DISSERTATION

THREATS OF HARM POSTED ON FACEBOOK; THE VIEWING AND RESPONSE BY

FRIENDS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

THREATS OF HARM POSTED ON FACEBOOK; THE VIEWING AND RESPONSE BY

FRIENDS

This qualitative study explored how people define and respond to threatening language that is posted in Facebook. Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research was used to see how the 16 participants made meaning of threats that were posted in Facebook and how they responded to the posted threats.   The data was collected through personal interviews with 16 traditional age college age men and women. The participants were asked a number of questions related to threatening language, including their personal definition as well as how they believed they would respond to threats and how they have responded to similar posts. The findings included how there is a large gap between how the user defines his or her friends and acquaintance as it relates to the electronic list of Facebook friends. How threats to social status was an identified fear via the use of Facebook. Threats were identified as directed toward others, and not toward oneself. The participants used Facebook for a variety of reasons ranging from academic, to social, to personal, but the use is in line with Facebook's mission, to connect people and not as much of a communication tool. Implications of this study may apply to threat assessment literature as well as working with bystander training.

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

School violence is not a new phenomenon; however, the instant access to live and in-depth coverage of violence has augmented a perception that this problem is on the rise. This coverage comes from various places, including traditional news media as well as social media such as Facebook. All levels of schools have established some form of threat assessment process to mitigate school violence. Statements made prior to acts of violence are very important in addressing threats of violence, according to the Center for Disease Control, "Nearly 50 percent of homicide perpetrators gave some type of warning signal, such as making a threat or leaving a note, prior to the event" (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). In the book *Violence Goes to College*, Dr. Nicoletti suggests any threat assessment process should include examining social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, as a person may post warnings and signs of violence there prior to acting (p. 64). There are a number of SNSs catering to various demographics and needs, currently, Facebook.com (hereafter referred to as Facebook) is the predominate site. Dana Boyd defines *social network* sites as, "environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology" (Boyd D. , 2007, p. 2). Facebook threats are on the rise, and have caused numerous arrests and investigations by law enforcement. According to Susan Payne "We certainly see a trend in the use of social media regarding bullying, harassment, threats" (Spehar, 2013). As a publically traded company, Facebook has established rules and expectations for registered users, these expectations must be agreed upon when signing up to use the SNS. Facebook draws attention to the expectations of threats of violence to others, "Safety is Facebook's top priority…You may not credibly threaten others, or organize acts of real-world violence….We also prohibit promoting, planning or celebrating any of your actions if they have, or could; result in financial harm to others, including theft and vandalism" (Facebook.com,

2013). Threats of self-harm are also addressed in the Facebook Community Standards with the statement "Facebook takes threats of self-harm very seriously. We remove any promotion or encouragement of self-mutilation, eating disorders or hard drug abuse. We also work with suicide prevention agencies around the world to provide assistance for people in distress" (Facebook.com, 2013).

Boyd indicates social network sites can be considered a different type of public space. These new, mediated public spaces have four unique properties:

- Persistence. What you say sticks around. This is great for asynchronous communication, but it also means that what you said at 15 is still accessible when you are 30 and have purportedly outgrown your childish ways.

- Searchability. My mother would've loved the ability to scream "Find!" into the computer and determine where I was hanging out with my friends. She couldn't, I'm thankful. Today's teens can be found in their hangouts with the flick of a few keystrokes.

- Replicability. Digital bits are copyable; this means that you can copy a conversation from one place and paste it into another place. It also means that it's difficult to determine if the content was doctored.

- Invisible audiences. While it is common to face strangers in public life, our eyes provide a good sense of who can overhear our expressions. In mediated publics, not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability introducing audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created (Boyd D. , 2007, pp. 2-3).

Current Use of Online Social Networks

People use SNSs for many reasons, such as communication, planning activities, sharing photos, and entertainment. It has become a very active part of many people's lives. SNSs such as Facebook have grown in use and popularity from their inception in 2004 Facebook just reported:

> Over 400 million members, making it the equivalent of the world's third largest country, ahead of industrial countries such as the United States (308 million), Russia (141 million), and Japan (127 million). Indeed, Facebook's population only trailed China (1.34 billion) and India (1.2 billion). The rate of growth for Facebook has been exponential with approximately 700,000 new users a day and 21 million new users per month. At this rate, Facebook will soon be larger than any other country in the world. This explosive growth in social networking impacts all segments of society, but given the youthful nature of many Facebook users (54.3 percent of total users are ages eighteen to twenty-four), the impact on students is dramatic and occasionally tragic (Wheeler, 2011, pp. 1-2).

The frequency of SNSs use has also led to more distribution of threatening language to a larger audience. A 2008 Cyberbully Alert indicates 40% of teens with an Internet connection have experienced some type of threat or harassment; most are received via social media, e-mails, text messages, and instant messaging (Cyberbully Alert, 2008, p. 1). These threats are both directed inwardly toward the person who made the posting or outward toward others: "Among the students, who committed a school-associated homicide, 20 percent were known to have been victims of bullying and 12 percent were known to have expressed suicidal thoughts or to have engaged in suicidal behavior" (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010, p. 1).

People believe they are freer to say things on line, and think they are not accountable for the statements when it is posted online.

With the quick growth and the popularity of SNSs, there is an increasing amount of research focused on risky behavior, including the posting of personally identifiable information. Much research is focused on identity theft and other information security issues and how to protect oneself from such attacks. However, how and what people are sharing on social network sites is continually changing, and the need to gather information in a threat assessment process is paramount.

Cyberbullying vs. Threats of Violence

With the use of social media, the term "cyberbullying" has become a common term in schools and homes. "Cyberbullying involves sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet (e.g., instant messaging, e-mails, chat rooms, and social networking sites) or other digital communication devices, such as cell phones. It can involve stalking, threats, harassment, impersonation, humiliation, trickery, and exclusion" (Feinberg & Robey, 2008, p. 26). Cyberbullying is typically ongoing and pervasive; in contrast, the posting of threats is more likely targeted to an individual or group of people and is associated with a specific negative situation or incident and tends to be short lived.

There is emerging research focusing on how friends respond to threats posted on SNSs. Many people participate and communicate in online social networking in a passive or lurking manner. Lurking on Facebook is passively looking at another person's Facebook page without commenting, or "*liking*" the content on the Facebook page. A 2008 study reported that as many as 90% of a large online groups involved lurkers (Pei-Luen, Qin, & Yinan, 2008). Lurkers participate in the online community "in a non-public manner regularly reading but not posting"

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(Pei-Luen, Qin, & Yinan, 2008, p. 2759). According to Dr. John Nicoletti in the book *Violence Goes to College*, often when acts of violence occur, the person(s) who commit the crime had posted some type of warning; currently many of the warnings are posted in Facebook or another social network (p. 64).

Communication via SNSs typically consists of postings on a person's wall, public, and private online messages, and photo sharing. Adolescents, who use SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and tumblr are building their peer groups in a different manner than in the past. The SNSs are also tied to the social capital theory, which states: "Social capital broadly refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people" (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1145). "The benefit from SNSs and social capital is the ability to draw resources from the various members of networks with which the person is associated" (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1145). People who become members of SNSs use the social capital in a variety of manners, such as finding old friends, expanding a network of friends, establishing study groups, creating employment networking opportunities as well as testing new personal thoughts and feelings. Testing of personal thoughts within Facebook may include posting ideas, personal feelings or beliefs that may be different from the individual's usual face-to-face persona. This is done to see how their friends will respond. "Sharing intimate ideas, including depression, and other ideations of harming self or others, is a large part of communication within social networks" (Moreno, et al., 2011, p. 447).

In Moreno's article "Feeling Bad on Facebook," the relationship between depression and anger can be viewed as closely correlated. The use of SNSs as tools for communication is important to college students to share their feelings, including anger or despair Moreno states:

It is possible that students experiencing depressive symptoms place greater investment in

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social networking sites as a communication outlet, as it could be viewed as a safe and indirect outlet for emotions. Second, references to depression were more commonly displayed on Facebook profiles in which a response by another Facebook user was generated. This suggests that those who receive reinforcement to a depression disclosure from their online friends may be more likely to discuss their depressive symptoms publicly on Facebook. From another perspective, this also suggests that depression disclosures on Facebook often elicit responses from peers who view these references" (Moreno, et al., 2011, p. 453).

People are using Facebook for all types of uses, including academic, social, and personal ones. They tend to share a large amount of personal information on the site this is not filtered and can contain a great deal of emotion. Sharing of information tends to be through status updates and can include signs of depression as a way to get responses from their Facebook friends. This connection between depression and threats to self can be a fine line and is left to the interpretation of the reader.

A recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates, "61% of 14–17 year olds use social network sites" (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228). Pempek et. al. highlight the number of college students using SNSs is almost universal. The average student uses an SNS an average of 10-30 minutes per day (p. 228).

Addressing personal information posted on the SNSs by young adults is imperative in understanding how and why young adults connect and communicate via the Internet. Williams and Merten have conducted studies that include profiles by young adults on social network sites. In their study, they identify technology advances such as blogs as "updateable public records of private thoughts" (p. 253). They also state, "the process of blogging involves individuals

voluntarily posting information about themselves: personal thoughts, feelings, beliefs, activities

in a public arena, with unlimited access for anyone with an Internet connection" (p. 254). The

need to post information and share personal thoughts and ideas seems to fit with teenage identity

formation and may be necessary as a part of growing up and developing. The need to share

information with a broader audience is important in the identity development of youth.

> One means by which the identity challenges of emerging adulthood may be addressed is
>
> through self-disclosure, particularly with peers. Buhrmester and Prager's (1995)
>
> model of self-disclosure suggests that adolescents can resolve issues through social
>
> input from others. Self-disclosure can serve the dual purpose of: 1) identity
>
> development, where external feedback from peers may help the individual to clarify
>
> his or her sense of self, and 2) intimacy development, where the relationship with the
>
> disclosure partner is strengthened. This theory is relevant to young adults as well
>
> because the issues of adolescence continue into emerging adulthood (Pempek,
>
> Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228).

School Violence

Increasingly, school violence is getting more attention because of the escalation of its

frequency as well as the accessibility of instant news to a worldwide audience. The instant

broadcasting of news can be attributed to the rise of the use of technology, including smart

phones, tablets, and people remaining connected to the internet at all times. Not all school

violence results in a shooting. There are different levels, including fighting, vandalism, and

harm to self. Colleges and universities continue to assess threat levels and strive to provide a

safe and welcoming community. With the increase in school violence, threat assessment has

become an important practice on college and university campuses as they are key to mitigating

threatening situations. "Threat assessment seeks to make an informed judgment on two questions: how credible and serious is the threat itself? And to what extent does the threatener appear to have the resources, intent, and motivation to carry out the threat?" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 5).

Following the Virginia Tech school shooting on April 16, 2007, where a gunman who was a Virginia Tech student killed 33 people on the university campus, most college, and university campuses have created some form of Threat Assessment Team (TAT). These multidisciplinary teams look at reports and information on students and staff of concern, to identify ways to address and mitigate the threat. These levels of concern are not limited to school shooters but are meant to identify people of concern and establish ways to address all types of threats. This type of violence is not limited to higher education. As suggested by the National Association of School Psychologists to address students of concern, many K-12 school districts have created some form of threat assessment teams.

