

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Credible Messengers Online: A Systematic Review of Social Media Strategies for Community Violence Prevention

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Community violence refers to interpersonal disputes between individuals within the same neighborhood that can escalate into community gun violence, producing lasting social and economic consequences. In high-crime areas, individuals may develop informal social norms consistent with Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street*, which are increasingly reflected in digital spaces as social media becomes more embedded in everyday life. Unfortunately, features of social media can amplify opportunities for disrespect, which may intensify interpersonal conflicts and contribute to violence. Given that credible messengers play a key role in violence intervention, it is important to examine how their strategies are adapting to digital environments. Credible messengers are trusted individuals who maintain relationships with at-risk populations and engage in violence prevention through outreach and intervention. This study presents a systematic review of their social media practices in community violence prevention.

The findings indicate that credible messengers more often use reactive rather than proactive approaches. Trust emerged as a central component across interventions, alongside variation in how social media is perceived and used in practice. Overall, this review identifies

key patterns and gaps in current practices, offering insight into how credible messenger interventions are evolving in digital contexts.

CREDIBLE MESSENGERS ONLINE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA
STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY VIOLENCE PROTECTION

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all the people that held up my shoulders when it was too hard for me to. To all the people who played a role in my academic and personal development. And to all the people that showed me kindness when I didn't deserve it. You know who are, and this work is for us.

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List of Abbreviations

CBO- Community Based Organizations

CGV- Community Gun Violence

NFS- Non-Fatal Shootings

Chapter 1: Introduction

Neighborhoods provide an interesting mix of individualism and social cohesion.

Neighborhoods have different social structures, cultures and issues unique to them. One major issue that significantly impacts neighborhoods is community violence. Community Violence can be described as interpersonal disputes between non-related individuals who may or may not know each other, within the same social context (Center for Diseases Control 2025). These disputes often take form in retaliatory acts of violence and generally occurs outside of the home. Community Violence can also turn fatal as individuals may decide to fight back with guns. When retaliatory acts of violence results in homicides or non-fatal shootings (NFS) this is known as community gun violence (CGV). This phenomenon disrupts neighborhoods in various aspects.

Economically, the unit cost of a single gun-related homicide is just over \$1.2 million, while the average cost, or the cost per homicide, is approximately \$625,000 (National Institute Crime Justice Reform [NICJR] 2023). For non-fatal injury shootings, NICJR calculates the unit cost at almost \$700,000, with an average per-shooting cost of about \$337,000, for an annual total of \$11.7 billion (2023). This goes towards direct and immediate expenses like policing, emergency services, and incarceration.

Moreover, communities with higher rates of CGV experience lost revenue. When rates of shootings are higher, their property value often decreases. As members are either injured, dead or involved in legal proceedings, it becomes difficult to be contribute to society. There are also contributing traumatic factors that affects other members in the community, based on their level of exposure to the violent act. Higher rates of visible violence can contribute to adverse

childhood experiences (Burke et.al 2022) or an increase in a cycle of violence (Wright & Fagan 2013).

And more importantly, the occurrence of CGV creates irrevocable damages that cannot be represented by a number. Homicides and NFSs disrupt social networks and relationships, as an individual who played the role of a child, parent, significant other, or friend is now seriously injured or may never live again. In 2020, 19,384 people were killed in gun homicides, which was a 35% increase from the previous year (Drane 2024). Moreover, research highlights Black and Latinx neighborhoods disproportionately experience higher rates of community violence, particularly young adults between ten and thirty-four (Sheats, 2018).

These factors establish the importance of neighborhoods reducing retaliatory acts of violence before it escalates into deadly gun violence. However, to support efforts in reducing this social challenge, it is important to understand the historical causes. Throughout the years, there has been growing literature in evaluating the relationship between socio-structural conditions impacting the prevalence of crime. Key theories include but are not limited to, broken windows (Wilson & Kelling 1982), social disorganization (Shaw & McKay 1929), strain (Agnew 1992), cultural deviance (Shaw & McKay 1942) and social control theory (Kornhauser 1978). All of these theories collectively highlight how social structure, economic strain and community dysfunction impacts crime rates on the neighborhood level.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Social Context: The Creation of the Inner-City

Structural disadvantages are rooted in decades of oppression that have continually pushed vulnerable populations to the margins of society. Examples throughout the years include the

legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, residential segregation, punitive criminal justice policies and deindustrialization (Kubrin 2005).

Between 1910 to 1940, the Great Migration occurred, where more than eight million African Americans migrated from the South to the northern states. (Leibbrand et al. 2020) There were various contributing factors. For starters, there were increased economic opportunities and no Jim Crow segregation in the northern states (Tolnay & Beck 1990). During the early twentieth century the agricultural market in the South was declining and there was a shift towards manufacturing models. Specifically, during this industrialization period the increase in factories and jobs is known as Fordism¹. The higher rates of job vacancies and economic promise was appealing for Black Americans to move up North.

Furthermore, another important contributor to the Great Migration was the opportunity for Black Americans to escape the social injustices of the South. They experienced unequal treatment in the courts, lynching incidents, denial of suffrage, inequalities in educational services and outward discrimination in public spaces (Woofert 1920). Specifically, escaping lynching was a significant push factor, as individuals were publicly tortured and murdered for criminal acts, or simply falling outside the standard of “acceptable” behavior. For example, one migrant wrote in his letter to the Chicago Defender, "After twenty years of seeing my people lynched for any offense from spitting on a sidewalk to stealing a mule, I made up my mind that I would turn the prow of my ship toward the part of the country where the people at least made a pretense at being civilized" (Henri 1975). Moreover, Tolnay and Beck's quantitative study found a positive

¹ Fordism is a manufacturing system that rose during the twentieth century's industrial movement. It was pioneered by Henry Ford, the creator of Ford motors. As Ford Motors rose to high production rates, they created the assembly line and [standardized goods and higher wages for workers. This drove economic growth for individuals and society as well as grew modern consumer capitalism (Patton 2013).

relationship between lynching rates and Black out-migration levels (1990). The authors analyzed population data from South Carolina and Georgia between the years 1910-1930. Overall, the economic prospects and the desire to evade racial terror were significant factors that contributed to African Americans populating northern cities.

Unfortunately, as the U.S economic system shifted to a globalized market in the 1970's, there was no longer a need for mass production in domestic factories. This resulted in deindustrialization. Many jobs were disbanded and there was an added pressure of competition through capitalistic achievement (Lipietz & Cameron 1997). Deindustrialization left many families unemployed and vulnerable. Especially the Black Americans from the Great Migration as they held most of the factory jobs (Patton et al. 2013).

The shift to a fast-moving consumer economic model created the rise of multinational corporations like, international finance and banking, global supply chain management and advancements in technology to name a few. The rise of capitalism influenced the modern social definition of success to monetary fortune (Patton et al. 2013). Nonetheless, as the people in these white-collar jobs became wealthier, it furthered class divisions between the people who were unemployed and those who lacked the educational background to compete for these new positions. As Patton prefaces, the “detractors suggested that [this economic structure] was cold and uncaring that did not consider the needs of the most vulnerable people” (Patton et al. 2013 A57). These factors caused neighborhoods to be under-resourced, under populated and isolated away from the standards of mainstream success.

