views
Hells Angels	112748	83916
MS-13	5084	
Latin Kings	4531	10090
Almighty Vice Lord Nation	3541	
18th Street	1765	123605
Bloods	1422	
Crips	1279	
Asian Boys	1261	6586
West Sidaz	827	
Bad Boys	715	
Wah Ching	524	90985
West End Gang	509	
Blood For Life	354	
Red Scorpions	54	
Malvern Crew	39	
Galloway Boys	2	

While the number of gangs found was slightly less than in the Facebook search (16 vs. 18), the MySpace profiles had many more 'friends' than found for Facebook fans or members. Also, gangs that were not present on Facebook or Twitter (West End Gang, Malvern Crew, West Sidaz) had an important presence on MySpace. In terms of content, image is as important on MySpace as it is on Facebook. All gangs displayed a multitude of photos brandishing guns, colours, and hand signs. There were a lot more pictures on the MySpace sites than on Facebook and many of these pictures were more incriminating. A Wah Ching page, for example, included a picture of automatic weapons held by someone hidden behind a red flag. Many of the same images (gang members with money, serious weaponry, and flags) emerged on several other gang pages, such as the Blood for Life, Crips, and Asian Boys. As with Facebook, many of these pages were filled with praises from the gang's fans and friends. On occasion, some 'agents provocateurs' would emerge from other gangs (Crips on Bloods sites, for example) and initiate a *flamewar*.[2]

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[2] A flamewar or flaming is an aggressive and often escalating exchange of messages over the Internet, whether on forums, emails, chats, or blog comments.

In comparison to other social networking sites, MySpace did have a slight emphasis on recruitment. Many gangs had promotional videos of their members shooting guns, beating up other gang members, making hand signs, showing off the number of people in their gangs, flashing their tattoos, and expressing their beliefs. In some cases, the profiles also included messages for new members and new recruits. This was the case with the Asian Boys, Bad Boys, Wah Ching, MS-13, and Crips. One profile had a background picture of Uncle Sam looking to recruit new MS-13 members (http://www.myspace.com/elmara8). MySpace sites also appeared to place a much greater emphasis on projecting an image of a gang's strength and power.

Not many profiles displayed the number of times they were viewed. Amongst those that did, it was obvious that major international groups, such as the Hells Angels, 18th Street, and Wah Ching, had a large following. As with Facebook, the Hells Angels were in a class of their own. In MySpace, the biker club had more than twenty times more friends than any other gang or organization. Once again, a more *just* treatment for Hells Angels members was the main plight taken on by those who became 'friends' through such sites.

MySpace is clearly the social networking site in which the greatest level of activity amongst members of criminal groups was found. Members were also more open about their gang links and lifestyles. This was the only site in which videos with very hard content were retrieved. This is also where the conversations and comments were the most active and numerous.

Conclusion

For many, it may seem obvious that gang members would exploit sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace as much as any other citizen. For others, it may be difficult to believe that gangs are actively soliciting individuals through venues that are so open and easily monitored. It may also be that gang members do use such sites for personal reasons, but not necessarily for the direct recruitment of new members.

It is clear from the findings of this study's keyword search that gang presence on social networking sites is linked primarily to promoting a general gang or street culture through individual displays. In most cases, the sites are designed and managed by members and associates who emphasize their allegiance to reputed groups such as the MS-13, Crips, Bloods, or Latin Kings. These gangs are the most prominent across the social networking sites that were monitored. There are some exceptions, such as the the Hells Angels, which were also very prominent, but which exist on-line as chapters or groups and not as individuals. Unlike the majority of street gang groups that were monitored in this study, the Hells Angels did not display their criminal or violent exploits. Indeed, such cases were more likely to diffuse the noncriminal features of the group and the problems that they were facing from what they displayed as overzealous law-enforcement.

In regard to the visitors to such sites, there is no evidence that they are being tricked or manipulated in any way. They are, however, showing their curiousity in regard

to such groups and, for those who share their comments and opinions, signs of support are evident. Aside from a small set of MySpace sites, street gangs are not proactively converting anyone into being gang members. Social networking sites are, however, creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come together.

This is not the first time that media outlets and law-enforcement efforts have been hampered by an overly strategic outlook of criminal organization and gang members (Morselli 2005). In many contexts, it is assumed that criminal groups are actively searching for new members to expand their horizons and become more powerful. Not only does such 'common sense' contradict basic limits in trust, security, and co-offender selection for anyone involved in crime, but it overlooks the more likely scenario that what appears to be and is interpreted as strategic is often something that was essentially unplanned. Reputed offenders are more likely attracting than seeking attention. Lesser offenders and outsiders are often the instigators of their own co-optation and for every wannabe who ends up joining the gang, there are an abundance of fans that simply stay on the outskirts looking in.

