Gangs and the Web : Gang Members' Online Behavior

Revital Sela-Shayovitz

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice 2012 28: 389 originally published online 1 October 2012
DOI: 10.1177/1043986212458191

Article

Gangs and the Web: Gang Members' Online Behavior

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice
28(4) 389–405

DOI: 10.1177/1043986212458191
http://ccj.sagepub.com

Revital Sela-Shayovitz[1]

Abstract

There is a lack of research on gang members' online behavior. The present study addresses this shortcoming by examining how gang members proactively use the Internet. Data were collected by means of in-depth, semistructured interviews with gang members. In addition, based on reports of gang members, the analysis focused on their group activity on the web. The findings reveal that the Internet does neither play a role in gang formation nor promote considerable changes in group traditional delinquency. However, it does influence socializing processes: Youths who have high-level computer knowledge provide guidance to others, which increases online delinquency. Moreover, the level of computer skills is a key factor in gang involvement in cybercrime: for gangs with members who have high-level computer skills, online delinquency becomes a routine part of the gang's life, and interaction with other groups around the globe facilitates their involvement in cybercrime.

Keywords

gang, Internet, online delinquency, hacking

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Internet has become a vital and integral component in one's daily life, especially among young people, with gang members being no exception (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007). However, the Internet appears to be a most significant decentralized medium, providing a growing unmonitored and uncensored forum, and thus serving as an easy and accessible arena for delinquency (King

[1]The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

Corresponding Author:
Revital Sela-Shayovitz, Mevo Tidhar 14, Mevasseret Zion 90805, Israel
Email: ron15r@netvision.net.il

et al., 2007). Furthermore, youths are more likely to have superior knowledge of computer technology skills, and therefore become capable of performing various types of computer crimes (Moon, McCluskey, & McCluskey, 2010).

There has been a growing corpus of literature on computer crime, but there is no consensus as to its definition. Consequently, several terms have been used interchangeably, such as computer-related crime, cybercrime, digital crime, and Internet crime. The common theme among these definitions is the aspect of using the computer illegally (McQuade, 2006). Accordingly, computer-related crime includes illegal copying and trading of commercial computer software, illegal access to another's computer system, the creation and/or dissemination of a computer virus, cyberstalking, and cyber-hacking (Bossler & Holt, 2009; McQuade, 2006; Moon et al., 2010). Computer crime has become a global phenomenon and rates continue to rise rapidly; its extent is unknown and varies across studies (Foster, 2004; Higgins, Wilson, & Fell, 2009; Taylor, 1999; Wall, 2005; Wilson, Patterson, Powell, & Hembury, 2006). However, financial damages caused by cybercrime are substantial and may indicate the extent of this online illegal activity. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in the United States indicates that 67% of businesses reported financial losses from cybercrimes, which amount to US$867 million (Rantala, 2008).

To date, research on gang members' online behavior has been largely neglected. This article attempts to fill the gap by examining gang members' online behavior. By means of an analysis of gang member reports, the study also focuses on group activity on the web. Furthermore, the article aims to explore the role of traditional social processes theories in social processes among gang members while accounting for other established theories of crime for illuminating gang members' online behavior and delinquency.

Social Processes and Gangs—Theoretical Framework

Traditional theories of microlevel processes focus on three key components in the attempt to explain the etiology of gang member involvement in crime and delinquency: definitions and values, behavioral models for imitation, and moral justifications that facilitate involvement in delinquency (Akers, 1998; Sutherland, 1947; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Warr, 2002). Accordingly, socializing processes include both techniques for carrying out the delinquent behavior, and attitudes and values that support this behavior (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974). Furthermore, the probability that an individual will engage in a criminal offense increases when they differentially associate with others who commit delinquency (Akers, 1985, 1994, 1998; Sutherland, 1947).Another important aspect relates to the socializing of techniques of neutralization (e.g., denial of responsibility, injury or victims, condemnation of condemners, etc.) that provide the individual with exoneration from moral constraints and allow him to engage in delinquency without harm to his self-image (Minor, 1981; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

More recently, microlevel theories have focused on explaining the impact of gang membership in the facilitation of criminal behavior. Several influential factors have

been identified, such as low self-esteem, engaging in delinquent behavior before joining a gang, risk seeking, a lack of structure (which leads to more free time), moral disengagement, anti-authority attitudes, group pressure, and rivalry between gangs (Decker, 1996; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 1989; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003).

Youth Online Deviance

Internet use is increasingly rising and has become a dominant medium among youths. Studies show that 87% of the adolescents in the United States surf the Internet and a majority of them surf on the average 3 hr per day (Lenhart, 2005), whereas youths in Israel surf on average 13 hr per week (Israel Knesset Report, 2010). At the same time, youth online deviance has also increased in recent years. Nevertheless, scholars researching juvenile delinquency have devoted little attention to these issues (Moon et al., 2010; Yar, 2005).