> The goal of threat assessment is not only to keep schools safe but also to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger or hopelessness. Effective threat assessment provides adults useful information about a student's risks and personal resources. In most cases students will not carry out their threat but may still be crying out for help. The assessment process should incorporate referral to appropriate mental health and social services, as well as a system for following up on the effectiveness of interventions" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002).

According to Margolis Healy & Associates, threat assessment teams do not profile people; they focus on the behaviors, addressing what they are doing and saying, not their traits (p. 29).

Once a threat has been identified, it is vital to gather accurate information about the people involved, and share the information among staff who can take action to address the concern. A threat is defined as "An expression of intention to hurt, destroy, punish, etc. as in retaliation or intimidation" (Merriam Webster, 1984, p. 1483). The intent of threat assessment teams is to use available resources to intervene and diffuse the threats prior to the threatened action being carried out. Campuses need to set up multiple ways of reporting threatening language to allow information to be shared between various sources. As a multidisciplinary team, it is important to gather and use information from a variety of sources to address the threat. Currently, one of the best ways to gather background information on people (both the target and the person making a threat) is through the use of SNSs such as Facebook. Another avenue of displaying threats can be in the form of pictures, as is the case of the shooting by Jacob Tyler Roberts in December 2012 in Portland, Oregon. As evidence, an article written about the shooter stated; "Roberts described himself on his Facebook page as an "adrenaline junkie," and said he is the kind of person who thinks, "I'm going to do what I want." Roberts, who attended Clackamas Community college, posted a picture of himself on his Facebook page firing a gun at a target. His Facebook photo showed graffiti in which the words "Follow Your Dreams" and painted over with the word "Cancelled" (Karlinsky & Curry, 2012). This type of photo threat is typically only discovered after the threat has moved from posting to action. Robert's photos posted on Facebook were discovered after he entered an Oregon mall and started shooting, killing three people, and only after the shootings did people view his statement and picture as threatening.

The use of SNSs is a way of testing the boundaries with friends and seeing how they will respond. How people respond to the posted threats in the early stages is important to addressing a potentially dangerous incident.

Threats and Social Networks

"Threats should always be investigated; even if a threat is not an early warning of attack, making a threat is usually a violation of law, which is a valid reason for opening an investigation" (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, pp. 25-26). Many times, threats are a way of communicating frustrations; however, Nicoletti et, al. point out that most perpetrators issue multiple warnings prior to the acting on the violence. Nicholetti et. al. state that there are three different types of threats: "(1) direct, (2) conditional and (3) veiled. A direct threat is one that is a clear intent to harm someone. A conditional threat is one that will occur if a certain condition is met or not met. Finally, a veiled threat is one that is 'hidden' or only picked up by the recipient; others typically will dismiss the threat with the notion that this is the way that the person talks or expresses themselves" (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, pp. 65-66). Veiled threats are the hardest to identify and typically are the type posted in mediated places such as SNSs. The three types of threats can be applied inward, e.g. a threat of harm to self, or directed outward or a threat of harm to others. All threats are to be taken seriously and investigated for validity. If the threats are ignored, the person making the threat may feel slighted. If it is dismissed, they may feel upset as they were not taken seriously and may act on the threat (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 65). Threats followed by violence typically are not something that just happens. Most acts of violence that are carried out are actually well organized and planned.

The Internet has changed the way people communicate. SNSs have removed the ability to pair speech and body language, which is a large part of human communication. This lack of nonverbal communication through the electronic medium can change the meaning of the message. Rosenblum proclaims unless one uses emoticons (representation of a facial expression

to express emotions via computer mediated communications using a series of punctuation marks and letters such as a colon and a parenthesis to make a face ☺ or ☹) the tone and control of language is lost. Even then the message is still left up to the person receiving the message and what is said is permanent. The use of the Internet currently serves as a point of broadcasting such threats (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 45). As Facebook and other social network sites become more popular, people will use them as a forum to post warning and threatening language. There are various reasons that people post threats.

The interpretation of what is threatening language is often difficult to discern from the normal communication, especially when verbal cues are not present. Many times the nature of the threat is not overt and is often dismissed until after the fact. People can look back on the warning signs and realize what the person was saying and see the posted warning signs. Nicoletti points out that in most cases of school violence, the person will test personal courage as well as seeing how other people or the system will respond. If the person making the threat is met with an unfavorable reaction from the notice, the tactic can be changed or the behavior is changed. If there is no reaction to the threat or the threat is reinforced, the person may act upon the stated threat (p. 71). As a recent study pointed out: "Two patterns were found in most of these shooting incidents; the availability of weapons to the suspect, and indications of the suspects' prior notifications to friends about planning or executing a shooting at the school" (Hueston, Andersen, & McCaleb, p. 3). Another area to explore is the connection with threatening language, and the link between depression and anger. According to Mote;

> The relationship between depression and anger is also explored by conceptualizing the two emotional states as a self-perpetuating cycle. It is clear from research that angry people feel more isolated, experience more negative feedback and have

recurring social conflicts. These negative events then create depression. An

individual may attempt to cope with depression through more anger, creating a

cycle of depression and anger with each contributing to the development of the

other" (Mote, 2011).

Importance of the Study

The importance of this study is to address how bystanders can have an impact on

threatening language which is posted in Facebook. Increased violence on campuses and in

public places and the focused national attention on these acts, have forced colleges and

universities around the country to alter the way they address and respond to threats of violence.

In the wake of these infrequent but highly publicized events, school administrators,

mental health professionals, law enforcement professionals, and policymakers

have come under increasing pressure to take steps to prevent school shootings in

their communities (Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekul, Fein, & Modzeleski,

2001, p. 157).

As the use of SNSs continues to be utilized as a major source of communication, people

will continue to post personal feelings and thoughts. The rise of Facebook as a communication

tool has allowed information to be gathered very quickly. Following recent mass or public

violence, articles cite activity on the suspected person's Facebook page as a possible reason or

motive or warning: "Without intervention, practicing efforts can escalate from fantasy to

violence against property to harassment or deadly force. When practicing behaviors are noticed,

protectors (people who observe the threats) must work to create barriers to further escalation"

(Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 71).   At times these posted thoughts can

include strong emotional outbursts, which can develop into threats of violence or harm to

themselves or to others. How Facebook friends respond to these posts can be a way of providing an early warning and even mitigate a tragedy.

Purpose of Study

This study looks at how people utilize Facebook and how they respond or believe they will respond to threatening language if they witness within Facebook. Threats are defined as "outward expressions of intent to harm one's self or others" (Baldwin, 1971, p. 72). All threats need to be looked into, "and should always be analyzed for credibility, seriousness, and lethality" (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 65). How people reading the threatening language respond to the threat is important.

> Threats that are ignored give the perpetrator the message that he or she is not being taken seriously. All of these approaches lead to the likelihood that a perpetrator will continue to use threats to get what they want. Most threats are harmless, just individuals blowing off steam and not thinking before they speak (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 65).

Many of the posts are people sharing personal thoughts, which can be considered threatening. How the Facebook friends respond to threatening language could have a large impact on the action on the threat: "Investigators have a stronger case for individual who is intent on committing violence unless sufficient impediments are put in place" (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 65). Even though many of the threats occur in the digital realm: "computer communication is not substantially different from face-to-face communication… In fact in group situations such as chat rooms, newsgroups etc., the impetus to conform may be stronger than in face-to-face interactions" (Williams K. S., 2005-2006, p. 696). Thus, there is a strong need to look at the way people communicate in the online format. This study indicates the

importance of how Facebook friends respond to threats of harm to self or others within

Facebook: "In short, a determination of what a defendant actually said is just the beginning of a

threats analysis. Even when words are threatening on their face value, careful attention must be

paid to the context in which those statements are made to determine if the words may be

objectively perceived as threatening" (Pavela, 2012, p. 5). The resulting need to look at threat

assessment is important to understanding the growing trend of violence in schools. There is a

large focus on college and university students "College campuses provide a high concentration

of individuals who engage in risky behaviors without thinking about the consequences of their

actions" (Higgins, Ricketts, & Vegh, p. 226).

     Bystanders or Facebook friends can play an important role in stopping a threat. The high

rate of the use of Facebook, along with the information shared within the network itself, leads to

an opportunity to explore the role Facebook friends play in diminishing threatening language.

Moreno et al. points out "anecdotal reports suggest some college students discuss mental health

concerns on status updates, examples include, 'Mary is feeling really sad this week' or 'Dan is

too depressed to sit in class' The prevalence of such disclosures is unknown. As the majority of

college students' profiles are public, these status updates are available to students' peers as well

as others within that university Facebook network, such as college health providers. If college

students use Facebook profiles to disclose symptoms of depression, these disclosures could be

viewed by peers as well as larger online audiences who may be able to facilitate identification or

referral for mental health concerns" (Moreno, et al., p. 448). The university mental health

providers are utilizing this information to provide counseling options and provide training to

bystanders to look for signs of depression. Because students continue to post their feelings in the

online world, there is a need to explore how peers respond to a threat, shared on Facebook.

Moreno et al. expounds: "in creating a SNS profile, college students may give researchers and health-care providers insight into aspects of their behavior that are not always apparent in offline life" (p. 452).

Current literature regarding threat assessment suggests there is a need to gain an understanding of the person who uses social media and how he or she communicates via SNSs. Information needs to be gathered from various sources, including victims or targets, friends, and acquaintances. Collecting information directly from a person who has made a threat is problematic. Many times the threat is removed from the site by the victim or the person making the threat, or the site administrators and is hard to "track." Direct threats can be a violation of the law or of an educational institution's code of conduct; thus it is vital to investigate each threat for validity and credibility. However, a person's peer group can influence how he or she acts and what is said on Facebook. Moreno's research shows: those who receive reinforcement to a depression disclosure from their online friends may be more likely to discuss their depressive symptoms publicly on Facebook. Moreno also suggests that depression disclosures on Facebook often elicit responses from peers who view these references (p. 453). The purpose of this research is to determine if there is an influence from friends when they observe/respond to threatening language that has been posted on Facebook. It is believed that this research can add to threat assessment on college campuses by exploring how friends who respond to threats have an impact on their peers in an online format.

Research Questions

The study will address the following questions:

1. What type of information is shared via Facebook?

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2. What do study participants consider a threat when viewing information in Facebook?

3. Do the participants take all posts of threatening language within their Facebook friends seriously?

4. How do the participants feel he or she will respond to threats posted in Facebook?

5. Have publicized acts of violence affected the participants' understanding of threats?

6. Does the study participant feel he or she will respond the same way via Facebook as he or she would in person?

Definition of Terms

See Appendix A for the definition of terms utilized in this study

Limitations

One limitation to this study is the ability to gain a true understanding of the impact a response to threatening language has on the person making the threat. Because the study participants are being asked a series of questions and reflecting on past threats, a clear understating of the threatening language may not be realized. Included in the study is a series of questions regarding how a person might respond as well as how he or she responded to threatening language posted in Facebook. Going into the study, there was not an expectation that the participants had witnessed threatening language; therefore both how a person had responded and how a person believed they would respond were included. In addition the person making the threat was not included in the study participants. The exclusion of this group did not allow for an understanding of the impact on the person making the threat.

Delimitations

The study will focus on traditional college age students, typically 18-24 who have a minimum of 100 Facebook friends, and log into/check Facebook at least 10 times in a week. It was believed the larger amount of Facebook friends, a person had the more likely they were to have witnessed some sort of threat posted in Facebook. In addition, if the person did not log into the network on a regular basis, they would not experienced threats in the same manner as a heavy user of Facebook. If the participant has not witnessed threatening language, they will be asked how they feel they will respond if they witness threatening language in the social networking site.