Loïc Wacquant who coined the term defines the “hyperghetto” as a space that is not just a poor neighborhood, but has structurally reinforced poverty, extreme social isolation, joblessness

tied to deindustrialization and heavy enforcement by the penal system (2002 p.285). Heavy enforcements can be described as severe, punitive or unjust actions taken by authorities in the criminal justice system (Kubrin 2005). Examples include oversurveillance by police, punitive policies or high rates of incarceration (2002 p.286).

As a result of deindustrialization and the rise of the hyperghetto, Patton asserts that individuals were forced to “negotiate these harsh new realities” and subsequently developed new forms of masculine identity and their own definitions of success (Patton, 2013, p. A57).

Wacquant draws the similarities between the ghetto and the prison system creating new forms identity.

“[The] incarcerated develop their own argot roles, exchange systems and normative standards, whether as an adaptive response to the 'pains of imprisonment' or through selective importation of criminal and lower-class values from the outside, much like residents of the ghetto have elaborated or intensified a ‘separate sub-culture’ to counter their socio symbolic immurement” (2002 p.287).

In other words, in response to the hardships of separation from mainstream society and social disorganization, neighborhoods turn to creating their own rules of success, power and control. Considering this historical foundation and rise of structural barriers, it created an avenue for the formation of the *street code*.

2.2 Code of the Streets in the Inner-City

Elijah Anderson sought to understand how structural disadvantages and being isolated from mainstream society could influence interpersonal relationships, social standards and

resistance strategies in a neighborhood. After his ethnographic work in Philadelphia, Anderson identified a street code existed where informal rules influenced interactions in public spaces.

Anderson identified different core pillars to the code. A major part of the code is social identity being derived from respect. Respect is being treated right or being shown deference. In the code, respect is a guarded commodity that is hard to earn, but easy to lose (Anderson 1999). Another pillar to the code is the importance of appearances. It is important to hold a tough demeanor as this helps limit victimizations of crime and yields more respect because you're willing to commit violence. As Anderson describes it, your self-image is dependent on how much "juice" you have (1999, p.72). An individual having the social identity as "wild", "crazy" or a "killer" are all positive adjectives in the code (Kubrin 2005 p.363). A person's public responsibility is to demonstrate they are capable and willing to use violence, even if they don't actually commit it. Lastly, the code supports the self-help model, where members of the community resolve their own disputes rather than involving law enforcement. This resistant strategy is normally in result of high legal cynicism and mistrust of law enforcement within the community. Upholding these pillars normally initiates increased forms of violence.

Research has consistently found individuals creating or being involved in altercations to gain respect from their peers. Anderson found youth created altercations to gain respect from their counterparts (1999). Or even take credit for violent acts they did not commit (Patton et al. 2017). Similarly, Deanna Wilkinson (2001) found that young men committed robberies in order to impress their peers and upgrade their social status. A third study found that youth from inner-city New York communities used violence for recognition (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998).

Additionally, in the 1970's, rates of violent crimes with guns also increased. (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998) Notably, guns were not just lethal weapons, but became a symbol of respect. Interestingly, this time period is also consistent with the start of deindustrialization from the Fordism period. Guns were viewed as way to settle disputes, grievances and form a shield of protection (Fagan & Wilkinson 1998). In one of interviews Forrest Stuart conducted in “Code of the Tweet”, a participant named Tevin posted a series of photos on Instagram of himself holding a large pistol. Even though the pictures looked menacing, he confessed the gun was actually his cousins and he took all of those photos in a span of five minutes.

Tevin expresses, “On these networks [social media], you got all types of niggas watchin’ you, tryna see if you really that savage [violent hustler] you say you is... That’s why I got them pictures with the pole [pistol] on me. They could see on my IG [Instagram profile] that I don’t even take a piss without the pole! They gon’ think twice about tryna’ diss” (Stuart 2020 p.197).

His reasoning enumerates the role guns play in being an emblem for power, strength and a survival shield in the code. However, this in turn, escalates the intensity of the street code. Firearms can effectively deter violent acts, until they do not and instead contribute to greater levels of violence. If one challenges another, then the individual is frequently left with actually needing to use their gun to defend their constructed reputation. This is often times why gun usage and CGV rates may be higher in disadvantage neighborhoods, as it is a product of the code (Kubrin 2005). As Anderson highlights,

“To run away would likely leave one’s self-esteem in tatters, while inviting further disrespect. Therefore, people often feel constrained to pay back—to seek revenge—after a successful assault. Their very identity, their self-respect, and their honor are tied up with the way

they perform on the streets during and after such encounters. And it is this identification, including a credible reputation for payback, that is strongly believed to deter future assaults” (1999:76).

It is important to reiterate, the street code is a subcultural theory that argues crime is both learned and a result of limiting structural conditions. These conditions were previously mentioned as poverty, segregation, economic disadvantage, etc. Correspondingly, with the rise of the hyperghetto in the 1970’s and the formation of the street code, it fostered different mechanisms of expression. Specifically rap music was created in the 1970’s as an outlet to process and cope with the daily hardships of the inner city (Kubrin 2005 p.365). While many detractors claim rap is derogatory, glorifies violence, promiscuity and drugs, rapper 50 Cent asserted “hip hop’s a reflection of the environment that we grew up in, it’s the harsh realities that end up in the music” (BlackTree TV, 2007). Rap music and hip hop is a manifestation of the living street code. It is a way for youth to reckon with the code, as well as further it. A question then arises: given that hip hop emerged from the social conditions of the inner-city, what is the intersection between hip hop and the development of social identity within the code of the street?

2.3 Code of the Streets, Rap Music and Social Identity

The roots of hip hop can be traced to the 1970’s in Bronx, New York City. In Bakari Kitwana’s *The Hip-Hop Generation*, he categorizes the individuals born in urban America between 1965 and 1985 as the “hip-hop generation” (Patton et al. 2013). He makes this distinction as they grew up in post-segregated America and their experiences heavily influenced the early years of hip hop. During this time hip hop emerged as an artistic extension of the Black Freedom movement. People fought for economic justice from the transformative struggles of civil rights violations and systemic racism from the past (Powell 2004). This earlier form of hip

hop created a collective identity among this specific generation as they created music about resisting systemic racism, police brutality and economic oppression (Kitwana 2003).

Furthermore, the roots of this art form influenced the way it's used now.

Hip hop is still used to formulate self-identity, like its origins. Not only do artists reflect on their daily experiences or transgression from social systems, but reclaim negative attributions placed on them. For example, Patton highlights, as public forums would characterize Black Americans as thugs, individuals would choose to be a super-thug. (2013) This can be described as a resistance strategy where individuals will use acts of defiance to oppose and empower one's self from unwanted bigotry.²

However, as individuals can choose how to create and bolster their identity, it also gives them the opportunity to be inauthentic. As hip hop evolved, it became a space where people could make fake claims about themselves to build up their street reputation, as well as make fake claims to damage other's (Patton et al. 2013)

Additionally, Kitwana argues a key part to hip hop is rappers are held to an authentic standard where they have to "keep it real" and back up the claims of their lyrics. This parallels Anderson's code of the street, in which respect and reputation are maintained through the defense of one's identity and claims. This creates a greater likelihood for violent incidents as physical aggression is often viewed as the most effective means of maintaining respect and ones reputation. An example of this in a hip-hop context can be seen between Tupac Shaker and

² Resistance strategies are actions done by racially oppressed minorities to oppose, cope or challenge detractors. Examples of resistance strategies is the dummy movement, where one acts dumb intentionally. The hyphy movement, where people act hyper-active in public. Crime of resistance like stealing goods from an establishment that stigmatizes one (Teitelman et al. 2010).