The motivation behind youth online deviance is wide ranging and similar to traditional criminal behavior, such as a desire for social respect, revenge, resistance, ideological protest, thrill seeking, theft, burglary, vandalism, and hooliganism (Muncie, 1999; Taylor, 1999; Verton, 2002). In addition, youth engagement in online delinquency is associated with heavy computer use (i.e., many hours a day), membership in cyber clubs, and involvement with delinquent peers (Longshore, Chang, Hsieh, & Messina, 2004; Lee & Ha, 2004; Lee, 2005; Moon et al., 2010).

The term "hacking" relates to "unauthorized access and subsequent use of other people's computer systems" (Taylor, 1999, p. xi). Hacking behavior is widely accepted in the sense of "computer break-ins" and closely associated with teenager deviance (DeMarco, 2001; Verton, 2002; Yar, 2005). Additional terminology refers to different forms of hacking, such as "cracking" (security breaking), and hacker subgroups, such as "black hat" and "white hat" hackers (Morris, 2010; Williams, 2002).

Yar (2005) examined the ways in which hacking is socially constructed as a process of labeling teenage delinquency in public and academic discourses. In the popular cultural sphere, the media contributes to social construction by highly publicizing some cases of youths who engage in hacking. Furthermore, movies, such as Wargames (1983) and Hackers (1995), have also contributed to the social construction of hacking as youth delinquency (Levi, 2001; Yar, 2005). In the academic domain, research on hacking has mainly focused on interviewing young hackers about their activities (for instance, Taylor, 1999; Verton, 2002). Thus, the perception of teenager deviance has been shaped both in the public and in the academic discourse.

At the individual level, hacking can be viewed as an "Internet addiction disorder" in which the hacker loses the capacity to exercise restraint over his own desire to use the computer (Young, 1998). In this context, it has been argued that Internet addiction disorder is similar to other types of addictions, such as alcoholism or drug addiction (Verton, 2002; Young, 1998). Other factors associated with involvement in hacking

are problematic family backgrounds, such as experiences of parental neglect, parental conflicts, parental alcoholism, and physical abuse (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Verton, 2002). However, research on the backgrounds of hackers is limited (Morris, 2010).

At the group level, hacking behavior takes place in a distinctive sociocultural context and group structure, and can be seen through perspectives of subcultural and differential association delinquency (Fitch, 2004; Taylor, 1999). These associations mainly occur over the Internet: Peer groups of hackers are formed and sustained via the Internet and interaction is primarily conducted in chat rooms and on bulletin boards. However, they may also associate in the "real world" and have group meetings and organized conferences, primarily in the United States. These groups provide youths with a sense of belonging, social identity, and a way of keeping abreast of technological developments (Rogers, 2000). Interactions can be seen as mechanisms of socialization for novice hackers who are introduced into hacker subcultures. These include ideology and values that legitimize hacking and a hacking lifestyle (codes of dress, speech, and leisure activities). Moreover, engagement in hacker subcultures can also be seen as a social learning process, which provides opportunities for novice hackers to learn tricks and tools from their more experienced counterparts (Fitch, 2004; Taylor, 1999).

The Internet and the Gang

Research attention regarding the effect of the Internet on gangs has been conducted mainly at the macrolevel, namely, the influence of the Internet on spreading gang culture. Indeed, the Internet has had a powerful impact on diffusing the culture, symbols, and lifestyle of gangs (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Hagedorn, 2005; Klein et al., 2001). For example, "gangsta rap" music, which is mass-marketed via the Internet, plays a key role in the diffusion of gang culture (Morales, 2003). Similarly, the existence of gangs with American roots in European nations, such as the Crips in the Netherlands and the A and B gangs in Oslo, can be viewed as part of the global diffusion of gang culture (Lien, 2001; Van Gemert, 2001). Furthermore, gangs also utilize the Internet in order to promote their group prestige or transfer messages to rival gangs. For example, YouTube has become a popular channel among Mexican gangs for uploading assassination videos as a form of intimidation (Drezner, 2010).

However, only very few studies have focused on the microlevel of gang members' online behavior. Findings indicate that 82% of gang members in the United States report that they have access to the Internet and 71% of them use a social networking site, such as Facebook or MySpace (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). In this context, it is important to note that in recent years access to the Internet has become very easy. Thus, even if gang members do not have access to the Internet at home, they can surf the web at Internet cafes or public institutions that provide online access. Importantly,

these public places have an advantage for online delinquency, since they provide unidentified use for those who are involved in illegal online activity.

In general, gang members use the Internet in a manner similar to those youths who are non-gang, namely for social interaction, games, music, and videos (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). However, the Internet plays a role in sustaining gang members' prestige: Those who frequently used the Internet report that they had a website to "show or gain" respect for their posse (King et al., 2007). Furthermore, the web provides support for gang activities through bragging, posting gang fights on YouTube, and making threats. Yet, the majority of gang members are still far from taking advantage of the Internet's full capacity in order to promote and organize their gang activities (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011).

