

# Humanizing Digital Mental Health through Social Media: Centering Experiences of Gang-Involved Youth Exposed to High Rates of Violence

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**ABSTRACT:** As the lives of young people expand further into digital spaces, our understandings of their expressions and language on social media become more consequential for providing individualized and applicable mental health resources. This holds true for young people exposed to high rates of community violence who may also lack access to health resources offline. Social media may provide insights into the impacts of community violence exposure on mental health. However, much of what is shared on social media contains localized language and context, which poses challenges regarding interpretation. In this perspective, I offer insights gained from the Beyond the Bullets: The Complexities and Ethical Challenges of Interpreting Social Media Posts workshop during the Digital Interventions in Mental Health conference in London, England: (1) social media as an underutilized environmental context in mental health services; (2) interpreting the meaning of social media posts is challenging, and there are additional challenges when users are exposed to offline violence and (3) the importance of having various perspectives when interpreting social media posts to build contextually nuanced and theoretically based understandings of digital social behavior.

**KEYWORDS:** Social media, gun violence, youth, social work, digital mental health, qualitative analysis

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## Introduction

In August 2017, I facilitated a workshop at the Digital Interventions in Mental Health conference in London, England. The conference sought to examine digital interventions aimed at improving mental health while promoting research with real-world impacts directly benefitting vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. I was invited to the conference because of my research at the SAFElab at Columbia University's School of Social Work in New York, NY, USA—a research group focused on examining the ways in which youth of color navigate violence on and offline for the purpose of grief support and violence prevention.

For the conference, I developed the *Beyond the Bullets* workshop to give participants an opportunity to experience the challenges and complexities of interpreting social media posts from neighborhoods with high rates of violence and to center the humanity of gang-involved and affiliated youth. This commentary is a critical reflection of that workshop, exploring the complexities, implications, and ethical considerations of observing and interpreting social media content from neighborhoods with high rates of violence, ending with insights gained from the workshop and participants.

## Literature Review

Increased access to and development of social media platforms is changing our ability to connect with one another. Social media allows people to observe and witness social problems others face in more direct and constant ways including experiences with gun violence.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests 45% of teens are online “almost constantly,” and 89% of teens report being online at least “several times a day.” These rates hold true for

Black youth in the United States, who report high rates of social media use with 94% having access to smartphones at home—79% YouTube, 77% Snapchat, and 72% Instagram.<sup>2</sup>

### *Social media and violence*

In cities like Chicago, Illinois, USA, which experienced 650 homicides and 3457 shooting victims in 2017,<sup>3</sup> social media posts from youth of color living in these communities may reflect this exposure to violence, including shared experiences of loss and trauma. The prevalence of gangs and crews in cities like Chicago and Philadelphia experiencing high rates of violence further complicates sharing on social media. Johnson and Schell-Busey studied the case of 6 underground battle rap videos on YouTube by four gang-affiliated rappers from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, who used social media to provoke each other and retaliate.<sup>4</sup> According to street outreach workers involved in the study, this set of videos was linked to two shootings.

Intersections of social media and violence are not specific to cities in the United States. Various scholars in the United Kingdom (UK) have examined the relationship between urban-based violence and social media.<sup>5–7</sup> Gang-involved youth in the UK have been found to use social media, both expressively (eg, feelings and grief) and instrumentally (eg, violence), with convergence often between the two.<sup>7</sup> In April 2018, the Home Office in the UK released their Serious Violence Strategy.<sup>8</sup> Throughout this 111-page document, social media is listed various times as a potential reason for the increase in violence, specifically mentioning taunting and violence among gangs.