Biggie Smalls dispute. In the 1990's the rappers feuded over claims of betrayal and insulting lyrics about the other. This caused a lot of street violence between the two and their affiliated groups. (Landrum 2023) Even though no one was charged with the others murder, there is high speculation their lyrical conflict is what influenced it. (Barrett 1999) Through the framework the code of the streets posits, this is a direct example of how studio lyrics can turn to street bullets.

Additionally, it is important to note people can display aspects of the street code in various ways, not just limited to hip hop. For example, graffiti painting, the illicit drug trade or tattoo artistry. (Kubrin 2005) Notably, there is an even greater rise in the street code being present on social media. Claims of disrespect or minimizing someone's reputation can now be on public platforms with greater visibility. Consequently, this can further exacerbate the weight of the claim and trigger retaliatory acts of violence to defend one's honor.

An example incorporating both hip hop and social media can be observed with the killing of Chicago rapper, Lili JoJo. He was a part of the Gangster Disciples who often had conflict with the Black Disciples. After a series of back-and-forth drill rap³ songs insulting each other, Lili JoJo published his location on X (formerly Twitter) to provoke a fight (Patton 2013). He was then murdered on the same night and Rapper Chief Keef promptly tweeted "It's sad cuz ... JoJo wanted to be jus like us #LMAO (laughing my ass off)" (Patton et al. 2013 p.A59). Similar to hip hop, this highlights an emerging trend in which social media is used to reinforce the street code and influence interpersonal disputes in disadvantaged communities.

³ Drill rap is a type of rap that originated in South Side Chicago. It was created with the intention of offending opponents and damaging their reputation. Common depictions in drill rap are loads of money, nice cars, guns and hanging out with your crew. It is an artform that allows people to assert their dominance in communities (Ilan 2020).

2.4 The Intersection of Social Media and Community Violence

A common perception of community violence is that it consists of random and sporadic acts. However, there is a growing consensus among researchers in this topic that community violence is actually predictable. Researcher Colin Loftin pioneered the idea that violent acts of crime unfold like a contagious disease (1986). Like an outbreak of a sickness, there is spatial concentration between people and places. Violence operates the same way as it clusters around the same geographic space which he calls “hotspots” (1986). There are also reciprocal characters, which cause back and forth retaliation dynamics between groups and individuals. And lastly, like catching an illness by someone, violent acts reciprocate after an initial altercation happens. If one were to examine a map that marks where violent acts occur, it would resemble a localized outbreak of a disease.

Criminologist Andrew Papachristos advanced this work by using this framework and applying it exclusively to CGV. He uses network science to map, analyze and predict behaviors within the complex interconnected system in neighborhoods. Papachristos work highlights gun violence concentrates in networks that are socially contagious and moves through time between person to person in a particular pattern (2013). This perspective was strengthened as expert Thomas Abt describes CGV has “sticky situations” in his book *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence--and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*. He posits “[community gun violence] centers around the same people, places and things” (2019). However, with the growing age of technology, the patterns of CGV are now being transmitted onto social media platforms. Expert Desmond Patton calls this the creation of the *digital street* (Patton et.al 2017).

On the digital street Desmond Patton describes “internet banging” as an emerging phenomenon where social media sites are used to trade insults or make violent threats (Patton et.al 2013) These social media sites include but are not limited to, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter). The platforms provide specific technological feature that influence how individuals can communicate, especially based on one’s intended purpose. For example, when wanting to make a threat about an opponent one can use the tagging feature or @ symbol to directly mention the person. This is described as adaptive structuration theory, which explains how people change the way they use technology over time, often adapting it for their own goals instead of using it exactly as it was originally intended (Christopherson 2007). It posits that technology is not a fixed tool, but is adapted by users, creating new structures through human action. Although social media was not created for the purpose of facilitating community violence, its technical features create an environment that amplifies and sustains it.

2.5 Categorizing the Digital Street

Similar to network science that is used to predict and map future retaliatory acts of violence, the usage of social media posts also exhibits their own patterns that can be analyzed.

Forrest Stuart furthered the concept of internet banging and used qualitative methods to categorize the specific ways gang youth utilized social media to incite potential future violence. Stuart summarized the posts into three categories. *Cross referencing* is where a challenger would damage someone’s reputation by finding old pictures of their opponent and publicizing it (Stuart 2020) Examples of old photos would usually be pictures from their childhood, in a school setting or before puberty. The objective is to show the opponent is not as tough as they claim.

Calling Bluffs is where challengers will publicly call their opponents to act in accordance with the violent threats they made (Stuart 2020). This is an attempt to invalidate their claims and show the initial opponent was only exaggerating. Usually, the challenger will share their location to highlight their opponent's unwillingness to fightback. While this increases the risk of victimization for the challenger, it increases greater respect per the code.

Catching lacking is capitalizing on individuals needing to maintain identities outside of violent offenses (Stuart 2020). For example, people still have personal and professional responsibilities like school, work or running errands with family members. Stuart posits, "it is a well-known truth among gang-associated youth that even those with the fiercest reputations for violence cannot live out such an identity during every minute of every day" (Stuart 2020 p.199). However, Challengers will confront their opponent when their guard is down and use features of social media like live streaming to publicize the act.

Moreover, Forrest Stuart argues these categories are on different tiers of escalating violence. For example, cross referencing is similar to "trolling", where one posts something to provoke an emotional response. This can be resolved with a counter online picture reasserting their dominance. On the other hand, to settle a post that is trying to challenge an opponent's bluff, it requires counter evidence that shows the rival is genuine about their claims of violence. This means enticing a physical retaliatory violent act. The same can be said for posts that attempt to catch the opponent lacking. The intention is to humiliate the rival when their guard is down, so settling the dispute would require a similar video to demonstrate they are not weak and received pay back. The varying levels of severity highlight the importance of culturally informed knowledge of these posts for appropriate responses and effective interventions.

2.6 Online Conflict to Offline Violence

Additionally, Caitlin Elsasser and colleagues evaluated multiple things. First, they concluded the most common types of online conflict that leads to offline violence. Secondly, they identified the specific social media features that create easier avenues to entice offline violence. A major contribution this study makes is half of the participants were female. The prior research in community violence has limited insights to female experiences.

The participants highlighted the main sources of conflict on platforms that led to in person violence was disrespect to self, disrespect to people they care about, and conflict related to romantic relationships. This illuminates the pillars from the code of the streets as the social posts are attacks on one's personal character or their social network. They found that nearly half of the conflict's adolescences described stemmed from someone being personally disrespected (n=56; 47%) (Elsasser et.al 2021). Disrespect to an adolescent's close relationship made up 16.1% of their cases. Conflicts related to romantic relationships made up 26.8% of the cases (Elsasser et.al 2021).

Elsasser and colleagues provided various insights to their second research question. The most significant social media feature the participants reported was the use of the comments section. Elsasser and colleagues found the comment section resulted in 80.4% of the offline incidents (2021). Alyssa, a 14-year-old female noted simply posting a "haha" on someone's post can be the starting point for a serious fight. (Elsasser et. al 2021) The authors state the context is important to accurately interpret the provocation of the "haha" (Elsasser et. al 2021). Oftentimes that may not be readily clear to the person it's being directed to or the outside audience viewing this comment thread. This further worsens the situation, as multiple individuals witness the

interaction. This can create potential for disrespect as more people are able to view the content and raises the stakes around defending one's reputation.