In contrast, among white supremacist and neo-Nazi gangs, the Internet has become a leveraged tool for online recruitment, and these groups have adapted several strategies with the aim of using the power of the Internet to unite and incite (Corb, 2011). Furthermore, the Internet serves as a socialization vehicle for white supremacist movements: The existence of websites dedicated to the neo-Nazi movement allows gang members to discuss the ideology and globalize their illegal activity with the intention of gaining group prestige. Thus, transnational interactions between neo-Nazi gangs play a role in the amplification of delinquent behavior in order to establish social status within the global field of the gangs (Sela-Shayovitz, 2012).

The Current Study

The literature review presented above indicates that computer crime is constantly growing in recent years, although research on juvenile delinquency has given little attention to these issues. Moreover, the effect of the Internet on gangs has been examined mainly at the macrolevel, namely the influence of the Internet on spreading gang culture and lifestyle. At the same time, microlevel research of gangs on the web has been largely neglected. The present study contributes to the existing literature through an analysis of gang members' online behavior. Furthermore, based on the reports of gang members, the analysis also focuses on their group activity on the web.

Sample

Data were collected by means of a convenience sample of 30 gang members in one of the big cities in Israel.[1] Based on the Eurogang definition (Klein & Maxson, 2006), gang members were identified by using the five key components of gangs: durability, street orientation, youthful age, illegal activity, and identity. Accordingly, the sample consisted of those whose peer group fitted the definition of gang (12 adolescents were identified as not affiliated to gangs and therefore were not included in the final sample of 30 participants).

A primary concern of this study was to maintain the confidentiality of study subjects (referred to as "gang members") and their city ("research city") in order to reduce the

possibility of the stigmatization of these youths and their community. This strategy was based upon previous studies that used the same approach (Aldridge, Medina, & Ralphs, 2008; Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003; Measham, Aldridge, & Parker, 2001).

Gang members interviewed for this study between 2010 and 2011 were men in the age range of 16 to 20 years. The sample was comprised of varied ethnic groups and gangs. Israeli-born members represented the largest group in the sample (74%), followed by immigrants from the former USSR (16%) and Ethiopian immigrants (10%).

The immigrants in the sample settled in Israel during their early childhood (at an average age of 3.5 years), and three of them were born in Israel. Most of them were school dropouts (60%) and the others were high school students (40%). Based on their reports, the gangs' size ranged from 5 to 20 members and the period of the gangs' existence was between 1 and 8 years. These gangs engaged primarily in violent attacks (including some cases of stabbing and subsequent injuries), burglary, vandalism, alcohol, and "soft" drug use (e.g., *marijuana,* hashish). Two of them reported engaging in "soft" drug distribution.

Initially, the sample recruitment procedure focused on identifying locations in the city that gang members were more likely to attend. Following the suggestion of the city's Youth Advancement Unit, four youth clubs were chosen: two clubs for youth dropouts situated in the city center and two others located in the community centers of two different big neighborhoods. These places are operated by the city's Youth Advancement Unit and include prevention and intervention programs. However, the clubs mainly serve as a comfortable and protected place for meetings of gang members (police are not allowed into the clubs), and many youths from different gangs may attend without committing to take part in intervention programs. Thus, the sample encompasses youths of different gangs and areas of the research city, which allowed researchers to gain insight into variations among respondents (also see the Eurogang project's strategy in Weerman, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, & Van Gemert, 2009).[2] Interviews were carried out in a private setting in the youth clubs, and social-educational workers who work with the youths helped us recruit them for the study. Furthermore, the environment of their youth club strengthened their sense of confidence in regard to participation in the research, and the refusal rate was relatively low (10%).

The study conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews and each lasted approximately 1.5 hr. Face-to-face interviews consisted of open-ended questions and involved a two-step process. The first step aimed to verify gang affiliation by focusing on the member's relationship with his peer group affiliation, group characteristics, and involvement in various activities, including crime and delinquency. The second step of the interview focused on computer technical skills, patterns of surfing, social processes, and online deviance activity.

The presentation of findings is divided into three main categories: computer technical skills and patterns of surfing, gang formation and social processes, and online interaction and illegal activities.

Results

Computer Technical Skills and Patterns of Surfing

Almost all gang members (except two) had access to the Internet at home and the average age when they started to surf the Internet was 10.6 years. About one sixth of them (16%) had completed a basic computer course at school or at community centers, while others had no formal computer studies. The average time that gang members surfed the Internet was about 5.1 hr per day, as they reported:

> I'm addicted. I surf from when I get up, around 11 AM, until I go to bed around 1 AM. If I'm not meeting friends, I'm on the computer. There's always something to do online. (R-25, gang member)

> I surf the Internet eight hours a day; I sleep with the computer. The computer gives me lots of fun and occupation; that way I pass the time without getting in trouble. (R-5, gang member)

The findings suggest that for gang members the Internet can be viewed as providing an alternative activity to "hanging out" or being involved in street delinquency. In addition, one tenth of them surf more than 5 hr per day and report they have difficulty restraining their desire to use the computer, which can be perceived as symptoms of Internet addiction disorder (Young, 1996, 1998).