### *Pathways to violence*

Patton et al.<sup>1,9</sup> further complicate the often narrow government and media narratives on gang violence by identifying pathways to violence and addressing the role social media communication plays through responses to loss and expressions of aggression. Responses to loss and expressions of aggression may hold various offline implications when in a context where gang violence is prevalent. A closer look at conversations on Twitter from Chicago youth reveals that many users share posts about losing friends and family members to violence, and at times these posts lead to more aggressive ones.<sup>10,11</sup> In some instances, these posts may even directly or indirectly facilitate someone being killed offline.<sup>4,12</sup>

Digital narratives of loss, grief, and aggression may not be captured through offline trauma-based interventions where social media is not considered as a consequential environmental context. Furthermore, there is limited research on trauma-based interventions that use social media as a data source to inform mental health practice.<sup>10</sup> There are many potential reasons why social media may not be used—privacy concerns, inaccessibility, social media literacy, and many other which are beyond the scope of this commentary. Concurrently, as mental health professionals, researchers, and academics, we have a responsibility to meet young people where they are. As one workshop participant stated, “as much as people and the police are looking at social media, it is not going to stop us from expressing ourselves online.” However, engaging with social media in intervention and prevention work poses its own challenges regarding gaps in contextual understanding and determining meaning in a digital environment.

### *Context*

A vital step when considering the integration of social media into violence prevention and trauma-based intervention is understanding and interpreting contextual features reflected in social media posts specific to the local community. Contextual features include localized language (often truncated and phonetically spelled), references to offline events and relationships, and cultural implications. Due to these challenges in interpreting and gleaning information from contextually specific social media posts originating from communities with high rates of violence, the SAFElab has developed a qualitative methodology for leveraging insights from domain experts, formerly gang-involved youth and violence outreach workers called the Contextual Analysis of Social Media (CASM) approach. CASM is a contextually driven methodological process used to annotate and qualitatively analyze social media posts for the training of a natural language processing computational system.<sup>13</sup> In the SAFElab, we have found that thoughtful integration of youth and community expertise as part of our analysis of social media data

from Chicago neighborhoods with high rates of violence elucidates distinctions in our interpretations and may offer insight into nuanced experiences of grief, trauma, and exposure to community violence.

### **Positionality and Background**

My own positionality to the research and the workshop is necessary to mention. I am a white man from Ann Arbor, Michigan, living in New York City. My involvement in research and practice in a predominantly Black community with high rates of violence like some neighborhoods on the Southside of Chicago cannot be separated from the long history of white academics seeking to know and understand “problems” in communities of color. This history of “research” on violence, which often more closely resembles imperialistic voyeurism, is rooted in racist frames of biological and cultural inferiority, rather than sociopolitical understandings of systemic and institutional pathways to violence. In my attempts to acknowledge and learn from the damage being caused by this history and not further the harm by outsiders entering the community, I actively practice cultural humility, processes of reflection, and take an ethnographic approach while constantly considering the ethical impacts of not only the work, but my own involvement in it. Cultural humility allows me to incorporate understandings of intersectionality and power, promoting self-awareness, openness, and transcendence.<sup>14,15</sup> Practically, cultural humility involves constantly challenging my own biases and assumptions, being open to not knowing and making mistakes, and understanding that the world is more complex than I can imagine. *The Beyond the Bullets* workshop was developed through a culturally humble framework, and was created for mental health professionals, researchers, and academics to engage in and further these processes for ourselves.

### **Workshop Structure**

The *Beyond the Bullets: The Complexities and Ethical Challenges of Interpreting Social Media Posts* workshop gave participants the opportunity to interpret social media posts from gang-involved youth in Chicago, Illinois, USA, using CASM. The workshop had 20 participants who voluntarily participated as a part of the larger digital mental health conference. Participants ranged demographically (eg, age, race, sex) and professionally (eg, community workers, case manager, mental health professionals, academics). During the workshop, I took notes of what was said along with a video recording for postworkshop reflection.

The workshop leveraged experiences of gang-involved and affiliated youth as primary source and foundational content and had 3 goals: (1) humanize the experiences of gang-involved youth of color from Chicago shared through social media, (2) center these often marginalized experiences in conversations around digital mental health through the dialogic and group participatory design of the workshop, and (3) give participants the opportunity to interpret social media posts embedded with



Figure 1. Sample tweet from workshop.

community-specific contextual features required to understand these experiences. Social media offers researchers, mental health professionals, and community workers a direct link to the people we serve and can help raise awareness around whether we are doing so effectively.