While proactive recruitment is not likely, there are two functions that are fulfilled by the rise of social networking sites that will have an impact on criminal groups. First, it has been argued for quite some time that one of the main obstacles blocking the expansion of criminal groups and organizations is the inability for participants to advertise their activities and ventures (Reuter 1983). Traditionally, offenders relied on the grapevine—word of mouth on the street—or media attention for crimes which they may or may not have committed, in order to diffuse their reputational qualities. This research shows that the rise of social networking sites has provided a new channel for publicity, allowing members of criminal groups to spread their images and enhance their reputations through conventional channels and across a wider public.

Second, it is important that we recognize interactions between street gang members and the many visitors of their social networking sites as a new form of convergence setting (Felson 2003). However, unlike the places where people come to physically interact and co-opt each other, web-based venues, while claiming to the presence of 'friends', are nevertheless converging people who remain physically distant from each other. Before recruitment could actively take place through such channels, these basic interactions would have to evolve beyond the mere sharing of pictures, comments, and opinions. Of course, having access to such a wide pool of curious onlookers does facilitate any recruitment process that may follow beyond the sphere of the Internet.

Law-Enforcement Reaction and Recommendations
In many ways, social networking sites are more useful intelligence resources for law enforcement than effective mechanisms for promoting gang culture and drawing in new gang members. Law-enforcement agencies have been closely monitoring the emergence of street gangs on social networking sites over recent years. Some have also used MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook for intelligence gathering and targeting, soliciting

information on known and unknown offenders. Law-enforcement officials have also turned to social networking sites to promote their efforts, encourage aid during their investigations, and diffuse their values across a wider community. In Canada, such sites have been developed by law-enforcement agencies in Montreal (Stevens 2009), Regina (Couture 2009), and Toronto (Masterman 2010). One of the more active agencies to use such sites is Interpol, which has recently turned to Facebook to help find 26 individuals involved in murders and child sex abuse (CTV 2010).

Police investigators are also using social networking sites to locate suspects. They use sites such as Facebook or Twitter to trace the IP addresses and messages of various suspects in hope of identifying their hiding locations and activities (Muessig 2009). They will also gather information on key targets by either tracking the content that street gang members place online or by posing as gang members and infiltrating the street gangs through virtual channels. Monitoring such sites on a regular basis also allows law-enforcement agencies to gather data on the network features and personal or business relations of gang members. Such information allows them to map the social networks surrounding each individual and obtain a more detailed assessment of the criminal groups and organizations that may be of interest to them.

Little is known about the success of law-enforcement use of social networking sites. Evidence is based primarily on journalistic interviews with police investigators who mention that they are using such websites to monitor certain organizations and individuals. There have been some cases in which the police did succeed in apprehending offenders, but the exact role that social networking sites played in the arrests remains unclear. We are thus at the early stages of this phenomenon and, as with the general population, police investigators and offenders are still trying to assess how social networking sites will help them achieve their respective goals.

While social networking sites continue to attract the attention of participants on both sides of the law, policy makers and law-enforcement should begin to address key areas that will facilitate their progress in this area. First, it is recommended that law-enforcement and intelligence agencies should create more formal links with the principal administrators of social networking sites. They should continue to learn more about how such channels of communication are structured, how servers are distributed, how to obtain information on IP addresses and private conversations, and how to close or obstruct a page. Liaison officers are already in place between law-enforcement and other communication companies and particularly for telephone services (e.g., Bell Canada). Once a mandate is issued, police officers generally know how to proceed when requesting information on an individual's telephone conversations. Websites as prominent as Google may be solicited to help criminal intelligence agents in various operations, but no operational framework appears to be available for such collaboration to take place systematically. What is needed at this point is a clear and consistent framework for such exchanges to continue.

Second, the monitoring of social networking sites and Internet channels in general appear to be the result of either accidental findings or massive searches by people

working in law-enforcement or intelligence agencies. Technological advances have progressed sufficiently for the creation of more systematic and elaborate automated searches that provide hits and warnings when necessary.

Third, policies must begin addressing the new avenues for freedom of speech. The Internet has led to a mass of opportunities for individuals to express themselves. A considerable portion of these individuals would have never had such an opportunity if they had to rely on the traditional venues for written or oral expression. This new and rising frontier also creates a jurisdictional problem in that what is attracting citizens in one legislative setting is taking place in another. As with other forms of transnational crime or deviance, further investment must be made in areas of police cooperation and legislative adaption to this new and innovative frontier.

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