Gang member computer skills can be divided into three levels. The low level of computer/technical skills refers to a basic knowledge of how to surf, play games, use Facebook, and send emails (53.4% of the youths). A mid-range level of computer technical skills means knowing how to download movies, music, and games illegally (one third of the youths). A high level of technical skills indicates knowing how to format the computer, a general knowledge of software, and hacking capabilities (13.3% of the youths), as described in the following:

> I can format a computer and program it. I can hack into sites and change them, and shorten processes like when I download films, music, and change the editing of films on YouTube. (R-1, gang member)

> I feel that I have good command of the computer. I know software and can download stuff, I can format a computer, build websites, change and upgrade games, hack into sites, all sorts of things. (R-5, gang member)

Furthermore, the analysis shows that there is a link between heavy Internet use and level of computer technical skills: The more knowledge and technical skills, the more likely that the individual will spend time surfing. These findings are compatible with prior studies on hacking, which indicate that young hackers can be regarded as losing the capacity to restrain their desire to use the computer (Young, 1998).

Gang Formation and Social Processes

Results show that the Internet does not play a role in the formation of gangs or in gang structure. It seems that gang formation is mainly rooted in the neighborhoods of members and begins in the early years of adolescence (ages 11 to 15 years). About one third of gang members reported that the Internet is a vital part of the group's activity: They play computer games together, gamble, listen to music, and watch movies and pornographic material:

> We have entire meetings of online games. We watch standup, funny YouTube videos or play poker. We gamble on the computer and on the table. I like to gamble, and don't mind losing money. (R-8, gang member)

Another interesting aspect is related to the social processes of learning computer skills and online delinquency. Almost half of the gang members reported that they had learned technological skills from other friends in their group:

> One of the guys is a real computer freak; he knows software and can write programs. He teaches us stuff: how to download games without paying, tricks like sending viruses. (R-26, gang member)

> One of us really knows the computer, so we consult him. We download whatever we like. Why pay? So we downloaded a few things, so what? Everybody downloads without giving a damn. Those companies have loads of money anyway, so if you succeed—great! (R-12, gang member)

Thus, the association among members of the gang can be seen as a social learning process of online delinquency: Those who have a high level of computer skills guide the others. These findings are compatible with the differential association theory (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974) and the social learning theory (Akers, 1985, 1994). Accordingly, processes of learning online deviance among gang members comprises differential association and interaction with those who have a high level of computer skills and are already engaged in online deviance through imitation or modeling techniques and learning attitudes that support this behavior. Moreover, it seems that gang members apply techniques of neutralization and justification by denying the harm caused to others and condemning the condemners, namely the hi-tech companies.

Online Interaction and Illegal Activities

Based on the reports of gang members, it appears that the group's online delinquency is related to members' technological skills and, accordingly, this group can be divided into three types of subgroups:

Surfing and abstaining: The majority of gang members do not commit cybercrimes, and most of them have a low level of technological skill (63.4%). They engage only in traditional delinquency, for example theft, burglary, violent attacks, and drugs. These youths do not trust the Internet, and their surfing is distinguished by abstention from taking online risks due to their concern about the police. Moreover, they prefer "face-to-face" interaction; they still utilize the Internet for their pleasure and as a source of information about rival gangs:

> You never know who will see what you write; you have to consider where and how to talk about drugs and beatings. Important things are discussed only face to face, not on the computer or the phone. But for other stuff, like girls or parties, Facebook is fine. (R-10, gang member)

> There was once a fight with a group we didn't know. There was some pushing and shoving outside a club, and we were drunk. So my friend stabbed one of them, nothing serious, and we fled. But honestly, we were nervous, because we didn't know what would happen. So we tracked them on a friend's Facebook to see what happened to the guy that was stabbed. (R-18, gang member)

It seems that the role of posts in generating conflicts is important to gangs, and represents a new variation of gang threats. Furthermore, the concerns of gang members regarding interaction via the Internet and preferring "face-to-face" talk may be understood in light of the fact that over the last year the Israeli police have exposed several cases of illicit drug trafficking conducted via the Internet, and these were given a great deal of publicity by the media.