The workshop began with an introduction to Chicago as an environmental context. I gave an overview of recent gun homicide and victim statistics in Chicago. I also provided a map of gangs and crews distribution throughout the city. Before any social media posts were shown to participants, they were instructed to consider the following questions: What are my initial interpretations of the following social media content? What is informing my interpretations (eg, personal experiences, news media, assumptions, and professional understandings)? What are the gaps in my interpretation? Finally, what other information am I missing?

Participants were broken up into small groups of four or five. Next, a social media post was shown to the entire group. Participants were asked to share their first impressions and what more information they needed to better understand meaning in their small groups. Then, each smaller group shared their initial thoughts with the entire group. After this, additional information about each post was given, such as related news stories, photographs, and cultural referential material (eg, rap lyrics). Groups were then asked to share how the additional information affected their initial interpretations, followed by another group share out. During this share out, groups verbally reflected on how the additional information affected their interpretations and shared about the potential offline implications of each example (eg, disrespecting another gang possibly leading to a potential for retaliation). This iterative process involving rounds of small group sharing followed by large group discussions was used for each of the three social media post examples. Finally, the workshop ended with a group discussion on the participant reactions and reflections from the workshop and insights they would take into their own work.

Participants interpreted three social media examples from our dataset, chosen based on the various contextual features embedded within each set of posts. The first post was made by Gakirah Barnes, a well-known youth from the Southside of Chicago who self-identified as gang-involved. The news of her death made national headlines (Figure 1). The example post was the last tweet she made a few hours before she was killed down the street from her home and it contains a numerical

house address and localized acronym, TMB (Trap Money Brothers). The second example involved two posts referencing an offline event—a person being killed by police—one of which was a reaction to this loss and the other, expressions of aggression toward a rival gang. The third post contained seemingly aggressive language but were lyrics to a song from a local Chicago-based rapper.

Workshop participant familiarity with Chicago gang and crew culture varied greatly depending on both personal and professional experiences. Many participants expressed a limited knowledge of youth who are gang-involved, mostly informed by popular news, television, and films. Community workers who had experiences with gangs and crews were able to connect with nuanced aspects of gang culture like posts about the death of friends and wanting retribution for their murder. Somewhat surprisingly, participants who had community work experience in London were able to interpret and contextualize social media posts from Chicago, often leading them to describe their own personal experiences, which informed their understandings of the post. Once participants shared their personal experiences, which added context and meaning to the post, mental health professionals and academics began to share their own professional knowledge around youth development and mental health, such as potential developmental risk factors a person might be facing if they just lost their friend to gun violence (eg, a post about a someone being killed by police). Due to the vastly different experiences and expertise in the room, participants were able to interpret a wide range of contextual features.

### Insights

Three insights emerged during the *Beyond the Bullets* workshop that I believe will inform research and practice in the area of urban-based violence and social media. First, social media is an underutilized source for understanding environmental context in mental health services and academia. Many participants had very little experience using social media in their work or professional settings, expressing a lack of familiarity with the various social media platforms, features, privacy settings, and extent of social media usage among young people. It is important we consider how social media can affect a young person's offline life and what mental health practitioners and researchers may be missing by not seriously considering it as an environmental context.

Second, understanding what a user is saying on social media is challenging, especially someone from a different community. Furthermore, a social media user's exposure to violence, loss, and trauma complicates our ability as researchers and mental health professionals to fully understand what they may be experiencing and expressing digitally. Various times during the workshop, participants shared interpretations that were based on what they had seen in popular media depictions of gangs and gang life, creating their own meaning of the

post rather than one based on the information that was provided. This interpretation pattern shown by participants led to my own realization regarding the importance of respecting the natural complexity of digital social behavior. We must not fall back on dangerous racialized assumptions when making decisions regarding the interpretation of meaning in social media posts. Fully grasping the complexity of social media behavior will allow us to build methodologies based on evidence and rigor, with the purpose of holistically representing and respecting the humanity of youth of color on social media exposed to violence.