Research Perspective

Working within the university setting as a conduct officer for the past 20 years has provided me an ongoing view of student behavior. Student behavior and actions are a real part of college life. As the Associate Dean of Students, I am tasked with addressing students of concern in and out of the classroom and deciding how and when to respond to threatening language and behaviors. Maintaining a balance between what is best for the student, what is best for the communities in which the student is involved and what is best for the university. As a member of the universities behavioral intervention team, I utilize Facebook as a tool in gathering information about students of concern on a regular basis. In 2005 I created an educational presentation entitled "*Risks and Rewards of Using Online Social Networks*" for the Vice President of Student Affairs at Colorado State University. This presentation highlighted the alcohol use and sexuality on campuses that was shared via Facebook. Following the first presentation, I have presented to more than 1000 people on this topic. These presentations and

my career in student affairs have led to an interest in my current topic of threat assessment and

the use of SNSs.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This research is designed to enhance the area of threat assessment and how others respond to posts of threats prior to the person acting on this threat. A review of literature highlights First Amendment Rights, posting of too much personal information on Facebook, lurking or observing other Facebook profiles and how all of this information is added to the threat assessment process. Accordingly, in the book *Ceremonial Violence*, by Jonathan Fast, threats can be categorized into four types:

- A *direct threat* is a specific act against a specific target, made in an unambiguous manner. 'I am going to put a bomb in the gym.'

- An *indirect threat* is in, some manner, vague, and ambiguous. 'I could kill everyone in this school.'

- A *veiled* threat implies, but does not explicitly threaten violence. 'The school would be better off without you.'

- A *conditional threat* is the kind often seen in kidnapping or extortion. 'If you don't pay me a million dollars, I will burn down the school.' (Fast, 2008, p. 238).

Threats of Violence via Online Social Networks

Violence has different classifications, including, "assassin, bullying, domestic violence, entrepreneurial, gang, group induced, racially motivated, relational, road rage, serial killer, street/predatory, suicidal avenger, suicide by cop, terrorist, and workplace/school" (Axelrod, 2009, p. 20). The use of the Internet has allowed the broadcasting of thoughts and ideas to a much larger audience. Often people feel safer sharing their personal thoughts via Facebook rather than in face-to-face conversations, as the online format allows them to feel anonymous.

This coincides with the theory of deindividuation. The original theory of deindividuation was introduced by Professor Zambrano and the Social Roles in the 1969 Stanford Prison experiment. In his study, Zambrano watched as people became more anonymous, the more they would act differently from the times their identity was known to others (Psychologist World.com, 2006-2011). The work of Zambrano was later expanded on by Spears and Lea addressing Computer-mediated communication and the Social Identity Theory of Deindividuation (*SIDE*) (Spears, Postems, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002, p. 94). Spears et al. states: "deindividuation theory proposes that behavior becomes socially deregulated under conditions of anonymity and group immersion, as a result of reduced self-awareness" (p. 94). The continuing growth of computer-based communication, it is important to address the different aspects of face-to-face vs. computer related styles of communication. According to Katherine Williams, deindividuation, and the use of the Internet could show; "tendency to react to situations quickly without considering all the consequences and to give little thought to the way others might view the behavior, all of which tends to give rise to impulsive and unrestrained behavior" (Williams K. S., 2005-2006, p. 691).

As Dr. Roper, Vice President of Student Affairs at Oregon State University said, "the long reach of social media has turned issues that university officials would once have handled face to face into something broader and more difficult to manage. 'It's not something we can control,' Roper said. 'It's a world unto itself.' As a result, he noted, 'The reaction is no longer a local one. You act locally and influence globally' as cited in (Rojas, 2011). Currently, the media has placed a great deal of emphasis on workplace/school violence. Workplace violence is synonymous with school violence as, "Schools are where teachers *and* children work" (Irvin, 2006, p. 169).

The federal government requires each school to establish policies to address workplace and school violence. Following the Virginia Tech tragedy (2007) most schools have established threat assessment groups to address threats of violence. Part of threat assessment is determining how friends and acquaintances respond (or do not respond) to the threats. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (*FBI*) terms this type of information as leakage:

> They can be verbal, or take the form of drawings, journal writings, videos, or school essays…. Leakage may also occur when the shooter tries to solicit the help of friends or classmates in obtaining weapons, or perpetrating violence. Leakage may take the form of a cry for help, an expression of inner conflict, or a boast. Dependence on leakage creates a secondary problem: re-socializing adolescents to recognize leakage for what they are and share them with school authorities and law enforcement agents. To snitch on a peer runs contrary to one of the most deeply embedded norms of adolescence, but the culture may be changing. Since Columbine, many potentially serious school rampage shootings have been thwarted by students who had heard of the plans and warned adults (Fast, 2008, p. 238).

Fast continues by stating "the Secret Service has expertise in threat assessment; they concentrated on this particular form of leakage. School shootings could best be avoided by attending to the leakages" (p. 238). People are becoming more aware of warning signs and responding to these signs because of the public nature of computer mediated communication.

As the use of the Internet continues to increase, the ways people communicate have changed as well. As people continue to use SNSs to communicate to a broader audience the forms of leakage will only grow and be more prevalent. However, in the area of threats, there

does not seem to be a difference between threats of violence in the physical world and the Internet. "After all, the Internet is merely a virtual extension of human civilization, and all things that are present in the physical world may also be encountered online. Additionally, the Internet may also expose individuals to new, previously un-encountered dangers" (Axelrod, 2009, p. 12). People who post threats on the Internet may act differently from individuals who would make the same threat in a face-to-face setting. Axelrod points out in his book that addresses violence and the Internet people perceive the feeling of being anonymous and believe they have the opportunity not to be accountable to others for what they say as the Internet;

> Promotes lessening of inhibitions due to the lack of physical contact and the absence of physical and verbal communicative cues… In general, these features of the Internet make combating violence more difficult because violence can present itself in different ways, masking its true identity and intentions… Criminals may also perceive the Internet as a safe environment; they often reveal more about themselves online than they would in the real world, allowing investigators a unique view of criminal behavior and motivation (Axelrod, 2009, p. 14).

Cyberbullying and Threat Assessment

A distinction needs to be made between the term "threats" and the current popular term "cyberbullying:" "*Bullying* involves aggressive behavior with intent to harm that is carried out repeatedly by one or more students, who are more powerful than the victim (Olweus, 1999) as cited in (Irvin, 2006, p. 175). Many times bullying has no pinpointed reason for the behavior; it can be attributed to showing dominance or as a show of dislike for the bullied person. It is considered cyberbullying when the bully utilizes an electronic form such as a computer/Internet or cell phone. "Bullying includes physical and/or verbal aggression (e.g. Belittling). Nansel and

colleagues found 'within U.S. schools, about one tenth of all students engaged in bullying and an equal proportion were bullied" (Irvin, 2006, p. 175). In contrast a threat tends to be focused or directed at one person/group of people and has an identified reason or cause. Threats also tend to be short term and isolated around a conflict and do not tend to be long termed. In addition, threats are typically started due to some type of incident or perceived incident or injustice between individuals such as a conflict.

Threats are intended to cause an apprehension of harm. In the case of Facebook this medium allows for threats to be further reaching. Many times when people make threatening statements they stem from aggression and frustration. However, when they are broadcast via SNSs, they become permanent and public.

Practicing

Many threats of violence via Facebook are relationship based. They can "be motivated by righting what they perceive to have been a grave injustice" (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, pp. 95-96). The target is picked based on either a current, past, real or imagined relationship or a wrong caused by someone or by a group. The Internet and social media are also means for a person to practice prior to acting on the posted threat. This practice may come in the form of attempting to get weapons, posting bizarre statements, attempting to get others to help in the act, or posting the threat to see how others will respond. Many times when people are made aware of threatening language, human nature is to attempt to explain the behavior in a non-confrontational manner or downplay the threats altogether. A December 2012 article on school safety and threats indicates there were "approximately 120 known but thwarted plots against schools between 2000 and 2010. The list is not comprehensive and many incidents likely went unreported" (Goldman, 2012, p. 1).

The difficulty lies in identifying language deemed threatening and knowing when others will respond to a threat. A 2004 study on threat assessment addresses the problem from a kindergarten – high school (K-12) perspective:

> The most significant concerns were how to identify serious threats and how to respond to them. Principals from elementary, middle, and high schools expressed concern that there were no guidelines for evaluating student threats, and said that they relied on intuition in making decisions about the seriousness of a student's risk for violence. The school psychologists expressed concern that they had little training in how to conduct psychological evaluations of students who made threats of violence (Cornell, et al., 2004, p. 527).

Officials need to be vigilant in quickly addressing reported threats but must have a balance of appropriate response and not overreaction to every post perceived as threatening. It is not feasible to evacuate a school each time a threat is detected, but a balance of safety and caution must be established. "School and public safety officials must treat threats seriously and have protocols in place for assessing and managing threats to school safety. School threat assessment is a gray area and administrators often find themselves walking a tightrope. Nine out of 10 threats may turn out to be unfounded, but no school administrator wants to be number 10" (National School Safety and Security Services, 2012).

Many people say things that they do not mean, at times they may be venting, or they could be quoting an obscure movie, or they could be making a threat to harm another person. It is not clear to assume what is meant when a person makes a threat to harm him or herself or another person. According to Nicholetti, some areas to be considered are does the person have a

history of violence? Does he or she have poor impulse control? Does the individual making the threat:

- have an unsuccessful personal history

- perceive himself or herself to be the victim of injustice

- does he or she have an obsession with a person or specific place or object

- use or abuse substances

- have an unhealthy fascination with weapons

- display mental health issues

- Specific personality disorders or a preoccupation with violence (pp. 68-69).

Looking into the online presence of people there are other areas to consider, such as how a person can "invent numerous personae for use in different situations or to give them different possibilities in the same sector of the net" (Williams K. S., p. 689). The Internet allows for people to be anonymous while simultaneously allowing for individuals to create their own persona and try out different personalities. This has led to support for the theory of "the link between anonymity and unacceptable or anti-social activities on line" (Williams K. S., p. 691) and supports the theory of deindividuation.

In addition there seems to be a rise in reports of threats directly after a reported large-scale person-made tragedy. In Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, 26 people were killed in a school shooting. According to ABC News, in the days following the shooting there have been over a dozen people arrested in three states for making threats in person or on social networks (Goldman, 2012). In an article Ken Trump, a national school safety consultant stated: "After high-profile incidents like the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook, threats go off the

wall. Some of those threats turn out to be unfounded, but sometimes those incidents propel

people planning legitimate threats" (Goldman, 2012).

Freedom of Speech

There is a fine line between freedom of speech and what could be considered threatening

when speaking or writing in public or as what Dana Boyd terms "mediated public" (p. 2) forums.

As the Supreme Court held in *Watts v. United States*, and this court acknowledged in

Jenkins, '[A] statute . . . which makes criminal a form of pure speech, must be

interpreted with the commands of the First Amendment clearly in mind. What is

a threat must be distinguished from what is constitutionally protected speech.' 394

U.S. at 707. It is a cornerstone of our democracy that the First Amendment

generally 'bars the government from dictating what we see or read or speak or

hear.' *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 245 (2002). 'True threats' are

an exception to this rule and may be criminalized without violating the First

Amendment. *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343, 359 (2003). But speech is only a

'true threat' and therefore unprotected under the Constitution if an 'ordinary

reasonable recipient who is familiar with the context [of the statement] would

interpret it as a serious expression of an intent to cause a present or future harm.'

