

Noelle Warkentin
PhD Candidate
Simon Fraser University

Étienne Blais
Professeur titulaire
Université de Montréal

David Décary-Héту
Professeur agrégé
Université de Montréal

Objectives

- Identify the prevalence and type of violent gang postings on SM in Montréal, Canada
 - Do they compare with gangs from larger cities?
- Investigate newer popular social media (SM) platforms

Background

- Canada has seen an increase in firearm related homicides in 2021, with a 6% increase in victims compared to the previous year [1].
- Social behaviours that take place on SM are now shaping one's activities, and armed violence is not an exception [7].
- Gang members post content on SM to promote their gang affiliation or interest in a gang, to discuss their participation in violent acts, to threaten rivals, to post information about rival gang members, or to extend their gang network [3,4,5,6,8,10].
- These postings may then signal specific messages to other gang members, which could lead to violence offline
 - Gangs have been found to use signals that are difficult to fake to provide trust [2]
- Researchers have investigated gang member postings in larger cities (Chicago, New York), leaving a gap in what we know about gangs in smaller cities.

Methods

- Search SM accounts of known gang members in Montreal, Canada:
 - Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok
- Hybrid deductive coding approach used to identify indicators of violence:
 - firearms, gun gestures, hand signs, other

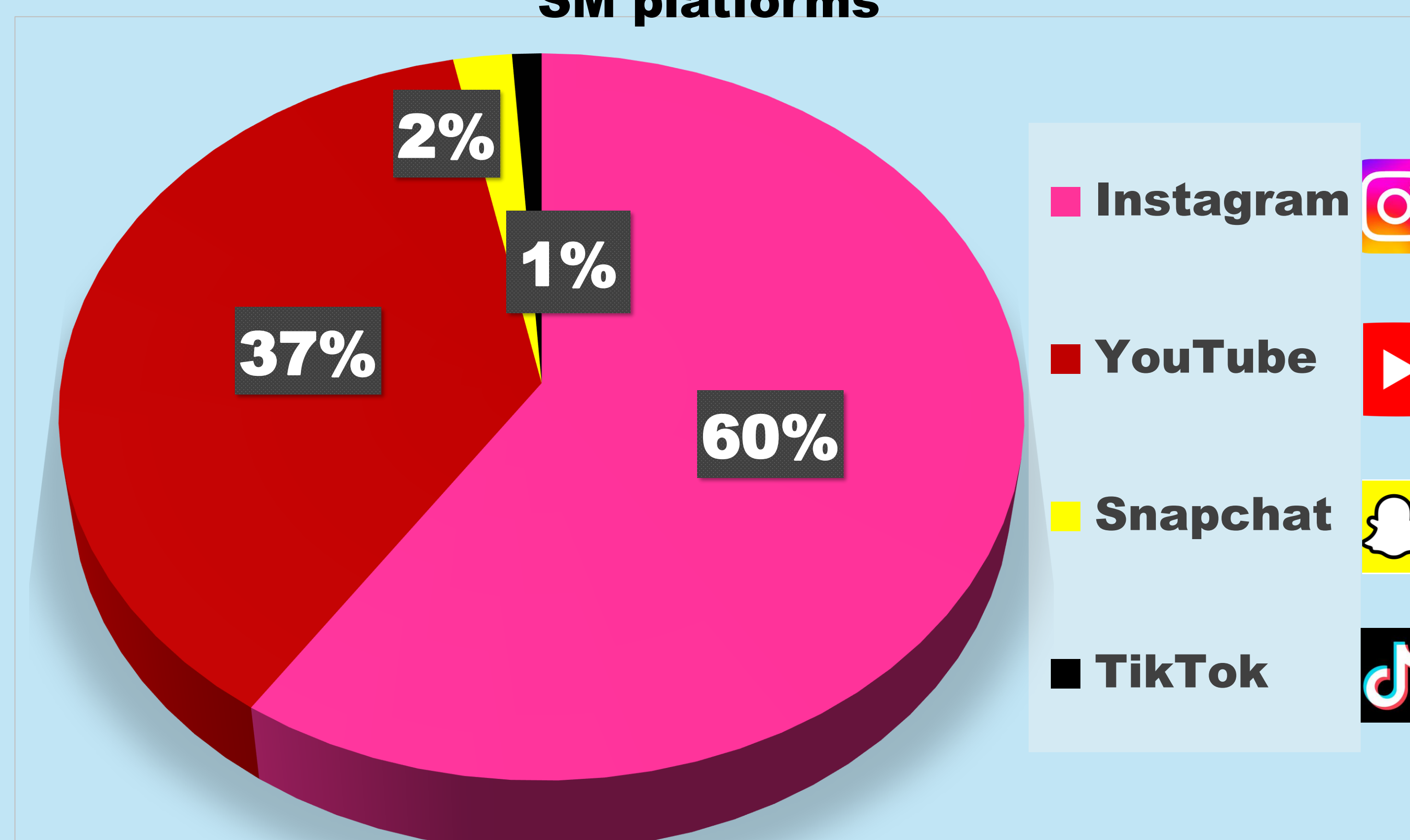
Results

Number of gangs and members with total posts and coded posts

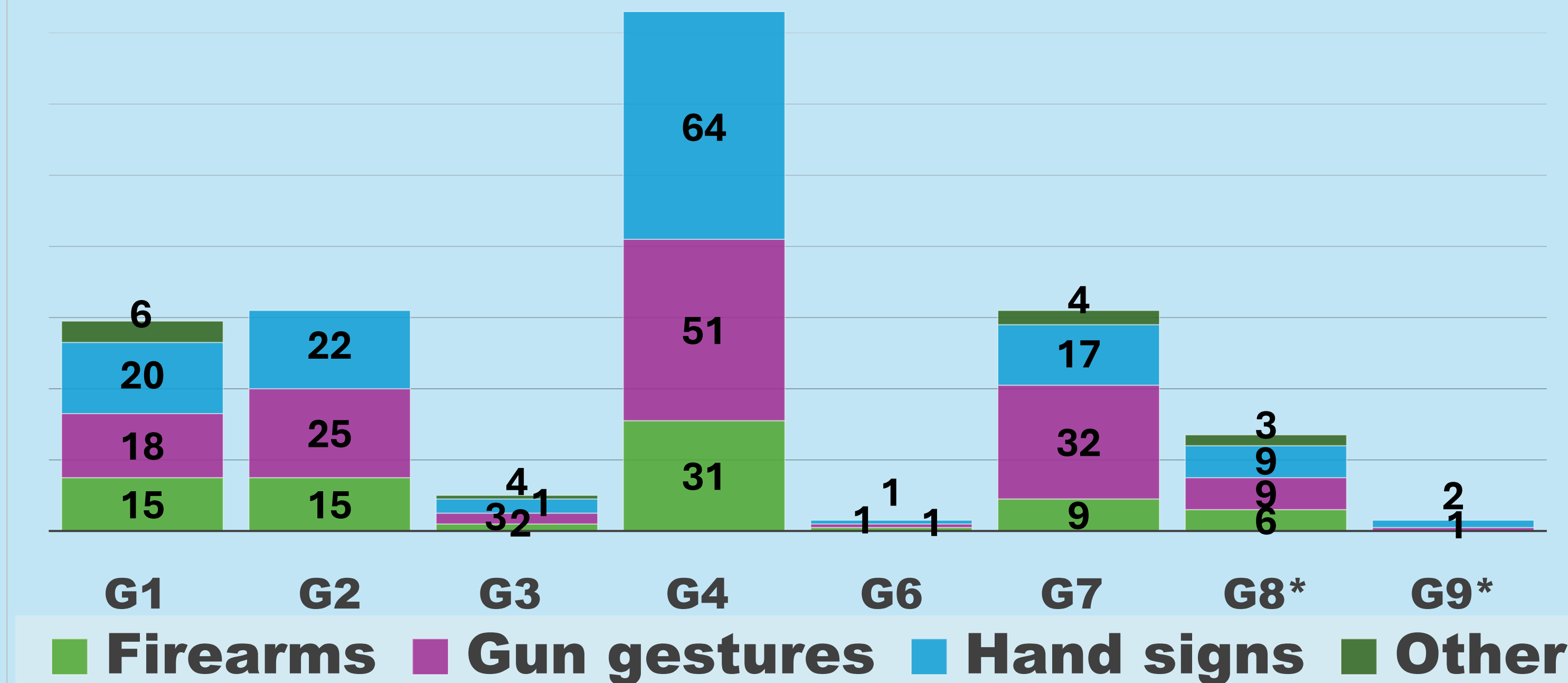
# Gangs identified	# Gang members identified	# Gangs with SM	# Gang members with SM	# posts	# posts coded
17	59	6	17	1,758	273