Third, when participants leveraged their own experiences and professional knowledge in the interpretation of social media posts, the collective group was able to recognize and understand the contextual features, nuances, and the various ways posts could be interpreted by others. For example, multiple participants shared experiences of being incarcerated and witnessing violence, offering vulnerable and personal narratives to their interpretations and the conversation as a whole. After this sharing occurred, mental health professionals and academics in the room began sharing their professional knowledge of theoretical, developmental, and diagnostic understandings of each social media example. Combining these various perspectives gave the group rich interpretations of each social media post, often with more than one possible explanation of meaning.

These insights from the *Beyond the Bullets* participants offer a new lens through which to view violence and social media. As we engage with the potential role of social media in the high rates of violence in Chicago and the increasing rates of violence in London, these insights provide ways to contextualize and understand the complexity of the possible connections between the two. What is happening on social media for young people in areas with high rates of violence? Is social media leading to violence, how and why? What are the pathways leading to violence for young people? How do we engage a variety of perspectives and people (beyond government and law enforcement) in conversation and solution creation, with the goals of protecting and serving marginalized youth of color?

### Ethical Implications

During the workshop, participants engaged ethical challenges regarding social media and violence. This engagement included privacy and freedom of speech on social media, the extent of parent involvement in social media usage for youth, and the reasons why someone would post aggressive or grieving content online. One of the most prominent topics discussed was the ethics of law enforcement using social media posts to indict and criminalize youth online, with participants often placing blame and responsibility on the social media user to watch what they post. Social media posts originating from communities with high rates of violence are already being used to criminalize and incarcerate marginalized Black

and Latinx youth.<sup>16</sup> This reality is important to recognize when observing and interpreting social media posts as researchers, social workers, and mental health professionals. Observing and collecting social media data has the potential to cause further harm if analyzed improperly or if it falls into the hands of various institutional and state entities operating within punitive frameworks.

After this workshop took place, we in the SAFElab developed a set of ethical guidelines for social media research with vulnerable groups, to prevent potentially harmful impacts on communities with which we work and where the social media data originate.<sup>17</sup> The ethical guidelines cover transparency around our research; guidelines around the ways we collect, analyze, and share data; and for how we present and publish our work. We hope this is a first step in confronting the challenges around the use of social media data in research and mental health services and can be expanded and adapted for practice-based and clinical work.

### Discussion

These insights have implications for current violence prevention research and practice in Chicago as well as London, which has experienced a surge in social media-related violence. The recent rise of homicide rates in London has been attributed to social media by both news sources and the government.<sup>8,18,19</sup> As organizations and the government begin to react to this rise, the complexity of social media communication must not be underestimated. Contextual underestimations and misinterpretations often lead to further harm, criminalization, and incarceration, as it has in cities in the United States.<sup>20–22</sup> One way to actively and openly engage with the complexities of social media communication is to involve people with various experiences, expertise, and professional knowledge in the interpretation of social media content and in the discussions regarding violence prevention and intervention, to include community members, youth, social workers, mental health professionals, and outreach workers. Finally, social media use by youth of color in London will be under more scrutiny than ever before. People involved in practice and community work must educate ourselves on digital rights regarding privacy and free speech (eg, the use of social media in the courts), and prepare youth to understand their privacy settings on various platforms, their digital rights, and the ways to use social media in prosocial and positive ways.

### Conclusions

Popular news and entertainment sources often make dangerous generalizations feeding stereotypical tropes of “those violent and threatening Black kids,” which may be used as referential material in discussions around violence and mental health.<sup>23,24</sup> However, for youth of color living in neighborhoods with high rates of violence, social media is an extension of life and must be considered and valued as credible primary sources of

experience. To fully engage with social media posts as primary sources of youth and community experience, there must be a variety of expertise involved at all stages of the process, from initial interpretations to deciding what must be done when coming across content that may require intervention or mental health resources. Yet, young people, community members, and violence prevention workers—community experts—are often missing in academic, research, and even policy spaces. Youth in neighborhoods with high rates of violence are using their voices to tell the world what they are experiencing, the good and the bad. It is our responsibility to involve as many people and do all that we can do to listen.

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