(Pavela, 2012, pp. 5-6)

Colleges and universities need to determine and defend the difference between freedom of

speech and true threats. "For public colleges and universities (and all colleges in California

except those with religious affiliations), free speech and threatening speech are in dynamic

tension with one another" (Sokolow, Lewis, & Schuster, 2011, p. 1). The information on threats

of harm is similar to cyberbullying: "Legal issues and potential lawsuits regarding whether

cyberbullying intervention is a violation of freedom of speech are concerns for schools.

Attempting to determine the role that schools should play in intervention can be complicated"

(Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008, p. 701).   Is the Internet, and to be more specific a

social network, a public or private forum? Supporters on either side of the discussion can and do

argue their point. "The private versus public boundaries of social media spaces are unclear. On

the Internet, the illusion of privacy creates boundary problems. New users and those engaged

exclusively in recreational domains probably feel this illusion most strongly" (Barnes, 2006, p.

3). "A presumption of privacy with respect to intimate social communication are unfounded in

the context of the Net" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 45). Much of what is occurring on the Internet is

being adapted from past way of addressing issues as law and policies are not able to keep up with

the rapid pace of technology development. Policy makers have to keep up with the technology

advances and adjust as necessary. It is still very difficult to address what is freedom of speech

versus what is considered a true threat.   With the recent surge in violence and social networks,

England has adapted laws, by stating:

> Credible threats and campaigns of harassment or stalking on sites run by Twitter Inc. and
>
> Facebook Inc. (FB) will be prosecuted "robustly" under new social-media
>
> guidelines, the Crown Prosecution Service said today in a statement. Non-
>
> threatening messages that are obscene or false may trigger charges if they "cross a
>
> high threshold," it said. The guidelines, which are temporary until they receive
>
> final approval, "are intended to strike the right balance between freedom of
>
> expression and the need to uphold the criminal law (Larson, 2012).

Most adults are concerned about their privacy on the Internet; however, when communicating,

and interacting in social networking sites such as Facebook, people freely provide personal

information yet do not want to be policed or judged on their actions or words.

Social networking sites create a central repository of personal information. These archives are persistent and cumulative. Instead of replacing old information with new materials online journals are archive–oriented compilations of entries that can be searched. While American adults are concerned about how the government and corporations are centrally collecting data about citizens and consumers, teenagers are freely giving up personal and private information in online journals. Marketers, school officials, government agencies, and online predators can collect data about young people through online teenage diaries. Herein lies the privacy paradox (Barnes, 2006, p. 3).

Furthermore, "Research on bloggers suggests there is a disconnect between the way users say they feel about the privacy settings of their blogs and how they react once they experience unanticipated consequences from a breach of privacy" (Barnes, 2006, p. 4).

The Internet and SNSs have changed the way people communicate, including the content and quantity of personal information they post on SNSs. "It is possible to glean personal information even without accessing a home page on these sites because many people use the public wall as a private message board to post intimate details of their lives, schedules, or recent sexual conquests" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 43). The amount of personal information shared via Facebook allows for others to gather the information and use it in negative manners. How others use the information can cause the users to engage in arguments via the Facebook walls. Rosenblum notes the tone and control of language is lost when posted on the Internet (p. 45). Thus the reader is left to interpret what is being said; as the reader of any message or post must

decipher the meaning and if, or how, to respond to that message. People can create an identity

via SNSs as well as remain as anonymous as possible. "This artificial sense of the anonymity of

Net communications leads people to actually lower their inhibitions and to feel protected from

the consequences of their speech" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 45).

There is certainly a larger opportunity for miscommunication when using electronic

means to communicate and what is occurring in a person's life for both the person delivering and

the person receiving the communication plays a factor in communication. "Online

communication has the potential to interact with, affect, or be influenced by all other spheres of

life" (Williams & Merten, 2008, p. 255). The difficulty in deciphering the messages' intent

during face-to-face interactions becomes even more challenging with computer-mediated

communication. In face-to-face interactions people receive both the verbal and non-verbal cues

regarding what is being said. Communication on the Internet does not allow for the non-verbal

cues to be incorporated into the message.

The Internet provides an unrestricted laboratory setting for adolescent identity

experimentation as they seek to understand how they fit into the world around

them. Concurrently, the Internet is a functioning community involving personal

morals and regulatory processes. However, these processes are stunted if

adolescents do not see their online activities as subject to any ethical code. In day-

to-day 'real-life' interactions, adolescents are in a constant state of checks and

balances with parents, teachers and school administrators, peers, and societal

norms. Their actions generate perceivable reactions that they use to gauge future

decisions and behaviors. The Internet, specifically blogging, does not provide this

type of "real" reinforcement or punishment. Internet standards for behavior are

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established via text communication normalizing or encouraging various activities

or attitudes. These "invisible cyber-friendships" (Mee, 2006, p. 1) allow

adolescents to co-construct the environments that will shape their psychosocial

development (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). (Williams & Merten, 2008, p. 256).

Thus, college administrators, parents, police, and friends must address such concerns and must

determine what are valid threats are and what are rants or venting of frustrations in a mediated

public.

Legal Perspective

When looking at freedom of speech in the college or university setting from a legal view,

the "Tinker Standard" can be applied. This standard is derived from the United States Supreme

court ruling of "*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 1969,*" that

states;

> Students, the Court held, do not, 'Shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or
>
> expression at the schoolhouse gate,' and school officials may not punish or
>
> prohibit student speech unless they can clearly demonstrate that it will result in a
>
> material and substantial disruption of normal school activities or invades the
>
> rights of others (SLPC, 1969, p. I).

A key point in this ruling is the last part that says "… that will result in a material and substantial

disruption of normal school activities or invades the rights of others" (SLPC, 1969, p. I). To

understand what a threat is and how it differs from protected speech it is important to see how

threats have been interpreted in the United Sates court system. In one case the United States

Courts define: "*true threat* as one a 'reasonable person' would interpret as a **serious** expression

of intent to inflict bodily harm upon **specific** individuals. When speech rises to this level,

reasonable consequences may legally follow. When speech does not rise to the level of a true threat, the speaker is protected by the wide latitude the courts have interpreted the 1st Amendment to permit" (Sokolow, Lewis, & Schuster, 2011, p. 1). The courts have continued to use the Tinker standard to address student speech over the Internet, mainly when it "originates off campus and is brought to school or to the attention of school authorities" (Amanda Tatro vs. University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 17). In another court case cited in the Tatro ruling, Doninger v. Niehoff (Conn.) the courts stated "the student could be disciplined for "expressing conduct in a publicly accessible blog posting when this conduct would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption within the school environment, at least when it was similarly foreseeable that the off-campus expression might also reach campus" (Amanda Tatro vs. University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 18). A recent court case has continued to force the United States court system to interpret older laws and adapt to fit the Internet and other technology as it pertains to threatening language. In the 1st District Court of appeals (Florida) the case of *Leary vs. State No. 1D12–097 March 18, 2013* was recently ruled on and the court of appeals ruled against O'Leary. In this case Timothy Ryan O'Leary was Facebook friends with one of his family members and posted: "FUCK my [relative] for choosin to be a lesbian and fuck [the partner] cuz you're an ugly ass bitch . . . if you ever talk to me like you got a set of nuts between your legs again . . . I'm gonna fuck you up and bury your bitch ass. U wanna act like a man. I'll tear the concrete up with your face and drag you back to your doorstep. U better watch how the fuck you talk to people. You were born a woman and you better stay one [sic]" (Golub, 2013). O'Leary's argument to the court was he never sent the threat. He admits to publishing the threat on his personal Facebook page, which O'Leary argues is not a violation of the statute (Timothy Ryan O'LEARY, Appellant, v. STATE of Florida, Appellee., 2013). The court ruled:

We have for review the trial court's denial of Timothy Ryan O'Leary's motion to dismiss

the two counts of sending written threats to kill or do bodily harm in violation of

section 836.10, Florida Statutes (2011). Appellant argues that, because the threats

at issue were simply posted on his personal Facebook[1] page, the threats were not

'sent' to the alleged victims as required by the statute. Thus, he asserts, he did not

violate the statute. Because we hold that, under the circumstances of this case,

appellant violated section 836.10 by posting the threats on his Facebook page, we

affirm… Appellant was charged with two counts of making written threats to kill

or do great bodily harm in violation of section 836.10, Florida Statutes. Pursuant

to Florida Rule of Criminal Procedure 3.190(c)(4), appellant filed a motion to

dismiss, arguing that the facts failed to establish a prima facie case against him

under the statute. Specifically, appellant asserted that the uncontested facts

established that he never sent or procured another to send any threatening

message to either victim. The State filed a traverse and demurrer in response to

appellant's motion to dismiss. While agreeing with nearly all of appellant's

recitation of the facts of the case, the State contended that appellant's Facebook

post constituted a "sending" under Florida law (Timothy Ryan O'LEARY,

Appellant, v. STATE of Florida, Appellee., 2013).

One issue is older laws are specific in identifying how a threat can be delivered, and those

methods do not include electronic methods such as Facebook. In the case of *Leary vs. State No.

1D12–097 March 18, 201,* the court cited another court case, *State v. Wise, 664 So. 2d 1028,

1030 (Fla. 2d DCA 1995).*

The Wise court defined "sending" as "the depositing of the communication in the mail or

through some other form of delivery" and "receipt of the communication by the

person being threatened." Wise, 664 So. 2d at 1030. While the Wise court dealt

with a defendant who had sent a threatening letter directly to the object of his

threat, under a plain reading of the statute, receipt of a threatening communication

by a family member of the person threatened, which is what occurred in the

present case, would also fulfill the second prong of Wise's two-part definition of

"sending." (Timothy Ryan O'LEARY, Appellant, v. STATE of Florida,

Appellee., 2013).

The use of Facebook and Higher Education has a different reading, mainly what is school

sponsored activities and how far do the institutions policies extend regarding freedom of speech.

In a recent case *Tatro vs. University of Minnesota the Minnesota Supreme Court, Amanda Tatro*

was a mortuary science major at the University of Minnesota. Tatro continued to post on her

Facebook page statements about the cadavers used in her courses that was outlined on the course

syllabus as a violation of the academic integrity policy. Tatro was given a failing grade for the

course, which she argued was unfair due to the university violating her freedom of speech by

limiting her ability to say what she wished regarding the cadavers. The court stated: "the

legitimate pedagogical concerns standard applies to 'expressive activities that students, parents,

and members of the public might reasonably perceive to bear the imprimatur of the school.' *Id.*

271 (stating the 'school-sponsored speech' comprises 'expressive activities' that 'may fairly be

characterized' as part of the school curriculum, whether or not they occur in a traditional

classroom setting, so long as they are supervised by faculty members and designed to impart

particular knowledge or skills to student participants and audiences)" (Amanda Tatro vs.

University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 16). The postings on SNSs need to be viewed in such a way as not to impede a student's right to freedom of speech but at the same time not have others feel harassed or threatened. In the Tatro case the courts state "the universe of 'legitimate pedagogical concerns' has been broadly construed, at least in the high school setting, to cover values like 'discipline, courtesy, and respect for authority.'" (Amanda Tatro vs. University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 17), thus in the Tatro case the court did "extend the legitimate pedagogical concerns standards to a university's imposition of disciplinary sanctions for a student's Facebook post" (Amanda Tatro vs. University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 17). Thus, there is more control over speech when the expectations are codified in policy and easier to identify what is termed threatening. Again, there needs to be the balanced issues of freedom of speech and policies to identify hate or threatening speech.