Additionally, using the tagging feature was highlighted in 10 out of 56 incidents of social media conflict. Anyone who is tagged in a post, their name is automatically pulled to being connected to it and gets on their page. This can be detrimental as opponents can call someone out through the tagging feature and it would put a public taint on their own profile. Often people will feel they need to respond to protect their identity (Elsasser et al. 2021). As Alyssa, 14-year-old female describes "tagging as way to pull people into a conflict, sometimes expanding conflict, sometimes starting conflict" (Elsasser et al. 2021).

Lastly, the live streaming feature was also highlighted in 23.2% of the cases in social media conflicts (Elsasser et. al 2021). Live streaming allows people to broadcast a video to not only their entire following, but all of the public. Monica, a 17-year was really mad so "[she went] live and turn[ed] up the whole Facebook, to make sure [she] really embarrassed [her rival]. Since the conflict unfolded on live stream there was a real time audience and a need to repair one's identity quick, as more and more people were watching (Elsasser et. al 2021). This is consistent with Stuart's category "caught lacking". The more people who logged on, the more damage it could do to the rival's reputation.

Both works illustrate how the properties of social media create easier avenues for the code of the street, making the "digital street" an attractive space for initiating disputes, as users can hide behind a screen.

On the other hand, it is important to note the nuance of using social media as a tool for intervention. While the majority of the viewers on Alyssa's live video were encouraging the fight, her cousin was attempting to de-escalate it through the comment section (Elsasser et al. 2021). This raises the question of how individuals are intervening in this phenomenon and what role social media plays in facilitating or shaping that intervention.

2.7 What is Intervention?

Intervention in community violence is largely connected to what Shaw and McKay describe as collective efficacy. They define collective efficacy as the social cohesion among neighbors and their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common goal (Shaw and McKay 1997 p.918). Moreover, a large component they stress in collective efficacy is the aspect of trust. They highlight a correlation between higher levels of trust and the development of stronger, more extensive social networks, which in turn creates greater opportunities for intervention to protect the collective good (Shaw and McKay 1997).

This can come from various different actors in the community. These include but are not limited to, street outreach workers, faith-based individuals, familial or friendship positions or non-profit workers. While these individuals may appear different in nature, they encompass the same properties that make them credible messengers. Szkola and Blount-Hill define the word relying on the rules of grammar and establish a credible messenger is someone who "inspires belief in the message they bear" (2025 p.296). While there is no shared definition among scholars, the authors conducted qualitative work to identify shared qualities among the credible messengers.

They concluded like their given definition, there is grave importance of having trust and credibility for their message to be believed. However, this is founded on various different things. The authors found having lived experience was essential to establish their credibility (Szkola & Blount-Hill 2025). There was significance in having local rapport and community cultural knowledge. Additionally, it was important to be authentic, compassionate and overall, not punitive in nature. This relates to high levels of legal cynicism in these communities and connects to Elijah Anderson's code of the street self-help model.

Moreover, credible messengers function as informal agents of social control who help uphold social order. Family members monitor and guide younger siblings to prevent involvement in risky behavior, street outreach workers intervene directly in community spaces to de-escalate violence, and neighbors often act to deter conflict within their immediate environments (Wical et.al 2020).

2.8 Credible Messengers using Social Media

However, with the rise of the digital street, it is interesting to observe how credible messengers have also adapted their intervention strategies to online spaces. Patton's qualitative work interviewing street outreach workers highlights specific social media practices used to connect with at-risk individuals and deter community violence (2016). Additionally, the qualitative work of Lane and Stuart highlights how community members, such as women protectors (including mothers, girlfriends, cousins, and sisters) and pastors, use social media to intervene in conflicts (2022). Some methods included threat-detection practices, such as geolocating threats and identifying retaliatory acts. Credible messengers also utilized social media features, including mass texting, to mobilize people within the community. This positions

the next question: are there common patterns among credible messengers using social media as part of their intervention strategies to prevent community violence?

Chapter 2: Current Study

There has been growing literature in evaluating credible messengers' social media methods to prevent community violence. Researchers have conducted primary empirical research through qualitative methods such as interviews, ethnographic work and focus groups. However, there has been no systematic reviews evaluating the commonalities and differences between the findings of the original empirical works.

A systematic review would be beneficial to the field as it would allow researchers to synthesize the existing work, assess the effectiveness of various online approaches, and identify trends across studies. This research study intends to systematically observe the patterns and variations within the credible messenger's social media practices to prevent community violence.

A pattern would be consistent social media practices used among credible messengers. For example, a hypothetical finding could be the majority of the interventions used by credible messengers are threat detection practices rather than community mobilization efforts. This type of conclusion would highlight implications of the way social media is used for CV intervention.

A variation or gaps refers to cases in which a trend appears consistently for one group but is underrepresented or missing for its counterpart. For example, a hypothetical finding would be concluding the social media strategies target males more than females based on their different social media engagement behaviors. As Patton identifies, in the context of community violence, males tend to use social media more publicly to show off or "flex", while women use it less

publicly, often through direct messages to act as intermediaries for males and set their rivals (2020). If interventions are mostly geared towards monitoring the public feed and not getting in contact with at-risk women, then this would also guide recommendations for improving intervention practices.

Additionally, a systematic review would offer a more comprehensive understanding of credible messengers as whole. Ultimately, this will not only advance research, but also strengthen the practice of violence prevention. It can inform credible messengers of evidence-based social media interventions and identify areas where changes are needed based on the findings. Ultimately a systematic review can be one step closer to building safer neighborhoods and saving lives.

Chapter 3: Data

3.1 Source of the Data & Unit of Analysis

The data used in this systematic review were published peer reviewed articles, dissertations, reports and conference papers that met the inclusion criteria. However, when producing the results, the unit of analysis for the systematic review were the individual interventions mentioned in the selected studies. This was done because the literature that met the inclusion criteria and was accepted into the sample mentioned multiple interventions within one publication. Therefore, evaluating the individual interventions rather than the studies in the provides a more robust assessment of the social media practices used by credible messengers.

3.2 Collection of the data

The search method to find and identify the studies for the sample was first conducting a Boolean search of keywords related to this topic. The keywords and Boolean logic used can be found in appendix A. The sequences of keywords were entered in multiple search engines. Google Scholar was used first. Then the University of Maryland's (UMD) library search engine was utilized. UMD's search engine has access to various research databases including but are not limited to, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Web of Science, Scopus and Hein Online and JSTOR. After this, a "hand search" of selected journals was also conducted to raise the comprehensiveness of the search and attempt to retrieve any potential studies maybe missed.⁴

The journals I selected cover areas such as criminal justice, public health, violence intervention, social media, gang violence, focused deterrence and violence prevention. These

⁴ Hand searching is manual literature review technique, where researchers physically scan tables of contents, reference lists, and full issues of key journals to find relevant studies missed by electronic database searches. This is an attempt to ensure comprehensive coverage for studies that were not indexed properly. This means studies won't be found in major academic databases due to technical metadata errors like incorrect publication dates or misspells of authors names, which will prevent online crawlers from identifying the studies (Richards 2008).

journals were also chosen from the list of UMD's Criminal Justice and Criminology list of reputable academic journals. These journals were selected from the UMD list with the criteria that they were relevant to this subject matter. The complete list of journals that were hand searched can be found in appendix B.