Surfing and causing harm: Gang members who have a mid-range level of computer skills perform online delinquency in the form of copying software, movies and games, gambling, and spreading viruses (23.3%). Their motivation is wide ranging and includes personal profit, thrill seeking, hooliganism, and revenge, as described in the following:

> We insert all sorts of viruses. For instance, we plant them in pictures on Facebook, so if someone opens the picture, the virus penetrates his computer. It's fun. We love it. We enjoy doing these things. (R-27, gang member)

The interactions of gang members on the Internet feature the use of caution strategies, such as codes, different usernames, and computers in public places. Yet, only two gang members reported that the Internet played a role in their traditional delinquency:

> We have an Internet connection with some out-of-town dealers; not on our home computer, but in a coffee shop or community center. We sit in the community center library and correspond. We use a different username and there are

> codes, so it isn't a problem. They only work via the computer and the stuff is delivered. We only deal in pills like hagigat, ocean, ecstasy, not the heavy stuff. (R-19, gang member)

Thus, it may be suggested that there is a gap between gang online delinquency and traditional juvenile delinquency. The majority of gang members do not utilize the advantage of the Internet to promote gang offenses.

Surfing and hacking: Gang members who have a high level of technical skills and computer knowledge reported engaging in frequent hacking (13.3%). They are motivated mainly by thrill seeking and curiosity; however, they are also driven by a struggle for recognition, prestige, and revenge. Their hacking behavior has an essential place in the group's activity with certain attitudes and even hacking "ethics," such as not vandalizing websites, attacking only rival groups, and not hacking for theft. Here is an example:

> We hack into all sorts of websites, for fun, it's cool. We sit around and try out methods of hacking. We also try to hack into other hackers, but [we] don't destroy, just hack. If someone tries to destroy a website, he can be caught by the CMD. We can do it, but it's stupid. We have no interest. It's enough that we managed to hack into an official site. (R-1, gang member)

These attitudes toward hacking are compatible with prior studies on the subculture of hackers (Taylor, 1999; Thomas, 2002). However, no evidence was found of resistance to authority or ideological protest in the gang members' hacking.

The current findings are consistent with the "routine activities theory" (Eck & Weisburd, 1995; Felson, 2002). Accordingly, it may be suggested that in those gangs that include youths with computer skills, hacking becomes a routine part of the gang lifestyle, together with surfing and engaging in other types of delinquency. Yet, it seems that the Internet has a key role in the group's interactions:

> Facebook is one of the sites that the police monitor closely. I don't talk to my friends there. We have our own communications network, so no one can really know what we do and no one can catch us . . . we use the GAIM software, it's safe; we can simply encode important messages. We upgrade it with some changes, so it's easy and useful. (R-3, gang member).

However, the Internet also provides a forum for interaction and discussion with other gangs around the globe (in the United States and former USSR) in order to learn about hacker subcultures and strategies of hacking:

> We communicated with a group in America, real pros. At first, it was intriguing to hear what they did, but it also sucked that they were so good. We learned from them some techniques of hacking and they connected us to organizations. But we're not in touch anymore. It ended badly and in rivalry. (R-1, gang member)

Thus, interactions with other groups of hackers can be seen as mechanisms of socialization and the social learning of hacker subculture. Furthermore, the online dynamics that took place between these gangs may be understood in line with the "social facilitation model" (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003) within the macrolevel context. According to this model, it may be suggested that hacker gangs tend to interact with youth groups who are already engaged in hacking in order to recruit them to this subculture (*selection*), and the affiliation to a hacker subculture facilitates their involvement in online delinquency (*social facilitation*). In addition, these youths have a virtual territory or "turf" (private web) and are involved in online skirmishes with other gangs in the attempt to protect their territory:

> We had a problem with another group online; they tried to hack into our network. It was really bad, so we stung them with viruses and made a mess. It didn't come to physical violence; it stayed online. (R-5, gang member)

These findings are in line with the perceived threat hypothesis (see also Barlow & Decker, 2010), and clearly reflect the social dynamic that took place within the gang. Accordingly, the presence of a perceived threat to the virtual territory of the gang (private web) energized the conflict with other gangs, which in turn led to an escalation of the online delinquency. In addition, gang members reported that their groups used to mark their online activity with symbols:

> We have all sorts of codes and symbols, like the fingers [✌], that we insert after we dealt with a website. But usually it's just to communicate among ourselves. (R-1, gang member)

> We use a red billiard ball. It means 'we were here, we did this.' It's like leaving a signature. (R-4, gang member)

Hence, the level of computer skills is linked to patterns of "show or gain": In gangs in which youths have a high level of computer skills, they are motivated to gain respect in order to establish their social status within the virtual field of gangs. Yet, most youths are not motivated by showing off:

> We don't need the Internet or Facebook so that people know who we are. Whoever knows us, knows, and believe me, people know who we are and know not to mess with us. (R-19, gang member)

It would seem that some gang members believe that social respect is based on interaction with others in the "real" world, while others prefer to avoid showing off due to their concerns about the police.