Another point for consideration in tort law: "The tort for public disclosure of private facts therefore limits liability to defendants who (1) publicize information that is (2) private, (3) not of legitimate concern to the public, and (4) disseminated in a highly offensive manner" (Lior, 2005, p. 5). The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech for the citizens of the US. The law defines what is considered a public forum and what is considered a limited public forum. However, many who use SNSs as a form of communication may not understand that there may be "multiple audiences, including those with some type of power or authority over them. Those other audiences may hold completely different views on what is socially acceptable communication" (Cain, 2008, p. 2).

To add confusion to the argument the Internet and social network sites are behind a password-protected area that has an established a set of guidelines; thus the implication of privacy is inherent in signing up for the sites. The 4th Amendment to the US Constitution

protects people from illegal search and seizures, which would address the SNSs and password protection. "SNS's are also challenging legal conceptions of privacy… the fourth amendment to the U.S. Constitution and legal decisions concerning privacy are not equipped to address social network sites" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 11). As SNSs continue to grow in popularity and use, the challenge to laws and policies will continue. In fact the lines are already blurred with regard to how SNSs are perceived. "Do police officers have the right to access content posted to Facebook without a warrant? The legality of this hinges on users' expectation of privacy and whether or not Facebook profiles are considered public or private" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 11). In a recent article by Boyd, social network sites are aptly called "mediated public,"which means not public and yet not private (p. 1). Police, school administrators, legal counsels are creating and addressing this new form of communication and looking into policies to address the threatening language posted behind the password protected walls. Currently, threat assessment includes the review of a person's online presence, to determine what was known leading to the incident as well as what could be done to stop further acts of violence.

Personal Information

"Websites are explicitly made for others to view more obviously about identity claims than those made for fun or for inner circles of friends" (Gosling, 2008, p. 130). One study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, studied not just the amount of information shared but the different types of information. "We went on to examine the interactions teens have with people unknown to them on social network sites, exploring the nature of new friendships created on the networks, as well as unwelcome, and sometimes uncomfortable or scary stranger contacts" (Lenhart & Madden, 2007, p. ii). The use of terminology also comes into consideration. In the past, the term "personal interaction" meant a

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person or group of people who would communicate, via personal contact, or face to face. Communities were created out of the personal interaction; however, according to Oblinger in the book, Educating the Net Generation, current college students who have grown up in a world of technology have a different sense of community. "Their communities and social networks are physical, virtual, and hybrid" (Oblinger D. O., 2005, p. 2.11). At the current time a great deal of research is emerging that addresses how people are interacting in the virtual world. The lines between what is virtual and what is physical or real are being blurred. People believe "Net rules and Net ethics apply" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 45).

It does not take any time to get an idea of a person's personality, hobbies or interests. By looking at what individual post on his or her Facebook page, we can glean a great amount of information about that person. "Webpages will allow identity claims to be made about values, interests, and goals through all kinds of media. They include simple text statements about user's political beliefs; videos of the owner surfing, an activity of obvious importance to her sense of who she was; blog railing about the latest tweaks in the rules of football; photos of famous movie directors and other heroes; and a huge number of symbols signaling allegiance to religious, ethnic, cultural and political groups (Gosling, 2008, pp. 130-131). People do not realize the amount of information which is left behind via the posts because they feel they are in a private setting within Facebook. ''Conversations may be recorded indefinitely, can be searched, replicated, and altered, and may be accessed by others without the knowledge of those in the conversation. Pictures or comments may remain linked with an individual long after the user's attitudes and behaviors have matured" (Cain, 2008, p. 2). These posts on SNSs do not come without a price, "Students have been expelled from class, called before the Dean of Students, lost positions on the school newspaper staff, and even investigated by the Secret Service, all because

of ill advised postings on Facebook" (Cain, 2008, p. 2). There is little chance that all face-to-face communication will ever be abandoned; however the use of online communication continues to grow so much that social scientists are exploring "the fact that self-reported personality traits are reflected in personal webpages" (Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009, p. 573).

Online Communication

What is being shared and how the information is being exchanged is ever-changing. As the topic of online or computer mediated communication increases, patterns of communication are emerging. One noticeable pattern in online communication centers on group membership and group dynamics. Much research is focusing on the supposed anonymity and the deindividuation of computer mediated communications. The user creates Facebook profiles, and therefore that person controls the information posted. This contained within Facebook can ranges from true and accurate all the way to false or a made up persona. In addition there is little to ensure the person one is communicating with (via text or posts on the Facebook wall) is the person who is identified on the Facebook profile.

People tend to be open to sharing a great deal of personal information online, more specifically in social networking sites such as Facebook, where they feel anonymous certainly more so than they would in face-to-face communications or in person group settings. Much of the information shared and how it is shared centers on membership in social groups. Facebook facilitates these social groups: "Social interaction is not just a question of interpersonal interactions between individuals: In (inter)group situations, social interactions implicates individuals acting as members of groups or social categories" (Spears, Postems, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002, p. 94). The premise of joining Facebook is to connect with others in a virtual social

setting. This coincides with the Facebook statistic that states the "average user has 130 friends" (Facebook.com, 2012). "Computer communication is highly normatively regulated, a network analysis showed that conformity to the locally defined group norms increased over time, that norms distinguished between groups, and that communication outside the group was governed by quite different norms" (Spears, Postems, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002, p. 97). It is believed this group dynamic can play a role in how and who responds to threats, which are broadcast via SNSs, as the Internet adds to the anonymity of the group members.

In addition to the group dynamics, there tend to be implications of gender differences as well. Recent trends are emerging that indicate males and females interact differently while online. One study states: "The girls… reported using social network sites to reinforce pre-existing friendships whereas boys reported using them to flirt and make new friends" (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, p. 421). Gender also plays a behavioral role in anonymity and computer mediated communication. "When gender identity is salient and people are anonymous, we may act more in terms of the identities and power relations associated with these gender categories" (Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Haar, 2002, p. 558). This may have a role in what types of threats are posted within Facebook and include how people respond to the threats.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

This study looks at how people use Facebook and how they respond or believe they will respond to threatening language if they witness it within Facebook. A perceived rise in school violence has led school administrators, police, mental health providers and others to address the concern growing from the perception. This concern has motivated schools at all levels to create policies and protocols pertaining to threat assessment. Within the threat assessment process, one method of garnering data is to access a person's online presence focusing on the individual's information shared in the SNSs. Information gleaned from these sites can be critical in mitigating the threat. Many people use social networking accounts as a platform for sharing thoughts and ideas to a broader online audience. Because the sites are searchable, this phenomenon permits the investigation of the threat and the person posting the threat. It can also reveal others involved or have knowledge of the incident.

Research Methods

This chapter will clarify and describe the methodology used in the study consistent with the guidelines presented by Creswell (1994). First, an overview of the qualitative research and why it was selected as the methodology for this study will be presented. A brief review of basic interpretive qualitative research will help familiarize the reader with this research design and why the selected design is appropriate with this study. Data collection procedures described includes sampling strategies and specific data collected. Data recording procedures including interview protocol will be presented. The following section will describe data analysis procedures. Last, verification and trustworthiness of the analysis will be addressed.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

According to Miles and Huberman, "With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). A primary focus of qualitative research is the ability to observe participants in a more life-like setting.

> Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from participants to the general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of the situation (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

Much of the current literature focusing on threat assessment is addressed from a first person perspective. The threats are addressed from the person making the threat as well as from the person who is threatened. If the individual did not observe a threat (either directed toward the individual or another person), scenarios were incorporated into the one-to-one interviews to determine how a person thought he or she most likely would have responded to observed threatening language. This study explores and expands on current threat assessment research. Current threat assessment information is designed to get an idea of the person making a threat via the person's online presence, including pictures, status updates, and Facebook friends, all of which could provide valuable information regarding why a person posted the threats on social

media. This study expands the threat assessment research process and identified how third

parties responded to a person who makes threats in Facebook.

Research concerning threats of harm to self or others is not a new area of study; however

because of well publicized violence, threat assessment and its analysis has become more

prevalent as an area of research at all levels of education and society. Current research on threat

assessment only briefly touches on the use of social networking, and mainly addresses how to get

more information about the person who initiated the threat.

Methodology

"A basic interpretative qualitative study is used when the goal of the researcher is to

understand how participants make meaning of a situation or a phenomenon. The researcher

serves as the filter for the meaning, using inductive strategies with a descriptive outcome"

(Merriam, 2002, p. 6). According to Merriam, there are three main goals in a basic interpretive

study:

1. How people interpret their experience

2. How they construct their world

3. What meaning they attribute to their experience (Merriam, 2002, p. 38)

Goal

Much of the current research focuses on threat assessment from a first-person's

perspective: Person *A* makes a threat; what is known about person *A*? What information is

needed to understand the incident with Person A and how likely he or she is to carry out the

threat? This study was designed to expand on the research on threat assessment by addressing

how individuals responded to threats, which were posted by Facebook friends. The study

identified how the participant interpreted the threat(s), why they chose to respond in the manner

they did, and looking to see if the study participants take all threats seriously or if some threats are dismissed. The original intent of this study was to identify and interview up to five individuals who had responded to a threat posted within Facebook and include in a collective case study. However, because of a number of barriers the focus of the study was altered to a Basic Interpretive Qualitative Study. These barriers included restrictions placed on the researcher to only contact potential participants via Facebook messenger. This restriction flagged the researcher within Facebook as sending spam messages to potential participants. This flag would block the researcher from sending any messages for the next for 24 hours. In addition, if the message did reach the potential participant the message was viewed as spam by the individual reading the message and the person would not respond to the requests to participate. With this continued barrier in place, the study criteria was adjusted to include individuals who had a minimum of 100 Facebook friends and logged into Facebook at least 10 times in a week. The researcher understands there is a large difference in the responses to threatening language, and the experiential understanding of how they think he or she will respond. With the change to a Basic Interpretive Qualitative Study it was unclear if the participants would have the same understanding or direct observation of threatening language. Thus the need to include how a person believed he or she would respond to threatening language was included in the study.

Participants

Individuals selected for the study detailed how they currently use Facebook as a communication tool. This used reports of their individual experiences of direct or indirect observation of threatening language in the context of social networking. It was important to create a distinction between responses to threatening language and experiential (how they think they would respond) to threats. A *direct observation* experience was defined as a situation in

which a Facebook friend posts a threat on the study participant's wall, including the study participant's observation/response(s) to the threat. An *indirect observation* experience was defined as an incident of a threat posted on the wall of a friend of the study participant rather than directly on the study participant's Facebook wall. The reason for addressing the responses and the way one thinks he or she would respond to threat is due to the makeup of the participants. It was unclear going into the research if the participants had witnessed threatening language in Facebook; thus the need to explore how they believe they would respond was incorporated into the study.

