Social Media and Violence: a study into the relationship between them and interventions to address this issue in West Yorkshire

The use of social media is growing exponentially,[1] particularly amongst young people; thus, it is important to understand the relationship between social media and youth violence. This report highlights some of the key findings from a study on professionals' perspectives of social media driven youth violence in West Yorkshire. It considers the multi-layer relationship between social media and violence, including the facilitation and organisation of violent crime amongst young people and the use of social media by gang members. Further, interventions surrounding social media and violence on a local, national and global scale are examined. Data subsequently indicate participants' views surrounding future interventions, and how these might be implemented. To achieve the aims of the research, a literature review and primary research involving semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals were carried out which were combined with data from a focus group provided by the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The relationship between social media and violence amongst young people is complex and multi layered.
- The relationship is characterised by: the facilitation of collective action,[2] the facilitation of the organisation of crime through features such as encrypted messages, location sharing and anonymity,[3] the use of social media by gangs for purposes of recruitment and promotion,[4] the impact of drill music, and the speed and reach of communication in terms of the acceleration of violence online and it's 'spill over' into the real world.[5]
- However, both the literature review and primary research suggest that there is limited research and knowledge on the 'spill over' effect (i.e. how tensions online spill offline).
- Current interventions appear to be very limited and disjointed.
- The research suggests that future interventions regarding social media and violence should be multi stakeholder, individualised and both preventive and reactive.[6]
- Reflecting on ideas about future interventions surrounding social media and violence, participants proposed using social media as a means of intervention through mass media campaigns, similar to those surrounding smoking and wearing seatbelts. They also recommended further educational and training programmes for young people from an early age and other stakeholders such as parents and professionals who work with young people. Moreover, they recommended the extension of drill music workshops where young people can produce music with positive lyrics which can be subsequently shared with their audience.

---

[1] Number of global social network users 2017-2025' (*Statista, 28 January 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> accessed 4 August 2021.

[2] Øystein Sæbø, Tommaso Federici and Alessio M Braccini, 'Combining social media affordances for organising collective action' (2020) 30(4) Information Systems Journal 699; Richard K Moule Jr, Scott H Decker and David C Pyrooz, 'Technology and conflict: Group processes and collective violence in the Internet Era' (2017) 68 Crime, Law and Social Change 47; Tuesday Reitano and Andrew Trabulsi, 'Virtually Illicit: The Use of Social Media in a Hyper-Connected World in Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (eds) *Beyond Convergence* (2016) 215.

[3] Caitlin Elsaesser, 'How social media turns online arguments between teens into real-world violence' *The Conversation* (5 April 2021) <https://theconversation.com/how-social-media-turns-online-arguments-between-teens-into-real-world-violence-155613> accessed 21 May 2021; Kimberley M Christopherson, 'The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog"' (2006) 23 Computers in Human Behaviour 3038.

[4] Desmond Upton Patton, David Pryooz, Scott Decker, William R Frey and Patrick Leonard, 'When Twitter Fingers Turn to Trigger Fingers: a Qualitative Study of Social Media-Related Gang Violence' (2019) (1) International Journal of Bullying Prevention 205; Desmond Upton Patton, Robert D Eschmann and Dirk A Butler, 'Internet banging: New trends in social media, gang violence, masculinity and hip hop' (2013) 29(5) Computers in Human Behaviour 54; Desmond Upton Patton, Robert D Eschmann, Caitlin Elsaesser and Eddie Bocanegra, 'Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence in Chicago' (2016) 65 Computers in Human Behaviour 591.

[5] Keir Irwin-Rogers, James Densley and Craig Pinkney, 'Gang Violence and Social Media' in Jane L Ireland, Carol A Ireland and Philip Birch (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Human Aggression* (Routledge: Oxon 2018); Keir Irwin-Rogers and Craig Pinkney, 'Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence' (*Catch 22, 2017*) <https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Social-Media-as-a-Catalyst-and-Trigger_Exec-Summary.pdf> accessed 20 May 2021; Murat Mengü and Seda Mengü, 'Violence and Social Media' (2015) 1(3) Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications 211.