The findings below add insight into gang member patterns of online delinquency. The analysis shows that the extent of their involvement in online illegal activity is as follows: gambling (46.6%), music piracy (36.6%), video piracy (36.6%), software

piracy (26.6%), dissemination of a computer virus (23.3%), illegal access to another's computer system (10%), cyber hacking (13.3%), and trading in drugs via the Internet (6.6%). Thus, gang online illegal activity is varied and to some extent similar to that of youths who are not associated with gangs. Moreover, it seems that there is almost no link between their street activity and online delinquency. However, the Internet plays a key role in the social dynamic within the group and in the interaction between gangs, as noted above.

Discussion

This article presents the findings of an exploratory study on gang members' online behavior. Furthermore, the study attempts to shed light on the processes and illegal activities of these groups on the web by means of an analysis of the reports of gang members. Several findings were particularly noteworthy.

First, gang members spend more time surfing in comparison to the general adolescent population. Thus, it may be suggested that surfing the Internet has become an alternative activity to "hanging out" or becoming involved in street delinquency.

Second, this study's findings indicate that the Internet does not play a role in the formation of gangs, rather the latter is a process that is mainly rooted in the neighborhoods of gang members and commences in early adolescence. However, the Internet does play a part in gang activities, particularly among those groups in which youths have high level of computer knowledge. Yet, among gangs consisting of youths with low-level computer skills, the Internet takes a marginal place in the group's activity, which basically manifests itself in not taking online risks.

Third, socializing processes of gang members are also related to learning online delinquency: Those who have high level of computer knowledge guide the others. These processes also include providing moral cover by employing techniques of justification and neutralization for engaging in online delinquency (Akers, 1998; Sutherland, 1947; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Warr, 2002). The findings contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge by broadening the concept of traditional theories, which focus on socializing processes among gang members, to group processes of delinquency in the *virtual* sphere.

Fourth, the analysis provides evidence indicating that the level of computer skills is a key factor in gang patterns of online delinquency and interaction. Gang members who have low level of computer skills engage in Internet interaction to a small extent and prefer "face-to-face" interaction. However, for those possessing computer skills and abilities, the Internet opens a window of opportunities in the virtual medium for cybercrimes. Their engagement in hacking and other types of computer crimes addresses varied motivations that are compatible with traditional gang delinquency, such as aggressiveness, excitement, desire for social respect, and revenge. Moreover, in gangs that consist of youths who have computer skills, online delinquency becomes a routine part of the gang's lifestyle. Thus, conceptualized within the framework of the "routine activities theory" (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 2002), it may be suggested

that gang online delinquency occurs when suitable targets on the Internet who lack capable guardianship encounter motivated and skilled youths.

Within the macrolevel context, the current findings highlight the influence of online interaction between gangs on social facilitation processes. In line with the facilitation model (Thornberry et al., 1993, 2003), it may be suggested that social facilitation processes do not take place only within the gang, but also between gangs. Thus, gangs of hackers tend to contact youths who are already engaged in hacking in order to guide them toward a hacker subculture (*selection*), and affiliation with this subculture facilitates their involvement in online delinquency (*social facilitation*).

Conclusions

Overall, the Internet does not promote considerable changes in gangs' traditional juvenile delinquency, which is still situated at the local level. Moreover, it seems that the involvement of gang members in online delinquency is generally similar to the activities of youths who are non-gang members (e.g., gambling, music piracy, video piracy, dissemination of computer viruses). This raises the question of whether gang members' online delinquency should be considered in the same vein as that of other youths' misbehavior on the web. However, given the interesting finding that the level of a gang member's computer skills is a key factor in the potential for engagement in serious cybercrimes, it can be assumed that it is only a matter of time before gang members will obtain further skills and learn to exploit the advantages of the Internet for their group activities. Findings regarding social facilitation processes between gangs in the virtual sphere also suggest that gang involvement in online delinquency has the potential to extend to more serious crimes.

Still, the fact that most gang members express concern about police monitoring on the Internet provides an interesting insight in regard to policy implications. Thus, even though gang involvement in cybercrime is less threatening than traditional delinquent gang behavior, it seems that the publicity of police exposure of illegal online activity has a deterring effect on gang members' involvement in online delinquency. Yet, further strategies are required in order to address the challenges of gangs in which members have high levels of computer skills.

The current research, of course, is not without its limitations. This study restricted the analysis to gang members in one city. It can be assumed that gang members' online behavior may not be similar to that of other cities or countries. Therefore, comparative research is required in order to investigate the similarities and differences that exist between gangs in various societies. Furthermore, the use in the present study of a convenience sample and the small number of participants also limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study relied on gang members' self-reported information, which rises concern about the validity of the data and potential response bias. Thus, even though qualitative analysis provides important insights into this topic, the use of different methodological approaches will enhance existing knowledge in the field. Finally, expanding the analysis to the interactions within the gang and between gangs will provide a better understanding of gangs' online behavior.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Scott H. Decker for his insightful and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The term, "gang," has been used in Israel only for groups involved in serious violent crime. The expressions, "band" or "delinquent peer group," which are less stigmatizing, are more commonly used. This phenomenon is also common in other countries and well discussed among researchers at Eurogang meetings (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; Weerman et al., 2009).
2. Given the different locations of the clubs that were selected, the youths who frequented the clubs and the demographic background of the respondents, it can be assumed that the sample is approximately representative of gang members in the city.