Anyone known to have directly made a threat did not participate in this study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Colorado State University as well as a university in the Southwestern United States from which the study participants were selected. Purposeful sampling was utilized to gain participants from the enrollment of a large research university in the Southwestern United States. Purposeful sampling was chosen as it is likely people with more than 100 Facebook friends who also log in multiple times a day are likely to have observed some type of threatening language. *Purposeful sampling* is defined as choosing study participants who: "are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 65). To identify potential participants the researcher utilized a critical reference group, comprised of three professional staff members who address students of concern at a university level. This critical reference group has background knowledge in addressing students who make threats of harm to self or others. The critical reference group identified potential participants by the knowledge of the study, and a firsthand knowledge of the participants, and their use of Facebook. Once a person was identified by this reference group, the study was explained to him or her; the names were forward to the researcher

who would make contact and request to participate. The research included 16 participants who were 18-25 and were required to be regular users of Facebook. Regular users of Facebook were defined as logging into Facebook at least 10 times a week with a minimum of 100 Facebook friends.

Data Collection

The data was collected in three phases as described below:

Phase one- population selection: Individuals who met the study criteria were identified.

Phase two-approval: The researcher individually met with each of the participants and provided them with the consent form and detailed information regarding the study as outlined in appendix C.

Phase three-personal interviews: The majority of the interviews were conducted in one setting lasting no more than one and a half hours. They all were conducted in a convenient, private location to allow for privacy of the study participants and to maintain freedom from distractions. The researcher asked about the study participant's direct knowledge of threatening language among their Facebook friends.   After the interview with the fourth participant, new information regarding the use of the like button was discovered, subsequently an additional question was included for all future participants. The researcher also returned to the first three participants and inquired about the use of he like button and how it pertains to threatening language. If the study participants did not have direct knowledge of threatening language, the study participants were asked about their personal thoughts toward the threats and how he or she believed they would respond to the threat and the reaction to the threat by other Facebook friends.

If the study participant did not have direct knowledge of threatening language, he or she was asked about indirect knowledge (which is a threat being posted on the wall of a friend of the study participant rather than directly on the study participant's Facebook wall). If the study participant only had indirect knowledge of a posted threat, the focus of the interview was on how the participant thought about the threat, how well he or she knew each individual involved, and description of the response(s) to the threat by all involved.

If the study participant did not have direct or indirect knowledge of threatening language, a scenario was presented and the questions for the interview were based upon how the study participant believed he or she would respond to the posted threats. Each interview was audio recorded. The questions for the personal interviews are listed in appendix D.

Data Analysis

The use of template analysis was utilized to allow for inductive codes to emerge from the participants in the study. To analyze data a coding template was created, "coding template, which summarizes themes identified by the researcher as important data set, and organizes them in a meaningful and useful manner" (What is Template Analysis, 2006, para. 1). Template analysis allows for the creation of an initial template using *a priori* themes, these themes were identified from the data collected after the *third* interview. These *a priori* themes came from the personal interviews with the study participants and were identified as *Friends vs. acquaintances, use of Facebook as a communication tool*, *target of threats*, *threats to self, and threat to others*. This limit of four initial themes allowed the researcher to organize the data into main themes or categories, then to continue analyzing the data in a more organized and refined manner searching for emergent themes. After the first template was created, each interview was analyzed once again to refine the data into more specific themes the template was expanded to clarify and

provide greater details to the participants' experience and understanding. A master template was

created and the individual data from each of the participants relating to the specific theme was

coded accordingly. The template expanded to include 17 different themes, many with other

themes identified and included. The researcher then utilized the codes to look for patterns,

utilizing constant comparative analysis. The data from each participant was compared to the

data gathered from the other participants. The data was gathered from the definitions of

threatening language, the personal interviews and document used for supporting the emergent

themes. As described by template analysis, in addition to the personal interviews, open or non-

private Facebook pages were utilized as supporting documents for the themes. These public

Facebook pages were highlighted on news outlets and were analyzed as a way to support the

themes identified by the participants. The data was coded in a manner that compared it with

previously coded data, and patterns began to emerge. The researcher utilized memos to clarify

thoughts and ideas as a way to create an audit trail of how and why the data was coded and

interpreted. Themes, which started to emerge from the coding and the comparison process, were

used to answer the research questions and provided illustrations and support for the answers.

Trustworthiness

After the completion of each interview, the use of member checking occurred to ensure

the accuracy of the interviews and that the researcher has captured the essence of the intent and

the feelings of the study participants. The participant was given the opportunity provide

feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the individual responses. Throughout the

entire data collection, an audit trail was created. The audit trail mapped the study, starting with

the collection of the data to the final write-up, detailing the choices and decisions regarding all

steps in the research process. This audit trail included the use of the memos detailing the coding

of identified themes and the manner in which the data was coded. The researcher utilized a

critical reference group for peer review of the analysis and audit trail, to ensure the new

information aligned with current practices pertaining to threat assessment.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study *Threats of Harm Posted on Facebook; the Viewing and Response by Friends*. Through data analysis, common themes emerged regarding threatening language through individual use of Facebook. The themes included:

- Facebook's use as a connection tool

- Threats to social status

- Identification of threats to self

- Identification of threats to others

The interviews conducted for this study contained an in-depth understanding of the study participants' use of Facebook, including the number of Facebook friends. I chose to provide a brief background for each of the study participants. The names listed are the chosen pseudonyms each chose at the onset of the study.

Study Participants

The study participants consisted of 16 individuals from a large research university located in a metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States. To address confidentiality each participant was asked to select a pseudonym of their choosing as well as how they identify (race, sex, and national origin). It was quickly determined that the definition of *logging in* did not meet the current understanding of logging into Facebook that the researcher had intended. Logging in was the act of physically typing in the user name and password to access Facebook. The participants indicated they have the Facebook application (app) on their cell phones, and hence were consistently logged into Facebook. The definition was expanded to logging in/checking for updates and was maintained with respect to logging in/checking Facebook a minimum of 10 times a week.

- **Andrew** is a 24 year-old Caucasian male, Software Engineering major, from California. He states he has 171 Facebook friends, reports to log into Facebook one-two times a day. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Anthony** is a 22 year-old multi-racial male, Biochemistry major, from Arizona. He states he has 700 Facebook friends and reports to log into Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Charlotte Smith** is a 19 year-old Caucasian female, Psychology major, from Pennsylvania. She states she has 650 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook account multiple times a day and usually at night just before going to bed. Began using Facebook in 2009.

- **Colton** is a 19 year-old Caucasian male, Business Communications major, from California. He states he has 475 Facebook friends and reports to log into his Facebook five times an hour. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Cory** is a 21 year-old Caucasian female, Biological Science major with a concentration in Genetics and Cell Development from Washington State. She states she has between 1300-1400 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2008.

- **Daisy** is a 19 year-old Latina female, Psychology major, from California. She states she has 600 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2009 or 2010.

- **Eric** is a 23 year-old Caucasian male, Business Legal Studies, major from Arizona. He states he has 601 Facebook friends and reports to log into his Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2008.

- **Jared** is a 23 year-old Caucasian male Computer Science major, from Oklahoma. He states he has 481 Facebook friends and reports to log into his Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2006 but stopped using in 2011. He reactivated his account in 2012.

- **Kadi** is a 22 year-old Black female, Psychology major, from Africa. She states she has 1100 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook multiple times a day. She reports to be on Facebook "24-7 I am there all the time." Began using Facebook in 2008.

- **Kayla** is a 23 year-old Caucasian female, enrolled in a master's of Early Childhood Development program, from Colorado. She states she has 858 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook 10 times a day. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Leah** is a 20 year-old Caucasian female, Economics major, from Minnesota. She states she has 1537 Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Liz** is a 23 year-old Caucasian female undecided major, from Arizona. She states she has 500 Facebook friends and reports to log into Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2007.

- **Ryleigh** is a 23 year-old Caucasian female enrolled in a Master's in counseling program, from Massachusetts. She states she has 1000+ Facebook friends and reports to log into her Facebook four times a day (more if she is bored). Began using Facebook in 2003 or 2004.

- **Sara Kopp** is a 21 year-old Caucasian female Psychology/Sociology, major from Ohio. She states she has 150 Facebook friends and reports to log into Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2009.

- **Wayne Royce** is a 21 year-old Hispanic male, Supply Chain Management major, from Arizona. He states he has 1750 Facebook friends and reports to log into Facebook multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2005 or 2006.

- **Yuki** is a 22 year-old Asian male, Mechanical Engineering major, from Arizona. He states he has 1000 Facebook friends and reports to log into it multiple times a day. Began using Facebook in 2009.

All of the participants are currently using Facebook in accordance with Facebook's stated mission: "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2013). All the participants have been using Facebook for a minimum of three years (except Jared, who used Facebook starting in 2007 but stopped for a year and reported that he counts this as his starting point). The number of Facebook friends varied from 171- 1537, with an average of 808 Facebook Friends for this group of study participants. The self-reported use of Facebook or logging in/checking their account ranged from a few times a day to multiple times an hour. All participants noted they had the Facebook application (app) installed on their smart phone, and have their phone with them at all times, which allows them to check Facebook more often than they might report. The app provides the user with a notification when a person has updated his or her page or sent a message. All of the participants reported they log into Facebook via multiple methods, including the app on the phone, computers and tablets. All reported the social network site is a point of connection to keep in touch with people and discover more about new and existing friends. Five of the study participants reported *trolling* of

Facebook profiles as a popular activity within the site. Trolling is looking at their own newsfeed within Facebook, which is a collection of status updates and wall posts from other users and reading the latest posts from Facebook friends. They stated if a post intrigues them, they would click on the person's page to get more information regarding the post or the person who posted the original status or picture. When a person is trolling Facebook, curiosity can cause the use to change to *creeping* on other users Facebook pages. *Creeping* on someone's Facebook is a common term used to identify people looking at other people's Facebook pages without posting or letting others know they were on the page. All stated the main reason for using Facebook is to *communicate* with friends and family. Two of the participants reported they currently maintain two separate Facebook pages as a way of sharing different types of information with different audiences. Charlotte Smith has one for friends and one for family so she can "socialize without being questioned."

Emergent Themes

Friends vs. Acquaintances

When asked about Facebook "friends" there were not a difference between friends and acquaintances.   However, as the participants were asked a series of questions relating to how they perceive, and respond to threatening language, the difference in the two groups became very apparent. This relational theme was apparent throughout the entire study. The data indicated there is a belief the person will have a positive impact on mitigating a threat when the person responding to the threat is considered a friend. The response to threatening language again is tied to the relationship with the person who made the threat. If the person making the threat is identified as a close friend, the response is typically swift and more personal, and usually followed up with a phone call or personal conversation by the person reading/interpreting the

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post as a threat. In the interpretation of threats, there was a difference between close friend and acquaintances; if the person were identified as a friend, the language was interpreted as a threat. If the person were identified as an acquaintance it may be discounted, ignored or considered spam. The data continued to demonstrate how the relationship between people plays a critical role in the understanding and response to threatening language. The stronger the true friendship, the more the language was interpreted as a threat and followed up on in a personalized manner.

When a person continued to post repetitive or annoying posts, the users had to decide if he or she wanted to continue getting the posts from that individual or delete the person from his or her list of Facebook friends. The user can make a decision to continue to receive the information from this friend or acquaintance, or to remove him or her and possibly lose the connection. All indicated they have or would not hesitate to remove a person from his or her Facebook friend list or "unfollow" if they continue to post what they term annoying or bothersome posts. The status of the person has a great deal to do with the decision to unfollow or unfriend. If the person is a close friend or family member, one may simply unfollow or block his or her information from the Facebook wall, and thereby avoid offending the other person. The decision to remove them or unfollow the person has a great deal to do with the relationship between the Facebook friends.