Finally, the references of the potential eligible studies were reviewed in case they were also qualified to be a part of the sample. The publications that were influenced and came after the identified potential studies that were also evaluated. This method is described as a forward search. Because the originating studies had already been selected as relevant, there was a higher likelihood that the references and subsequent cited works would also meet the selection criteria. This approach was used to enhance the comprehensiveness of the search and minimize the risk of overlooking relevant studies.

To identify potential eligible studies before the screening criteria, both the title and abstract were evaluated to discern if it was related to the research question. If the literature seemed relevant it moved on to the screening criteria. At the end of this stage, there were nine studies that advanced for further consideration.

3.3 Screening Criteria

Law Enforcement Exclusion

Eligible studies for this systematic review were studies that assessed social media intervention efforts used by credible messengers. As mentioned, Credible Messengers would be trusted individuals who have contact with at risk persons and are not surveillance oriented. This can consist of community-based organizations, significant others, parents or close friends. While Law Enforcement agencies have been increasing their social media usage for their own investigations, they were excluded from the sample because they fall short of the credible

messenger standard. This research paper centers around the unique position credible messengers hold within the neighborhood context that allows for social media interventions to occur. Moreover, studies demonstrate higher rates of legal cynicism and mistrust in police forces in the inner city (Hitchens et al. 2017).⁵ Law enforcements level of punitiveness and social doubt are contrary to the qualities central to credible messengers. Therefore, law enforcement social media practices for interventions were not included in the sample.

Types of Participants

Interventions presented in the studies that will be used for the systematic review may have involved individuals in any community type, family dynamic or geographic area. This approach enables the identification of both patterns and gaps in intervention practices. There were no exclusions on age, race gender. However, this study did focus on at-risk individuals.

At -risk individuals are defined as people who face a higher probability of experiencing negative outcomes in various aspects of their lives due to factors such as poverty, family instability, involvement in the justice system, substance abuse, mental health issues, or lack of access to education (Bonta 2007). The studies that were included for this systematic review were consistent with this definition. Groups I excluded in this regard were people who were not at risk of entering into community violence. However, out of the nine eligible studies none of them focused on no -risk individuals. This is because intervention literature usually centers around people who are already involved in community violence or in the network of entering.

⁵ There were no exclusions on location, however, since most of community violence is seen in the urban context, much of the literature centers around those places (McDonald 2011)

Additionally, my criteria required that there be a community link between the credible messengers and at-risk persons. This could be through a social connection, familial connection or simply a digital connection online. Being an outsider to the community was not sufficient enough to be included in this study. This is an attempt to give insight how a community can come together and use a problem as the solution- not the uses of bystanders. From this criterion, I excluded two studies that were going to be a part of the original sample. In these two studies the interveners were social workers and street outreach workers. However, the research focused on social media practices used to initiate contact with clients and build foundational relationships. While social media can effectively build trust between interveners and at-risk individuals, these relationships were still in their early stages and did not reflect the unique credible messenger relationships this study aimed to examine. Therefore, the studies were excluded.

Platform Inclusion

The systematic review included studies that evaluated platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp and TikTok. These platforms were incorporated into the inclusion criteria as they were discussed in higher amounts in community violence literature. However, other popular mainstream platforms like LinkedIn, Telegram, Discord and Roblox were excluded because of their different intended purposes. LinkedIn is utilized for professional development and networking. Telegram and Discord are closed cloud-based servers that allow individuals to communicate with their contact list, not the greater public. Roblox is a social platform geared towards video gaming. Because these platforms set up their features differently for this intended purpose, it is unusual for community violence disputes to take place on these apps. That is why these specific platforms were excluded from the evaluation.

Exclusion of Drill Rap

Forms of neighborhood disputes do occur in music video, specifically drill rap where people boast about confrontational lyrics and violent aesthetics (Allen et al. 2025). These music videos often do result in offline in person community violence. However, the evaluation of music videos was excluded from this study because the systematic review focuses on social media practices. While evaluating music videos would bring merit to the research field, for this study the evaluation would fall outside of the research scope.

Types of Interventions

Since my research question relates to how Credible Messenger's use social media to reduce community violence, the critical feature for inclusion was the study had to highlight different intervention tactics related to social media. Some examples of these would be using different social media platforms. Differences in reactive or proactive approaches, like threat detection or generating your own post to promote peace or contrasts between in-direct interventions like disciplinary actions or teaching the individuals about the harms. There were no specific exclusions made to types of interventions.

Time Frame of Studies

The time frame of the potential eligible studies spans between 1997 through 2026. The lower bound is set to 1997 because that is the year the first social media platform was launched being *Six Degrees* (Ngak 2011). Therefore, it was concluded most, if not all of the publications addressing social media and community violence would be after this point.

3.4 Justification of Data

Comprehensiveness

The usage of this data to answer the research question has its benefits. The selected sample includes in-depth interviews and comments from credible messengers who are trying to combat community violence. Their insights are crucial and often can't be accessed from an outside perspective or in quantitative work. Not only does this data highlight the phenomenon of social media being used as an intervention tool, but it addresses the research question in a comprehensive way by featuring multiple perspectives and in different geographic places. This selected sample will be able to illuminate the common social media intervention practices across the board and showcase things that aren't mentioned as frequently. Overall, the studies included in the sample will allow for a systematic review to be conducted, which as mentioned has not been conducted in the research literature so far.

Limitations to the Data

There are limitations to the sample that are important to highlight. For starters there are a limited number of studies because this is still an emerging research topic. There is also ambiguity in discerning what a credible messenger is. As mentioned, credible messengers do not have an exact definition, but are guided by similar characteristics. High levels of trust, respect, credibility, shared experience in the community, having a close relationship with at-risk individuals are all important aspects. Moreover, it is imperative the credible messenger is not punitive or surveillance oriented, as this would contradict the other traits. However, uncertainty arises when a person shares both aspects of these characteristics. For example, a probation officer can have shared experiences and close relationships with at-risk persons, however, if they are court imposed and are reporting their investigations back to punitive officials then it raises the question whether they really are credible messengers. Nonetheless, it is difficult to establish

precise definitions and standards for credible messengers because the concept depends on the relationship between the intervener and the individual, making it inherently subjective.

Moreover, the characteristics of the actual intervention methods can overlap and be multiple things, but also not applicable for some categories. For example, an intervention can be characterized as being threat detection, reactive and relationship building. However, it had no implications of community mobilization. This results in a “not applicable” (N/A) category for cases in which no specific features are explicitly identified in the data. These cases represent a form of coding uncertainty, where the absence of explicit information prevents assumptions about platform use.

3.5 Description of Final Sample

After conducting the search process and verifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final sample of included studies were seven. However, the number of interventions that will be analyzed that were highlighted in the selected sample was fifty-nine.

Geographic Coverage

The interventions highlighted geographic coverage across many places. The United States cities include Boston, Chicago and New York. There was European representation with the city of London. There were also insights from El Salvador and Honduras. Lastly, there were also interventions from Singapore.

Types of Credible Messengers

There were also insights from various credible messengers. There were interviews from women protectors such as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and female cousins. There was also an interview from a pastor. Additionally, there were insights from institutional credible messenger such as street outreach workers and social workers.

Timeframe

The selected studies were all published in early the early twenty-twenties between 2019-2025.

However, the date empirical research was conducted was in the early twenty tens. It ranged from 2009-2020. This will impact the results showing social media trends from this time.

A complete list of the studies in the sample can be found in appendix C.