[6] Paul Reilly, 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: An exploratory study of strategies for policing interfaces in cyberspace' (2011) 3(1) Policy and Internet 1.

Research conducted by Annabel Walker, University of Leeds, LLM Criminal Justice and Criminal Law, April to October 2021.

INTRODUCTION:

The internet has been one of the most 'transformative and fast-growing technologies,'[7] with more people using the internet now than ever before.[8] As a result, the growth of social media has been exponential.[9] 'In 2020, over 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025.'[10] As the use of social media increases, academics have taken greater interest in the impact that this has on interactions in the real world. Some research has highlighted that social media can act as a facilitator for offline violence.[11] However, currently, there appears to be limited understanding of the 'spill' over of tensions from online to offline. Further, interventions regarding social media and youth violence are limited and disjointed. Thus, this research has been developed with the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit to better understand the relationship between social media and youth violence, and to explore interventions which could be adopted as a more effective response to it.

MAIN FINDINGS:

Relationship between social media and violence

The research demonstrated that some links between social media and violence have been identified; namely that social media can help facilitate collective action,[12] the organisation of violent crime and gang violence and the impact that the speed and reach of communication of the internet can have on violence in the 'real' world.[13] Study participants identified that young people engage in violent behaviour to cultivate a sense of belonging. They subsequently offered miscommunication and copy-cat behaviours as explanations as to why online tensions 'spill' offline. Some participants noted the effect the coronavirus pandemic had had on social media and violence such as an increased use of social media for gang violence recruitment; however, it is too early to draw any robust conclusions about this. The findings from the research participants largely corroborated findings from the literature review.

Current Interventions

This research attempted to 'map' the interventions which have already been developed to address social media driven violence. The literature review showed that very few current interventions have been developed in this area and those that have been, are disjointed. Noteworthy examples include educational programmes such as the European Commission project named 'Stop Violence on Social Media',[14] hashtag and social media analysis by law enforcement agencies and

---

[7] Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, 'Internet' (*Our World in Data, 2015*) <https://ourworldindata.org/internet> accessed 4 August 2021.

[8] 'Worldwide digital population as of January 2021' (*Statista, 7 April 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/> accessed 4 August 2021.

[9] 'Number of global social network users 2017-2025' (*Statista, 28 January 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> accessed 4 August 2021.

[10] 'Number of global social network users 2017-2025' (*Statista, 28 January 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> accessed 4 August 2021.

[11] Øystein Sæbø, Tommaso Federici and Alessio M Braccini, 'Combining social media affordances for organising collective action' (2020) 30(4) Information Systems Journal 699.

[12] Øystein Sæbø, Tommaso Federici and Alessio M Braccini, 'Combining social media affordances for organising collective action' (2020) 30(4) Information Systems Journal 699.

[13] Keir Irwin-Rogers, James Densley and Craig Pinkney, 'Gang Violence and Social Media' in Jane L Ireland, Carol A Ireland and Philip Birch (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Human Aggression* (Routledge: Oxon 2018); Keir Irwin-Rogers and Craig Pinkney, 'Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence' (*Catch 22, 2017*) <https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Social-Media-as-a-Catalyst-and-Trigger_Exec-Summary.pdf> accessed 20 May 2021; Murat Mengü and Seda Mengü, 'Violence and Social Media' (2015) 1(3) Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications 211.