Use of Facebook as a Communication Tool

When asked how the participants currently use Facebook, all used the word "communication" as a descriptor followed by family, friends, and acquaintances. When asked about other sources of communication beyond Facebook, participants answered that they mainly use texting, phone calls, or instant messaging. The delineation of Facebook friends and close friends (ones where the contact is mixed-modal on and off line) is distinct.   All of the

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participants stated their preferred method and the largest portion of their communication with close friends as occurring outside Facebook. Facebook was identified as a way to research people, to get more information about a person or establish and solidify new friendships. The study participants acknowledge that Facebook does not permit nonverbal communication to be a part of the communication and only displays pictures and words, which was seen as a limitation for strong communication. As Jared described, Facebook is like a passport that chronicles a timeline and a history via words and pictures, but does not convey emotion or context. Jared offered an example such as, identifying major milestones for a person, such as graduating high school, or college and career paths. The timeline even pointed out a time when someone is born via the date entered into Facebook. He said the data is all static and is left for people to speculate about what happened in the middle. Therefore, the reader is required to fill in the blanks and the context to make sense of what is posted. Facebook is considered a standard mainstream communication tool for people. Its use is filtered, as they are aware others are scrutinizing what is posted within the site. Other social networking sites such as Twitter, tumblr and Instagram were mentioned as growing in popularity where people believe they can be freer with personal information without fear of others knowing or responses by family and friends.

All cited the use of Facebook as a personal *communication* tool; two specifically stated they use the network for academic purposes, and six reported they used Facebook for professional reasons. The participants disclosed using text messaging and personal phone calls as the primary way they communicate with close friends (outside face-to-face). Facebook is reported as the second most common method, again outside face-to-face. Though participants in this study reported using Facebook for personal, academic, and professional purposes, the main reason cited for use is to communicate with family and friends.

This is not the case with *acquaintances,* (which is defined as a person with whom the user does not know very well, or has limited interactions in a face-to-face manner). Facebook is listed as the main form of communication with this group of Facebook friends. When asked, all participants defined close friends as people with whom they interact in a face-to-face manner, either daily or, on a regular basis. Sending private messages within Facebook is the most common way of communicating with friends within the network itself. A private message is not posted on the wall of the person and is not made public; it is much like an e-mail message sent directly to the recipient's "inbox." Half of the participants believed communication between friends is private and is important and not all Facebook friends need to be aware of their personal business. Outside private messages, Facebook tends to be primarily used for simple interactions, such as "liking" a status update, sharing a picture, short sentences (posts/status update) or thoughts.

Target of Threats

The participants identified threats to their social status and emotional harm as the largest concern and focus. Threats of physical harm were less of a concern. Colton pointed out: "From a Facebook standpoint it's definitely social; definitely everybody's all worried about their social status. It is just really important to a lot of people; I still think you want to be accepted by as many people as possible. I think with Facebook if anybody threatens your social status you're going to be affected no matter what." This was echoed in various ways throughout the participants' definitions; they were less concerned about physical harm from friends and more focused on emotional or social threats, including blackmail, and lowered social statuses. Cory supported this sentiment by saying "I think that both of them (Webster's Definition of threatening language) are a little bit intense with physical threats. I think that right now, physical

interaction is not as much as it was, say, in the 80's… Threats now are more emotional, or people's words and the way people make you feel is more of a threat to your personal well-being than the maybe beat you up now sort of thing. I think the definitions though they are literally correct maybe don't entirely contain the scope of what online threats can be in this day and age."

In addition to the threats to social status, the participants identified political affiliation as a reason for threatening language to be posted as well as a target for threatening language. The participants identified how threats can be directed toward a particular political affiliation rather than at a particular person. These targets of threats were not expected to be found in the study, and were unique in how they emerged from a number of the participants.

Threats to Self-vs. Threats to Others

The participants clearly articulated self-harm as a part of their individual definitions of threatening language; however, self-harm was largely omitted and seldom addressed beyond the personal definition. The sentiment from the participants was threatening language needs to be directed outwards or toward another person. The participants generally did not consider threats to self as serious threats unless prompted by the researcher. Six of the participant's identified a person who had posted a serious direct threat to harm him or herself, but only after significant time into the interview. The threats of harm to self were not in the forefront of the study participants' minds. Sara Kopp had almost completed the interview when she realized she has a close friend who had posted threats of harm to himself on a regular basis. "I guess I do have one friend who I don't perceive as a threat to others, but perhaps to himself, very possibly depressed, I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to take his own life. People say they could just imagine being on his hit list or whatever. Wow, now that I think about it." Charlotte Smith shared how she knows people she termed "self-harm people," whom she defines as people who are not going

to kill themselves but would cut themselves. She stated she does not consider this threatening language. Liz began the interview by saying, "I don't know if I have any information that will be helpful to you and your study," and by the end of the interview had identified two current threats to others, and two threats to self, all posted on her Facebook news feed. Threats to self are a different type of a concern for this group of participants, as it is not directed at another person or group of people. This is the first area in the data where there is a large delineation between friends and acquaintances. Four of the participants made reference to surrounding themselves with friends who would not post threatening language. In addition, 15 of the 16 participants pointed out that they had seen threats posted in Facebook at one point, and clarified that the threatening language was from acquaintances. Their personal definition of threatening language is shaped and framed around the relationship between the participant and the Facebook friend.

How the study participants currently use Facebook

The use of Facebook ranged from creeping on others' Facebook page, to being the administrator for groups collaborative private Facebook page(s). As Wayne Royce stated "When I look at somebody's Facebook, maybe I am trying to figure out more about them Facebook stalking, Facebook creeping whatever you want to call it; one huge indicator that I take into account is the pages that they like and who they like. And to get an idea as to who they are as a person." Anthony said "I'm an admin on one of our fraternity pages, and it ends up being used as a threatening site. Guys will threaten each other, and it will keep going, and I will delete it and tell these guys you guys need to talk to each other. You don't need to deal with it on Facebook."

Contact with "acquaintances" is broader in scope of use. As Andrew pointed out, Facebook is a good means for people to maintain contact with others without verbally talking to

them. This type of communication was desired to keep contact with acquaintances. This included such items as public posts, wall postings, and the sharing of web links and pictures. Facebook has a broad appeal for use, including broadcasting information to a vast audience regarding various topics. Many of the study participants create and manage multiple Facebook pages. These pages are not the same as maintaining multiple Facebook accounts. A page can be a personal page (this is the most common type of Facebook page) or it can be a page dedicated to a specific topic, area of interest or business. The group pages can be set to private, where only people who meet specified criteria (member of organization etc.) are allowed to view the content of the page. These types of private pages require a person to be designated as the administrator of the page who will approve membership to the page or group. Over half of the participants cited they are members of a Facebook page specifically linked to a work position or a club/organization to which they belong. Maintaining different Facebook accounts requires a person to sign up to use Facebook under a different e-mail and password combination. The broad use of Facebook, including contact within professions and academia was not seen as an issue by any of the participants. No risks were identified when discussing how they currently use Facebook. However, many of the participants addressed how they monitor their personal online presence and are cognizant of what they post within Facebook. Only two of the participants stated they had more than one Facebook account; all others use the same account for both personal and professional use. Only Charlotte Smith said the two accounts was to delineate between the personal and professional use. Three of the participants mentioned how they utilize the security settings, and have them specifically set for each of their friends; they also limit what others can view on their individual Facebook page.

It is commonplace for people to become "Facebook friends" soon after meeting in person, and many may never talk or interact face-to-face with that person again. Charlotte Smith stated it excites her to use Facebook as a way of meeting people when she moves to new places, "because when I first moved to college, everybody was adding me, and I was new and I'm like 'I have friends, I don't know anyone'; only two of them ended up talking to me." Half of the participants said they accepted friend requests from people they have just met. It is typical to meet someone in person and become Facebook friends soon after meeting. All of the participants could tell the researcher how many Facebook friends they had without looking at their Facebook account.

There is a large discrepancy in how people use Facebook and how they feel others should use Facebook to share information. Facebook was cited as an essential tool in communicating and connecting with people. In various ways all participants articulated how the use of Facebook has been a hassle in some way, including how friends and acquaintances post annoying information such as quotes or game requests. Three of the participants admitted Facebook has a negative effect on genuine personal relationships. Jared and Colton reported they each have taken a break from the use of Facebook. Jared reported his temporary break from Facebook was for about a year, and archived his account. Archiving is a way to keep the information from the account without having it active and visible to others on the network. When he re activated his account, he stripped his account of all posts, pictures, and links to other sites, but kept the Facebook friends. He admitted he works for an Internet-based company and Facebook is a way of identifying people when doing business, including logging on to business sites via Facebook; he believed it was important to maintain a Facebook account for his online presence and credibility. He said he kept all of his prior Facebook friends as he did not want to lose the

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connection with this group of people. Colton said it was the best time for him socially when he did not have his Facebook account; he was not constantly checking his account when out with other people. He reported he interacted differently during this period because looking at his Facebook account on his phone did not distract him. He continued to say he had a more genuine interaction with his friends based on the nonuse of Facebook. However, both Jared and Colton admitted they perceived they were disconnected from their Facebook, friends and consequently they reactivated their accounts. No participant considered permanently deleting their account, but some did state they use other social media more frequently. When asked directly how they use Facebook, the participants stated that they typically use it to look at others people's pages and search for others' Facebook profiles, and do not post many status updates themselves. They cited various reasons for not posting status updates, but all seemed to center on others' perceptions of them through the status updates. Anthony shared: "in my mind when I'm using Facebook everything I post is building upon the image that people have of me. I'm pretty conscious about what I put on Facebook or Twitter, and I think that everybody should have the same sense of consciousness too." Colton echoed this sentiment by saying:

> Whether it is the jokes you make in your statuses, things you post about the links you share, the videos you share, pictures, and everything, who you communicate with what you communicate about, it all ties into Facebook. I think the fact that you can look at someone's Facebook page and kind of tell who they are, it is a huge importance. Does it make it right? Probably not! I checked my phone probably five times in the last hour; that is not right, but this is the world we live in. This is where society is and if you are not with us you are against us. It is a great tool; it is all about how you use it.

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Daisy and Charlotte Smith both shared they are in leadership positions, and this has changed the way they currently use Facebook: less for personal use and more for school-related activities. Ryleigh provided a more personal reason for not posting status updates; she thought she does not have much to say, and feels her posts are not good enough for others to read. Daisy reported she censors much of her information, as she knows she is in the public eye. This is not the case for her when she uses other social media sites such as Twitter, but she believes Facebook is more *mainstream* and that most people know about it. She believed Twitter is not as widely used and is not as large and overwhelming as Facebook, therefore she is freer in how and what she *tweets* via that site.

All stated they feel there is a perception of themselves expressed to others via their Facebook page, and they needed to maintain a positive view or persona by what they post and share. This includes the posts and pages they *like* and pictures and videos they share. Many of the study participants who used the *like* button viewed it as a troublesome action. The participants cited a concern with the recent changes to the Facebook network, which currently allows for the *likes* shared on a person's wall to show up on other Facebook users' walls, even ones not connected with the user. This concern is viewed as losing control of their personal information and had a negative impact on the participant's use of Facebook. Despite the changes to Facebook and how the information shows up on another's wall or news feed, the use of the *like* button continues to be highly used but viewed by the study participants as confusing. This simple button has multiple interpretations; it is a way of showing one agrees with the statement or idea, or simply likes the picture or post. However, it could also be a way to show the person was there, or *creeping*, on another person's Facebook page. Sara Kopp reported "I have always thought that's kind of odd. Somebody posts something like 'I had an awful day' or 'it was

terrible somebody did this to me today' and then people *like* it. People ask all the time when is Facebook going to come up with a *don't like* button?" On one hand, it shows acknowledging the status of the picture or the post. On the other hand it can show that you like the picture, action, or threatening post, and serve as endorsement of the activity or behavior. It definitely can be taken both ways I think."