Chapter 4: Study Methodology

To be able to identify patterns in credible messenger's social media practices, a coding schema was created. The coding schema was composed of thematic categories to identify variables and patterns. The themes included observing different social media platforms, specific intervention strategies, both direct and in-direct. Relationship and network dynamics, intervention approaches, contextual and structural factors and population the targeted. The full coding schema can be found in appendix D.

The studies in the final sample were uploaded into the software Atlas.Ti. Flag coding was used to identify the number of times each code appeared in the studies. After finishing the coding of all the studies, Atlas.ti displays the frequency with which each variable appears in the dataset.

The coding schema will allow the researcher to systematically organize the variables under observation and maintain transparency for the audience. During data preparation, there was verification of the categories, labels, and demographic groups are clearly defined across the studies that are included in the sample.

Interpretation of Data

To accurately interpret the analysis results, frequency counts will be used to identify key patterns. This will help demonstrate which social media strategies credible messengers use most

often and which are less common. Frequency tables will further illustrate which practices described above are most prevalent among credible messengers. Variables with higher frequency counts indicate emerging patterns across credible messengers, while lower-frequency variables highlight potential gaps in intervention strategies. To calculate frequency counts, the researcher recorded the number of times each code appeared and converted this into a percentage based on the total sample of fifty-nine intervention cases.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1 Social Media Platform Used

To reiterate, the coding schema focused on the following social media platforms:

Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok.

Between all of the platforms, Facebook was the most frequently discussed among the interventions. Out of all 59 interventions, Facebook composed a total of 23.7% (14/59). X (formerly Twitter) was the second most used platform comprised of 10.1% (6/59). Instagram came up 5.1% (3/59) within the interventions and WhatsApp 5.1% (3/59). There were no explicit mentions of Credible Messengers using TikTok to conduct interventions. There were 57.6% (34/59) interventions with no mentions of specific social media platforms (see Table 1).

Table 1

Social Media Platforms	
Facebook	14
X (Formerly Twitter)	6
Instagram	3
WhatsApp	2
TikTok	0
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	34

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions.

5.2 Platform Based Interventions (direct)

The platform-based interventions were divided into two categories, direct and in-direct. The most common intervention strategy used among credible messengers was monitoring online conflicts, as it appeared 17% (10/59) throughout the codes. Credible messengers also used social media to identify retaliatory threats, which came up 13.5% (8/59) among the interventions. While identifying retaliatory violence can be described as a form of monitoring, the distinction is made to describe monitoring as watching the environment and the latter is detecting specific signals of imminent danger. Social Media also allowed Credible Messengers to geolocate threats as posts and comments often hinted at the location of retaliation. This intervention strategy was also one of the highest codes comprising of 15.3% (9/59).

Social Media platforms also allowed Credible Messengers to intervene through messaging. Direct messaging is privately messaging the at-risk to address public conflicts. This was identified in 6.8% (4/59) of the total interventions. On the other hand, counter messaging is publicly responding to online content in order to challenge, correct, or de-escalate harmful narratives. This was identified 5.1% (3/59) among the interventions.

Credible messengers also used proactive approaches to intervene. Some individuals posted their own content about peace and relationship building. This strategy was observed 5.1% (3/59) across the interventions. There were also implications of community mobilization and event planning. This strategy was highlighted 13.5% (8/59). See Table 2.

Table 2

Platform-based interventions (direct)	
Monitor	10
Identify Retaliatory Acts	8
Geolocating Threats	9

Direct Message	4
Counter Message	3
No Counter Message	1
Event Planning	5
Mobilize People	3
Posting own Posts	3
Rumor Starting	1
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	12

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions.

5.3 Platform Based Interventions (indirect)

Credible Messengers also engaged in interventions that were informed by social media, but later carried out offline. This included incentivizing or disciplining the at-risk youth based on their social media postings. For example, credible messengers disciplined the at-risk individuals by withholding perks to urge them to delete harmful content. One mother refused to give their child rides to school, and girlfriends played “hard to get” by withholding intimacy to incentivize deleting threatening posts (Lane 2022). On the other hand, Credible Messengers also rewarded at risk youth for posting positive content by commenting support and doing fun activities (Lane 2022). One sister encouraged her friends to comment on her brothers post that exemplified pro-social activities. She also rewarded him with a trip to mall with her friends (Lane 2022). Disciplinary actions appeared in 5.1% (3/59) instances between all the coded interventions and rewarding behaviors appeared 10.1% (6/59). See Table 3.

Table 3

Social media–informed interventions (indirect)	
Disciplinary Actions	3
Incentivizing	6
Teaching Harms	5
Urging content removal	9
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	36

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions

5.4 Relationship and Network Dynamics

The interviews with the credible messengers highlighted at the forefront, trust and relationship building was crucial for the success of interventions. The credible messengers emphasized there needed to be a prerequisite of trust to use social media as an intervention to begin with. This was present 11.9% (7/59). Concurrently, Credible Messengers also reported social media helped initiate or deepen their relationships and trust with the at-risk youth. The intervenors mentioned using social media as a tool this way 25.4% (15/59). Additionally, credible messengers reported the importance of having a cultural understanding of the neighborhood and social dynamics to properly identify threatening content on social media and intervene accordingly. This was evident in 11.9% of the total interventions (7/59).

The use of social media as an intervention tool among credible messengers also included the importance of relationships among other members in the neighborhood. Intermediaries like youth informants were helpful in intervening with social media. For example, if credible messengers did not have viewer access of an at-risk individual, they could connect with someone who was a mutual connection. Or the youth would help identify the at-risk youth the credible messenger needed to get in contact with. This theme was prevalent in 10.1% (6/59) interventions.

Based on this information, credible messengers drew on existing social network ties within interventions, which enhanced effectiveness due to strong connections among participants. This was seen through using youth informants for reliable information or friends to make the intervention more authentic and impactful to the at-risk persons. This was seen in 23.7% (14/59) of the total observed interventions. See Table 4.

Table 4

Relationship & Network Dynamics	
Trust Prerequisite	7
Relationship Building	15
Level of Cultural Understanding	7
Social Network	14
Intermediary	6
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	10

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions

5.5 Intervention Approach

The interventions done by the credible messengers can be characterized as proactive or reactive. Proactive interventions were defined as preventative actions taken in anticipation of potential conflict or escalation. Reactive interventions were defined as actions taken to prevent a retaliatory act of violence from occurring. Out of all the interventions, 18.6% (11/59) were classified as proactive. On the other hand, 30.5% (18/59) were described as reactive.

There was also a difference in trends between credible messenger's interventions staying online and a hybrid approach being used. Online interventions that stayed solely on social media appeared only 3.4% (2/59) between all the interventions. In contrast, credible messengers taking a hybrid approach by using social media as a tool and finishing the intervention in real life appeared 30.5% (18/59). See Table 5.

Table 5

Intervention Approach	
Reactive	18
Proactive	11
Hybrid Intervention	18
Online Only Intervention	2
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	10

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions

5.6 Contextual and Structural Factors

There was wide variation in credible messengers' opinion of using social media as a tool for intervention. The difference in outlooks was most prevalent amongst street outreach workers. For some street outreach workers they had specific policies that prohibited them from connecting with their client online. This appeared 8.5% (5/59) across the interventions. Although other street outreach workers were free to interact with their clients virtually, a few number of them expressed negative feelings towards using social media for interventions. This appeared 3.3% (2/59) among the interventions. The biggest reason for having aversion were privacy concerns for their personal lives and not wanting to cross boundaries for their clients. On the other hand, more street outreach workers reported positive outlooks to social media, as well as encouraged their colleagues to use it for their work. This theme emerged 13.6% (8/59).