- Results provide descriptive analysis of gang use of SM
- 1,758 posts were searched from 43 different SM accounts (posted between 2011 - 2023)
- 17 members from 6 gangs had at least 1 SM account
- 273 posts coded as containing at least one form of violence
- Instagram accounts had the most posts containing indicators
- Gun gestures and hand signs were most frequently depicted
- Hand signs and firearms were identified more frequently on Instagram, while gun gestures were identified more in YouTube videos
- Instagram and YouTube were most popular, meaning they may play a larger role in displaying signals.
- One gang (G4) had the most postings with indicators

Posts identified with displays of violence across different SM platforms



Frequency of posted violent signals per gang



Discussion

- How firearms were displayed was similarly identified by previous researchers [8], indicating that these gangs are presenting much like gangs in larger cities.
- Indicators displayed by members of different gangs indicates that these signals carry messages that could be deciphered by others in the gang world.
- Previous researchers have identified that members often display firearms, gun gestures, and hand signs to indicate an aggressive persona [9, 11], it is feasible that such indicators are practical signals to others within these online spaces.
- Displaying these on SM may be considered risky, which may convey truthfulness [2].
- Future research should examine how these signals on SM may be associated with offline violence.

References

- Cotter, A. (2021). Firearms and violent crime in Canada, 2021.
- Densley, J. A. (2013). How Gangs Work. Palgrave Macmillan
- Frank, R., Cheng, C., & Pun, V. (2011). Social Media Sites: New Fora for Criminal, Communication, and Investigation Opportunities. Public Safety Canada.
- Holt, T. J., & Bossler, A. M. (Eds.). (2020). The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance. Springer International Publishing.
- Lauger, T. R., & Densley, J. A. (2018). Broadcasting Badness: Violence, Identity, and Performance in the Online Gang Rap Scene. Justice Quarterly
- Morselli, C., & Décary-Héту, D. (2013). Crime facilitation purposes of social networking sites: A review and analysis of the 'cyberbanging' phenomenon. Small Wars & Insurgencies
- Moule, R. K., Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2017). Technology and conflict: Group processes and collective violence in the Internet era. Crime, Law and Social Change
- Patton, D. U., Eschmann, R. D., & Butler, D. A. (2013). Internet banging: New trends in social media, gang violence, masculinity and hip hop. Computers in Human Behavior
- Patton, D. U., Eschmann, R. D., Elsaesser, C., & Bocanegra, E. (2016). Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence outreach workers know about social media and urban-based gang violence in Chicago. Computers in Human Behavior
- Sela-Shayovitz, R. (2012). Gangs and the Web: Gang Members' Online Behavior. Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice
- Urbanik, M.-M., & Haggerty, K. D. (2018). '#It's Dangerous': The Online World of Drug Dealers, Rappers and the Street Code. The British Journal of Criminology