[14] European Commission, 'Stop violence on social media' (*European Commission*) <https://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants/results/daphne-toolkit/content/stop-violence-social-media_en> accessed 23 August 2021.

regulations/policies that have been put in place by social media companies themselves.[15] Study participants were not able to identify any interventions that that are already in place regarding social media and youth violence, perhaps highlighting the lack of effective interventions. However, some participants did identify interventions relating to youth violence more broadly. These included workshops produced by charities, assemblies and PSHE lessons in schools, and staff training. The literature review demonstrated that a major limitation of the effectiveness of interventions regarding social media-driven youth violence is the 'continually evolving nature of these online venues'.[16] The literature review and primary research also concluded that current interventions are limited due to a lack of funding.

Future Interventions
Study participants suggested that interventions that are developed to address social media and youth violence should be multi-stakeholder, individualised and both preventative and reactive. Overall, there was little evidence of a single, consistent narrative in regards to what interventions participants thought would prove most effective. However, individual ideas consisted of developing positive music workshops where young people can create music with positive lyrics to share with their audiences. Further, participants suggested that social media companies should take more responsibility, including requirements for further identity checks when creating social media accounts and working with young people to develop initiatives. They suggested that a mass media campaign focused on social media and violence should be created, making use of social media and visual graphics. Moreover, they suggested that educational programmes should be implemented more regularly and from a young age in schools. It was suggested that education could include guest speakers, case studies and video clips. Participants also identified the importance of raising awareness amongst all stakeholders, including parents and training for professionals who work with young people. Finally, participants noted the importance of providing young people with alternative activities such as youth and sports clubs. Reflecting upon these prospects, it was noted however that unless a public health approach is taken to address this issue, little is likely to change. Participants also suggested that the development of future interventions is likely to be limited due to a lack of funding, wider structural and systemic issues, and the rapid pace at which social media develops.

CONCLUSION:
The findings from this research project are significant and corroborate prior research. They demonstrate that social media does help to facilitate offline violence. However, there is an evident lack of understanding of how online tensions 'spill' offline both in the literature and primary research. The various layers of the relationship between social media and youth violence are reflected in the interventions that have been developed. However, current interventions in this area appear to be limited and disjointed. Participants were largely unaware of any interventions to address social media and youth violence that currently exist. Nonetheless, the participants made several recommendations of interventions which could be implemented in West Yorkshire. Further research should continue to explore these areas.

METHODOLOGY:
Qualitative research methods were used to achieve the study's aims. First, a thorough literature review was carried out. This examined both the relationship between social media and violence

---

[15] Megan Behrman, 'When Gangs Go Viral: Using Social Media And Surveillance Cameras to Enhance Gang Databases' (2015) 29(1) Harvard Journal of Law and Technology 315 See also 'The Twitter Rules' *(Twitter Help Centre, 2021)* <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules> accessed 7 September 2021; 'Violence and Incitement' *(Facebook Community Standards, 2021)* <https://m.facebook.com/communitystandards/credible_violence/> accessed 7 September 2021; 'Community Guidelines' *(Instagram, 2021)* <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119> accessed 7 September 2021.
[16] Russell Wolff, Jack McDevitt and James Stark, 'Using social media to prevent gang violence and engage youth' (2011) <https://www.mass.gov/doc/shannon-csi-resource-guide-7-using-social-media-to-prevent-gang-violence-and-engage-youth-march/download> accessed 23 August 2021.

and the scope of interventions that have already been developed to target this. Following this, 12 semi-structured interviews were carried out with professionals who work with young people in West Yorkshire. This included teachers, youth workers and probation officers. The data from these interviews was combined with data provided by the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit from a focus group made up of 32 individuals. The research was conducted within the University of Leeds' ethical guidelines and was completed as part of the researcher's Master's in Criminal Justice and Criminal Law. This research is limited in generalisability due to the small sample that was used and the particular focus on West Yorkshire. Nonetheless, this focused research allowed for rich, in-depth data to be gathered and analysed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

As the use of social media is ever-growing it is important to understand the impact it has on behaviour in the 'real' world. It is clear that further research on social media and youth violence is needed to understand the relationship fully; and subsequently contribute towards effective interventions. Future research could focus on the views of young people themselves, to better understand the issues that they face, and from their own perspective. Furthermore, not all participants were particularly knowledgeable about the specific features of social media - the gap in understanding between professionals and how young people use social media may also be explored within future research. Future qtudies may pursue quantitative methodologies in pursuing some of these questions and broader themes.