The credible messengers who had connections with the at-risk persons through familial or friendship ties, demonstrated higher rates of social media usage for intervention purposes and expressed amore positive outlook. A potential explanation for the higher usage is they don't have professional authorities restricting their ability to use social media.

The Street Outreach workers who held negative feelings towards using social media for their job also had reservations of befriending the at-risk youth. This showed up 5.1% (3/59) between the interventions. On the other hand, the street outreach workers who held positive feelings explicitly mentioned friending the at-risk youth back on the platforms, 8.5% (5/59).

See Table 6.

Table 6

Contextual and Structural Factors	
Company Stipulations	5
Negative Feelings	2
Not Befriending at-risk youth	3

Positive Feelings	8
Befriending at-risk youth	5
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	34

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions

3.7 Intervention Population Targeted

The intervention strategies reviewed targeted more males at-risk. This showed up 13.6% (8/59) than females which showed up 5.1% (3/59). There was no features of interventions targeting the LGBTQ+ community. See Table 7.

The racial composition that social media intervention strategies reported were more geared towards racial minorities. African American or Black individuals were mentioned 15.3% (9/59). Latinx individuals appeared 8.5% (5/59) in the studies. Caucasian individuals were mentioned 6.8% (4/59) and Asian populations showed up 5.1% (3/59) in the interventions. Social media strategies targeting Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native and Native American were not mentioned at all in the sample. See Table 8.

Lastly, the intervention strategies overwhelmingly targeted youth in High school. Individuals between 15-19 were featured 6.8% (4/59) in the interventions. Middle schoolers between the age 11-14 were featured 3.3% (2/59) in the cases. Lastly, older individuals between 20-29 were only mentioned 1.7% (1/59) in the total interventions.

Table 7

Gender Targeted	
Male	8
Female	3
LGBTQ+	0
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	48

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions

Table 8

Race/Ethnicity Targeted	
African American/Black	9
Latinx	5
Caucasian	4
Asian	3
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	0
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	38

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions.

Table 9

Age Targeted	
Post Highschool (20-29)	1
Middle School (11-14)	2
High School (15-19)	4
Not explicitly stated (N/A)	52

Counts are out of the 59 coded interventions.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Social Media is a Tool

The findings highlight social media can be an effective tool for violence prevention on the neighborhood level. Out of all the fifty-nine observed interventions, social media was used in some shape or another. The results overwhelmingly demonstrate that credible messengers used social media as a form of threat detection. Credible messengers demonstrated rates of identifying retaliatory acts, geolocating threats and intervening accordingly. This also coincides with the differences in reactive approaches compared to proactive. As Demond Patton finds in his SAFElabs project, there is critical two-day window time of intervention between one gun violence occurrence in the neighborhood to the next act of revenge (Brayan 2025). These

findings enumerate social media can play a significant role during the imperative window of time.

However, it is important to preface social media being a tool for violence prevention does not mean it is the sole solution. It is still important for Credible messengers to intervene in person, and this is demonstrated in the data. There is an approximately twenty-seven percentage point difference between interventions being hybrid in nature compared to only staying online. This exemplifies even though credible messengers are using social media to identify retaliatory acts of violence, they are still taking the step to see the at-risk individuals in person. This also touches on a key part to being a credible messenger as it fosters the close relationship with the person and does not stay confined to the walls of the screen.

6.2 Social Media & Trust

A big theme that can be derived from the overall results is the importance of trust in interventions. Overall, trust serves as a foundational component of credible messenger literature. The credibility of credible messengers is rooted in their ability to establish trust with at-risk individuals. These implications were also evident in the social media sphere. Patton notes about one street outreach worker “ Her access to youth social media is based on their relationship with her, and the trust they have for her to intervene without treating them like criminals or sub-human beings” (Patton 2016 p.297).

Alongside this, social media also helps strengthen the initial relationship by creating a space for relationship building. One street outreach worker described simply liking and adding emojis were quick and easy ways to build rapport with their clients (Patton 2016). This is possible through the social media features the platforms provide. Even though this intervention

strategy is not specifically about stopping an act of violence, it still appeared high on the frequency counts, 25.4% (15/59). This may be because this form of social media practice remains significant for credible messengers, as it can help facilitate future interventions by making individuals feel more comfortable to reach out.

Furthermore, credible messengers also reported posting pictures of their own lives on social media platforms and befriending the youth. This is another way social media allows relationship building by giving the credible messengers an opportunity to humanize and be relatable with the youth (Patton 2016).

This can also be reaffirmed through the counterpoint raised in interviews with Street Outreach Workers, who emphasized the central importance of trust and relationships with youth. Without this trust, their work would be ineffective. Several workers described navigating a “tight rope” on social media, being cautious not to damage trust or make missteps that could harm relationships. As one street outreach worker noted, “I would rather approach the youth privately as I wouldn’t want to embarrass him and be disconnected” (Patton 2016 p.599)

This aligns with observed differences in intervention strategies, where credible messengers more often used direct messaging rather than public counter-messaging. While there was only a one percentage point difference between the rates, the insights from the street outreach workers shows the importance of wanting to remain in the individuals good graces. This reflects the Code of the Street framework in a digital context, as publicly correcting or disputing rumors could damage reputation and reduce credibility.

6.3 Differences in Outlooks between Credible Messengers

The results also give insights to Credible Messengers as a whole. Credible Messengers are defined as an individual with trusted relationships with at-risk youth that understand through lived experiences (Szkola & Blout-Hill) This can range widely from family members to street outreach workers to faith-based individuals. However, even within the Credible Messenger title, there are differences from within. Some Credible Messengers experienced company stipulations that regulated their communication with the at-risk individuals, 8.5% (5/59). However, credible messengers that were familial or friendship based did not have these company regulations to abide by. This altered the way company enforced people intervened. Furthermore, this distinction can be seen in the different contextual factor rates.

All of the results that showed negative outlooks towards using social media as an intervention tool came from credible messengers that were employed by an institution (either street outreach worker or social worker). More so, they were also the only ones to have specific opinions on not befriending the at-risk youth on the platforms, (5.1% 3/59). The workers expressed not wanting to cross any professional boundaries (Patton 2016 p.596).

On the other hand, credible messengers could engage in more direct and, at times, authority-based forms of intervention. This was evident in the use of incentives and disciplinary actions in response to harmful content posted by youth (Lane, 2022). In one case, a sister acting as a credible messenger reportedly created a rumor online about a girl her brother liked in order to prevent him from becoming involved in a gang dispute (Lane, 2022). While these actions did not involve public embarrassment of youth, credible messengers also did not face the same institutional risks, such as job termination or formal accountability, that might constrain other

actors. This highlights key differences in intervention strategies and outlooks by the credible messengers themselves.

6.4 Social Networks and the Greater Community

The results also highlight the importance of social networks in violence prevention. While this study primarily focused on the relationship between credible messengers and at-risk individuals, it is important to note that other community members often play a supporting role in intervention processes. The findings show frequent use of intermediaries within neighborhoods when credible messengers do not have a direct connection or are seeking to establish rapport. Social networks were featured 24% (14/59) and Intermediaries being used in interventions were mentioned 10.1% (6/59). For example, one pastor reportedly relied on girls with central connections to at-risk boys' Instagram networks to identify individuals he should engage with (Lane, 2022). Similarly, one street outreach worker utilized his broader network to avoid excessive monitoring of a single individual while still maintaining awareness of clients' lives.