References

Akers, R. L. (1985). *Crooks and squares: Lifestyles of thieves and addicts in comparison to conventional people*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Akers, R. L. (1994). *Criminological theories: Introduction and evaluation* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: Roxbury.

Akers, R. L. (1998). *Social learning and social structure: A general theory of crime and deviance.* Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Aldridge, J., Medina, J., & Ralphs, R. (2008). Dangers and problems of doing 'gang' research in the UK. In F. van Gemert, D. Peterson, & I. L. Lien (Eds.), *Street gangs, migration and ethnicity* (pp. 31-46). Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing

Barlow, H. D., & Decker, S. H. (2010). The policy implications of general theories of crime. In. H. D. Balow & S. H. Decker (Eds.), *Criminology and public policy* (pp. 3-123). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Bossler A. M., & Holt, T. J. (2010). The effect of self-control on victimization in the cyber world. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38, 227-236.

Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review, 44*, 588-608.

Corb, A. (2011). *Into the minds of mayhem: White supremacy, recruitment and the Internet.* Google Ideas conference, Dublin, Ireland.

Decker, S. H. (1996). Collective and normative features of gang violence. *Justice Quarterly,* 13, 243-264.

Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz D. C. (2011). *Moving the gang: Logging off moving on*. The paper was commissioned by Google Ideas.

DeMarco, J. (2001). *It's not just fun and war games*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Justice website, http://www.cybercrime.gov/usamay2001_7.htm

Drezner, D. W. (2010). Weighing the scales: The Internet's effect on state-society relations. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs, 2*, 31-46.

Eck, J. E., & Weisburd, D. (1995). Crime places in crime theory. In J. E. Eck & D. Weisburd (Eds.), *Crime and place: Crime prevention studies* (pp. 1-35). N.Y. Criminal Justice Press and Washington. DC: Executive Research Forum.

Esbensen, F. A., Huizinga, D., & Weiher, A. W. (1993). Gang and non-gang youth: Differences in explanatory factors. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 9*, 94-116.

Esbensen, F. A., & Weerman, F. M. (2005). A cross-national comparison of youth gangs and troublesome youth groups in the United States and the Netherlands. *European Journal of Criminology, 2*, 5-37.

Felson, M. (2002). *Crime and everyday life.* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Fitch, C. (2004). *Crime and punishment: The psychology of hacking in the new millennium*, Bethesda, MD: SANS Institute.

Foster, D. R. (2004). *Can the general theory of crime account for computer offenders: Testing low self-control as a predictor of computer crime offending*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

Hagedorn, J. M. (2005). The global impact of gangs. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 21*, 2, 153-169.

Haynie, D., & Osgood, W. (2005). Reconsidering peers and delinquency: How do peers matter? *Social Forces, 84*, 1109-1130.

Higgins, G. E., Wilson, A. L., & Fell, B. D. (2005). An application of deterrence theory to software piracy. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 12*, 166-184.

Hobbs, D., Hadfield, P., Lister, S., & Winlow, S. (2003). *Bouncers. violence and governance in the night-time economy.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Israel Knesset Report (2010). *The supervision and restrictions on the Internet in order to protect children and youth.* Retrieved from http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/docs/m02407.doc

King, J. A., Walpole, C. E., & Lamon, K. (2007). Surf and turf wars online: Growing implications of Internet gang violence. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, 66-68.

Klein, M. W., Kerner, H. J., Maxsen, C. L., & Weitekamp, E. G. (2001). *The Eurogang paradox: Street gangs and youth groups in the U.S. and Europe*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.

Klein, M. W., & Maxson C. L. (1989). Street gang violence. In M. E. Wolfgang & N. A. Weiner (Eds.), *Violent crime, violent criminals* (pp. 198-234). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Lien, I. L. (2001). The concept, honor, conflict, and violent behavior among youths in Oslo. In M. W. Klein , H. -J. Kerner , C. L. Maxson, & E. G. Weitekamp (Eds.) *The Eurogang paradox: street gangs and youth groups in the U.S. and Europe* (pp. 165-174). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.

Klein, M. W., & Maxson C. L. (2006). *Street gang patterns and policies.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lee, K., & Ha, Y. (2004). Path analysis on the relationship between Internet-related crime and related factors among juveniles. *Journal of Home Economics, 42*, 127-143.

Lee, S. (2005). An empirical study on causes of juvenile delinquency in cyberspace. *Research on Criminal Justice Policy, 16*, 145-174.

Lenhart, A. (2005). *Protecting teens online*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Levi, P. (2001). ''Between the risk and the reality falls the shadow'': Evidence and urban legends in computer fraud. In: D. Wall (Ed.), *Crime and the Internet*, London, UK: Routledge.