Research conducted by Annabel Walker, University of Leeds, LLM Criminal Justice and Criminal Law, April to October 2021.

REFERENCES:

——'Community Guidelines' *(Instagram, 2021)* <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119> accessed 7 September 2021

—— 'Number of global social network users 2017-2025' (*Statista, 28 January 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> accessed 4 August 2021

——'The Twitter Rules' *(Twitter Help Centre, 2021)* <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules> accessed 7 September 2021

——'Violence and Incitement' *(Facebook Community Standards, 2021)* <https://m.facebook.com/communitystandards/credible_violence/> accessed 7 September 2021

—— 'Worldwide digital population as of January 2021' (*Statista, 7 April 2021*) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/> accessed 4 August 2021

Behrman M, 'When Gangs Go Viral: Using Social Media And Surveillance Cameras to Enhance Gang Databases' (2015) 29(1) Harvard Journal of Law and Technology 315

Christopherson K M, 'The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog"' (2006) 23 Computers in Human Behaviour 3038

Elsaesser C, 'How social media turns online arguments between teens into real-world violence' *The Conversation* (5 April 2021) <https://theconversation.com/how-social-media-turns-online-arguments-between-teens-into-real-world-violence-155613> accessed 21 May 2021

European Commission, 'Stop violence on social media' (*European Commission*) <https://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants/results/daphne-toolkit/content/stop-violence-social-media_en> accessed 23 August 2021.

Irwin-Rogers K, Densley J and Pinkney C, 'Gang Violence and Social Media' in Jane L Ireland, Carol A Ireland and Philip Birch (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Human Aggression* (Routledge: Oxon 2018)

Irwin-Rogers K and Pinkney C, 'Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence' (*Catch 22, 2017*) <https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Social-Media-as-a-Catalyst-and-Trigger_Exec-Summary.pdf> accessed 20 May 2021

Mengü M and Mengü S, 'Violence and Social Media' (2015) 1(3) Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications 211.

Moule Jr R K, Decker S H and Pyrooz D C, 'Technology and conflict: Group processes and collective violence in the Internet Era' (2017) 68 Crime, Law and Social Change 47

ReitanoT and Trabulsi A, 'Virtually Illicit: The Use of Social Media in a Hyper-Connected World in Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (eds) *Beyond Convergence* (2016) 215

Reilly P, 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: An exploratory study of strategies for policing interfaces in cyberspace' (2011) 3(1) Policy and Internet 1.

Roser M, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, 'Internet' (*Our World in Data, 2015*) <https://ourworldindata.org/internet> accessed 4 August 2021

Sæbø Ø, Federici T and Braccini A M, 'Combining social media affordances for organising collective action' (2020) 30(4) Information Systems Journal 699

Upton Patton D, R D and Butler D A, 'Internet banging: New trends in social media, gang violence, masculinity and hip hop' (2013) 29(5) Computers in Human Behaviour 54

Upton Patton D, Eschmann R D, Elsaesser E and Bocanegra E, 'Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence in Chicago' (2016) 65 Computers in Human Behaviour 591

Upton Patton D, Pryooz D, Decker S, Frey W R and Leonard P, 'When Twitter Fingers Turn to Trigger Fingers: a Qualitative Study of Social Media-Related Gang Violence' (2019) (1) International Journal of Bullying Prevention 205

Wolff R, McDevitt J and Stark J, 'Using social media to prevent gang violence and engage youth' (2011) <https://www.mass.gov/doc/shannon-csi-resource-guide-7-using-social-media-to-prevent-gang-violence-and-engage-youth-march/download> accessed 23 August 2021