Patton (2016) further emphasizes "First, David [the street outreach worker] limits the social media demands he makes of any particular client by having multiple sources from whom he can glean information. Second, he keeps a mental record of his youth's online social networks, so that he can strategically pick specific students to question about violence related messages online, based on when and where the trouble is taking place. Third, David sees the youth's social media network, and not just the youth's own activity, as vital to providing insight after a violent event" (2016 597).

Overall, this demonstrates how social networks strengthen credible messenger interventions by expanding access to information, enhancing trust-building efforts, and

embedding messengers more deeply within the broader community. In turn, this contributes to increased collective efficacy.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Weakness of the Study

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, while adults comprise a significant proportion of those impacted by community violence (Center for Disease Control 2025), much of the existing literature and empirical research in this study focused on youth. This creates a gap in understanding the primary population most affected by community violence and limits the generalizability of findings. Second, a high number of categories were coded as not applicable, which restricts the ability to fully capture patterns across the fifty-nine interventions. Finally, some interventions contained contextual ambiguities, as they could involve multiple overlapping strategies. This resulted in instances of interpretive coding decisions rather than strictly objective classification frameworks.

7.2 Strengths of the Study

However, this study also has several strengths. First, it provides an initial foundation for identifying patterns in credible messenger practices online. It offers a basis for future research to explore these themes either individually or collectively in greater depth. Additionally, the findings have real-world applicability, as they can directly inform the work of credible messengers in violence prevention settings. Finally, the study establishes a clear search strategy and coding procedure, which enhances transparency and allows future researchers to replicate or build upon this analysis.

7.3 Recommendations for Research

This study represents one of the first systematic reviews examining credible messengers' social media practices in the context of community violence prevention. However, there are several opportunities for future research. First, due to research lag, this review primarily draws on empirical studies from the early 2010s. Given the rapid evolution of social media platforms, future systematic reviews would benefit from incorporating more recent studies in order to capture current trends and emerging practices.

It is also important to emphasize that the absence of findings within certain categories does not indicate irrelevance or lack of importance. Rather, it reflects limitations in the existing literature. For example, platforms such as TikTok may play a significant role in shaping or escalating violence, but were not captured in this dataset due to the time period in which the empirical studies were conducted. Similarly, the lack of representation of Native American and LGBTQ+ populations should not be interpreted as evidence of absence or non-involvement, but instead as a reflection of gaps in prior research and sampling limitations.

This leads to a second recommendation: future research should prioritize engagement with hard-to-reach and underrepresented populations. In particular, the limited representation of women and LGBTQ+ communities suggest a gap in understanding their experiences and social media practices within violence prevention contexts. The same applies to other racial and ethnic minority groups who may be underrepresented in the existing literature.

Ultimately, future systematic reviews would benefit from a broader and more contemporary body of empirical research. As this field continues to develop, further studies examining credible messengers across different platforms, populations, and contexts are needed.

Additionally, given the variation in credible messenger's outlooks towards social media in their jobs, future work should further explore these discrepancies.

Moreover, this systematic review also offers practical implications for credible messengers themselves by highlighting both the potential and the limitations of social media as a tool in violence prevention.

7.4 Recommendations for Credible Messengers

Comfortability

While it may seem self-explanatory, it is important to state individuals should still only be observed with what their comfortable with. This is on a case-by-case basis and is not a one shoe fits all solution. Social media provides an easier avenue for levels of comfortability through the platform's features. For example, as Lane identified, "youth agreed to be monitored in the first place and shared information with the Pastor [which] directly or indirectly implicate[s] that they were open and willing to de-escalate." (2022 p.467) However, not everyone may feel comfortable like this youth, so social media accessibility should not be assumed until shown otherwise.

Expanding Social Media as an Early Warning System

As the research demonstrates social media is already being utilized as a violence intervener. Violence Prevention has evolved to not only being in person, but needing guarding on the digital arena as well. It would be helpful to expand this research practically through different popular/big violent prevention programs like Ceasefire and Cure Violence. As one Street Outreach worker said "Programs like Ceasefire and Cure Violence, in particular, can draw on th[ese] more proactive approach. Rather than wait until after a shooting to discern network rosters and intercede into the ecology of violence, outreach workers might instead leverage communication visibility on a more continual basis, moving further upstream and across the

network to organize earlier, more community-based interventions” (e.g., Stuart et al. 2020 p.205).

Overall, as Stuart (2020) notes, “Problematically, the majority of these professionals, a reported 75 percent, are ‘self-taught’ [in social media] and thus act on their own personal (and potentially biased) interpretations of social media users and their content” (p. 205). This systematic review highlights how the same social media platforms that can contribute to the escalation of violence may also serve as important tools for saving lives and strengthening communities through violence intervention efforts. However, it is important to learn from practitioners themselves and integrate their experiences with scientific research in order to develop evidence-based approaches for violence prevention.

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Appendix A

Set 1: ("credible messenger*" OR "violence interrupt*" OR "violence interrupter*" OR "street outreach worker*" OR "community violence intervention" OR CVI OR "violence prevention specialist*" OR "trusted messenger*")

Set 2: ("social media" OR "digital media" OR "online platform*" OR Facebook OR Instagram OR X OR Twitter OR WhatsApp OR Snapchat OR TikTok OR "messaging app*" OR "online communication")

Set 3: (intervention* OR outreach OR prevent* OR "violence reduction" OR de-escalat* OR "conflict mediation" OR "harm reduction" OR "community intervention*" OR engagement OR "relationship building")

Appendix B

List of Journals

1. Criminology
2. Criminology and Public Policy
3. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency
4. Journal of Criminal Justice
5. Journal of Quantitative Criminology
6. Journal of Interpersonal Violence
7. Criminal Justice and Behavior
8. Crime and Delinquency
9. Police Quarterly
10. American Journal of Criminal Justice
11. Western Criminology Review

Appendix C

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Appendix D

Coding Schema

Type of Credible Messenger

- Women Protector
- Man Protector
- Street Outreach Worker
- Social Worker

Social Media Platforms

- Facebook
- X (formerly Twitter)
- Instagram
- WhatsApp
- TikTok
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Platform-Based Interventions (Direct)

- Monitor
- Identify retaliatory acts
- Geolocating threats
- Direct message
- Counter message
- No counter message
- Event planning
- Mobilize people

- Posting own posts
- Rumor starting
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Social Media–Informed Interventions (Indirect)

- Disciplinary actions
- Incentivizing
- Teaching harms
- Urging content removal
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Relationship & Network Dynamics

- Trust prerequisite
- Relationship building
- Level of cultural understanding
- Social network
- Intermediary
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Intervention Approach

- Reactive
- Proactive
- Hybrid intervention
- Online-only intervention
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Contextual and Structural Factors

- Company stipulations
- Credible messenger visible online presence
- Negative feelings
- Not befriending at-risk youth
- Positive feelings
- Befriending at-risk youth
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Race/Ethnicity Targeted

- African American/Black
- Latinx
- Caucasian
- Asian
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Gender Targeted

- Male
- Female
- LGBTQ+
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)

Age Targeted

- Post-high school (20–29)
- Middle school (11–14)

- High school (15–19)
- Not explicitly stated (N/A)