Loeber, R., & Stouthamer-Loeber, M. (1986). Family factors as correlates and predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency. In: M. Tonry & N. Morris (Eds.), *Crime and justice: An annual review of research* (vol. 7). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Longshore, D., Chang, E., Hsieh, S. C., & Messina, N. (2004). Self-control and social bonds: A combined control perspective on deviance. *Crime and Delinquency, 50*, 542-564.

Measham, F., Aldridge, J., & Parker, H. (2001). *Dancing on drugs: Risk, health, hedonism in the British club scene*, London, UK: Free Association Books.

McQuade, S. C. (2006). *Understanding and managing cybercrime*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Minor, W. W. (1981). Techniques of neutralization: A reconceptualization and empirical examination. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 18*, 295-318.

Moon, B., McCluskey, J. D., & McCluskey, C. P. (2010). General theory of crime and computer crime: An empirical test. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 38*, 767-738.

Morales, G. (2003). Chicano and Latino rap and its influence on gang violence and culture. *Journal of Gang Research, 10,* 55-63.

Morris, R. G. (2010). Computer hacking and the techniques of neutralization: An empirical assessment. Retrieved from http://whitepapers.hackerjournals.com/wp-ontent/uploads/2010/06/Computer-Hacking-and-the-Techniques-of-Neutralization.pdf

Muncie, J. (1999). *Youth and crime: A critical introduction*, London, UK: SAGE.

Rantala, R. R. (2008). *Cybercrime against businesses, 2005 (NCJ 221943)*. Retrieved from http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cb05

Rogers, M. (2000). *A new hacker taxonomy*. Retrieved from http://www.cerias.purdue. edu/homes/mkr/hacker.doc

Sela-Shayovitz, R. (2012). The impact of globalization, migration, and social group processes on neo-Nazi youth gangs. In F. A. Esbensen & C. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth gangs in international perspective. Results from the Eurogang program of research* (pp. 211-225). New York, NY: Springer.

Sutherland, E., (1947). *Principles of criminology* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott.

Sutherland, E. H., & Cressey, D. R. (1974). *Principles of criminology,* 9th Ed. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott.

Sykes, G., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review, 22*, 664-670.

Taylor, P. (1999). *Hackers: Crime in the digital sublime*, London, UK: Routledge.

Thomas, D. (2002). *Notes from the underground: Hackers as watchdogs of industry.* Retrieved on April 20, 2009 from http://www.ojr.org/ojr/business/1017969515.php

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., & Chard-Wierschem, D. (1993). The role of juvenile gangs in facilitating delinquent behavior. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 30*, 55-87.

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., & Tobin, K. (2003). *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Van Gemert, F. (2001). Crips in orange: Gangs and groups in the Netherlands. In M. Klein, H. J. Kerner, C. L. Maxson, & E. G. Weitekamp (Eds.), *The Eurogang paradox: Street gangs and youth groups in the U.S. and Europe* (pp. 145-152). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.

Verton, D. (2002). *The hacker diaries: Confessions of teenage hackers.* USA: Brandon A. Nordin.

Wall, D. (2005). The Internet as a conduit for criminal activity. In A. Pattavina (Ed.), *Information technology and the criminal justice system*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Warr, M. (2002). *Companions in crime: The social aspects of criminal conduct.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Weerman, F. M., Esbensen, C. L., Aldridge, J., Medina, J., & Van Gemert, F. (2009). *Eurogang program manual: Background, development, and use of the Eurogang instruments in multi-site, multi-method comparative research: History of the Eurogang Research Program*. Retrieved from http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/eurogang/Eurogang_20Manual.pdf

Wilson, D., Patterson, A., Powell, G., & Hembury, R. (2006). *Fraud and technology crimes: Findings from the 2003/04 British Crime Survey, the 2004 offending, crime and justice survey and administrative sources* (Home Office Online Report). Retrieved from http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/rdsolr0906.pdf

Williams, S. (2002). *Free as in freedom. Richard Stallman's crusade for free software*. Retrieved from http://www.cui- y.cn/Recommended/Linux

Yar, M. (2005). Computer hacking: Just another case of juvenile delinquency? *The Howard Journal, 44*, 387-399

Young, K. S. (1996). Pathological Internet use: A case that breaks the stereotype. *Psychological Reports, 79*, 899-902.

Young, K. S. (1998). Internet addiction: The emergence of a new clinical disorder. *Cyber Psychology and Behavior, 1*, 237-244.

Bio

Revital Sela-Shayovitz is head of non-formal Education Studies at David Yellin Academic College, and an Adjunct Professor in the Graduate School of the Criminology Institute at the Hebrew University. Her main research focuses youth gangs, violent crime and social control, and media coverage of crime. Her research has been published in Europe and the US in, for example, British Journal of Criminology, Journal of Experimental Criminology, Feminist Criminology, Violence against women, Crime and Media.