This is evident by reviewing the Facebook page of Sean Lenz, non-participant in the study. His Facebook page was highlighted on the news after the December 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Lenz is a 19-year-old Tennessee man who posted on his Facebook wall "feel like goin on a rampage, kinda like the school shooting were that one guy killed some teachers and a bunch of students :D [sic]" (Lenz, 2012). After Lenz posted this statement, there were 31 *likes* to the statement on his Facebook wall; his Facebook page has since been removed from the network. The participants in this study could not articulate why someone would use the *like* button in this manner, and all stated he or she would be upset and confused if any of his or her friends supported such a direct threatening statement. Another example is a video story from a news station that was shared on a person's personal Facebook page in which a person was charged with abusing and neglecting 40 dogs in his care. The woman who shared the link posted a comment under the video "shoot him," and one person *liked* the video. Some interpret the use of the like button as being involved in a Facebook discussion; if you *like* a comment, post or a picture, you have become involved in the discussion even without making a comment. As Colton described, it "you have to read it to want to like it" therefore you are a part of the conversation or incident (in the case of pictures) by pushing the *like* button." Kadi pointed out if you *like* a status or post when others are in conflict, such as engaging in a Facebook argument, you are supporting one side of the argument and run the risk of upsetting the other person(s)

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involved.

When an acquaintance posts a status in Facebook that is interesting to the participant, they may respond by hitting the like button or composing a short written response. All identified Facebook as a communication tool, and this desire to maintain contact with acquaintances indicates they are an important part of a person's Facebook group of friends. This contact is not intended to be in-depth conversation, but simply a way to view the wall posts and status updates and remain current and connected by the sharing of large events that occur and are considered "Facebook worthy." Facebook worthy is defined by Colton as events in a person's life worth posting on Facebook for the world to see, or to share with one's group of Facebook friends.

Nonetheless, there is a limit to what the participants wanted to see in their Facebook news feed. Each indicated they have a low-tolerance for consistent posts that he or she deems annoying. Eric stated "if somebody always posts a status, or quote that has some relevance to their life, like they have a quote of the day. I feel like if they have to do that, I feel like I need to post something like don't make Facebook your own personal talk show." If they are an acquaintance, they are typically unfriended. According to Anthony "it is dependent who it is; sometimes it is someone that I don't want see with a post but I don't want them to be upset, because it's usually an upsetting thing if you unfriend somebody. So I don't want to upset them but I'm sick of reading all the stuff they put on so I unfollow them. But if it's somebody that I'm not close to or I don't see in my real life outside of Facebook, then I will just unfriend them, and if I know it's not going to offend them then I will just unfollow them." Colton supported this as well, by stating:

> I could definitely say I have unfriended people on Facebook, obviously the 400+ friends I
>
> have on a daily basis I probably talk to maybe ten of them. On a monthly basis

probably closer to 100. Old friends post statuses or post pictures, notice what I am doing as well, this is where I go to school, congratulations, you know. I have somebody I don't really talk to, but I am Facebook friends with, and they say something that's negative I have no problem unfriending them. I am not the guy that has to have 1000 friends. Honestly, I don't like dealing with people's nonsense and whining. You know people who vent to Facebook are deleted real fast. I have no problem deleting somebody maybe if I'm not real friends with them, just the Facebook friends because I don't want to be around, obviously because what I've been through. I have been on the bad side of it, and that is just not fun.

Sara Kopp did not like the posts coming to her news feed from her family. "My father-in-law posts all these awful hurtful political pictures. I don't know, it's very harsh, very unexpected that he would be like that or even share it. So I just hide them; you're not who I thought you were so I will just hide you if I don't want to see your stuff anymore." Wayne Royce believes he allows people to be a part of his Facebook friends and addressed it in a manner of access to information, "That also means maybe I'm hiding them from my timeline, because I choose not to watch their, truth be told: idiot comments or idiot status updates about what they had for lunch. I don't care, I've too much stuff to do in my day, don't care. Or they just post too much stuff it fills up my newsfeed. So it falls down to who I choose to surround myself with in social media, so basically it's people who are not annoying, aren't irritating, and very much aligned with the positive things I wish to see in life." Jared suggested it is the decision of the user to select friends and acquaintances that are similar in attitude and beliefs, and establish the correct privacy setting: "Now it's more of a permissions type thing, the way I view friends on Facebook. I think of it as I

let them view my stuff, and I can see their stuff. Right now I am kind of a unique case because I

have nothing for them to see. I don't know that I've ever deleted anyone except when they

personally annoy me, but in that case, I'm the one on Facebook; why would I be mad? Because

A) *I'm* on Facebook, B) I'm the one who chose to friend them, so I don't delete people based on

what they say."

There was a difference in perception of how participants believed they share information

and how they feel others should share in Facebook. As an example, Kadi shared **"**it is *my*

Facebook; I have the right to post whatever I want, whenever I want it, wherever I am at.

Because I am not invading your space, I am not invading your privacy; I am using *my* phone, and

it is not your phone. What am I invading?" She went on to say how she believed others should

not share their own personal business or "beefs" on Facebook. "It should never be like that; it

should be something fun to communicate with your friends. That is how it has always been with

me. I have never put my personal business; even if I am beefing with someone, I would not post

that on Facebook. That is not Facebook's business that is my business." This statement came as

she confessed to the researcher she was currently engaged in two independent Facebook

arguments with two individuals over personal disagreements. Similarly, Daisy was actively

engaged in an argument via another user's Facebook wall that turned to threats between other

users also engaged in the discussion. Daisy reported she is a campus leader and does not use

Facebook all that much. She identified that she is cognizant of what she posts because Facebook

is too public. Ryleigh reports "I mainly read statuses, I don't post as much as I would like to.

I'm too busy, it's like I have nothing important to say." However, she later reported she posts

status updates on a regular basis. The majority of the participants stated they did not like to post

statuses; however, it was clear from other questions that they minimized the reporting of how

often they post status updates. The connection via status updates, private messages, and pictures within Facebook is an important part of keeping current with large groups of people without much effort.

What is Considered a Threat When Viewing Information in Facebook?

The Participants identified differences between verbal and non-verbal communication and articulated there is a large gap in using Facebook as a communication tool. Facebook allows people to connect and communicate in various ways, such as through pictures, and words; however, there is no context regarding what is written, and the receiver of the message interprets the meaning of the post in their own personal manner. Liz supported this by saying "you have to be careful what you post because you cannot hear the context, or the tone." Facebook communication (with the exception of uploaded videos in Facebook) removes all but the words and leaves the message to interpretation of the reader. Anthony shared the feeling that non-verbal communication is important to understand the meaning of messages by stating, "I usually try to keep it off Facebook; if you can meet in person I think that's best, because I think once you can have nonverbal communication with each other as well; I think that helps a lot. It is very difficult to really be threatening with somebody in person, unless it is a very serious issue, but it can escalate hard (on Facebook)." Each participant had a personal definition of threatening language, and contrasted it with the definition from Webster's dictionary. The participant was asked if this definition was still relevant, given the digital age in which we live. All believed the definition written by Webster's New World Dictionary is relevant and addressed the current modes of communication.

The participants described threatening language as intent to do some type of harm, and can include threats to social, physical or emotional wellbeing. The use of profanity was included

in many of the definitions.   Half of the participants included comfort level as a part of their definition of how they define threatening language. Comfort level was described as how the person who was reading the post felt after reading the post; some described the feeling as uncomfortable or unsafe. Charlotte Smith stated "Anything that makes people feel uncomfortable, to the point where they feel harmed emotionally or maybe eventually physically." It is evident in the study the participants' definitions of threatening language are formed from personal experience with their current and past use of Facebook. Colton identifies how he has been the target of threats, and has experienced threats via Facebook as well as in person. Leah discussed how she watched two of her close friends being threatened in person as well as ones posted within Facebook. These threats increased in frequency and intensity, resulting in a tragic conclusion. This personal experience had a profound impact on her, and has shaped her definition of threats. Cory acknowledges that her younger sister's social status was threatened via Facebook by a classmate of the sister. Threatening language has become commonplace within Facebook, so much so that five of the participants feel they are desensitized to threats. As support to this statement, a 2013 NY Post online article cited the occurrence of a new trend among high school girls when prom dress shopping. The girls are posting pictures of their prom dresses on Facebook, tumblr, and Twitter so others in their school will not have the same dress (Linge, 2013). The article stated a search of "Steal My Prom Dress" can be conducted in Facebook with a result of more than 40 Facebook pages found. Some of the pages were titled; "*Steal my prom dress and i'll knock you the fuck out [sic]*" (Maniscalco, 2013) or "*Bitch don't steal my prom dress*" (Lovisetto, 2013). Eric supports the data by saying he does not deem threats serious unless they are to kill someone; he states he has seen threats, "maybe once or twice in my life, and that was more like, 'I am going to fight somebody.' They did not

say they were going to kill them or anything." Andrew and Colton also state they feel people are besieged by threatening language while using Facebook. Andrew takes the approach that if they threaten to kill someone, "I consider that an idle threat as it happens all the time." Eric defines threats via Facebook as "as anything that is specific to a person and the intent to do something. But if it's ambiguous and just somebody that has a different opinion, I don't care." Each person shapes their definition from his or her personal experiences of online interactions as well as the relationship with the person making the statement. Jared states his definition is centered on a few things, "generally speaking, red flags that you would never say in an ordinary conversation. Now my next question for myself is what is an ordinary conversation? It could probably manifest itself in a lot of ways, as it would depend on the relationship I had with that person. For instance, if I had a close friend and said something that was just a little bit off, that would be a way bigger red flag, than someone I did not know saying something a little crazy. My sympathy to the language being used depends on my relationship with that person."

Threats are not limited to the written word, and also can be expressed in Facebook through pictures and videos. It is important to note video was not researched in this study. Liz identified a friend who recently posted pictures of his truck as he and a group of mutual friends went to different bars. She disclosed he had received a driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) ticket in the past. While he was out, he continued *checking in* via a program linked to Facebook to various bars in the area. Liz was not with the group and became concerned as he was posting the pictures of his truck as he was checking into the various bars. She assumed he was intoxicated because of the number of bars he had checked into, and she became worried about his ability to drive due to his posting of the pictures. She texted a member of the group who was out with him, and was informed the group had split up. Liz was relieved to hear the

male she was concerned about was home. She perceived these pictures as a direct threat to him and others, and followed up with others close to him to locate him and ensure he had a safe way home that would not pose a risk to him or others on the road. Prior to this personal story, only words were included in the definition of threatening language. Thereafter, the definition needed to be expanded to gauge the sentiment of others to ascertain if pictures should be included as a part of the definition of threatening language. Because pictures are being displayed in such large numbers, it is important to include them in the definition of threatening language; thus, a question regarding pictures as threatening language was added.

Most study participants did not feel pictures are a main component of threats, but did feel they can support or be a supplemental part of threatening language. The dominant topics identified by the participants related to pictures as threatening language were blackmail and weapons. Four of the participants mentioned the picture would need to include weapons for them to consider it threatening language.   Anthony felt, "You know I think of like a person holding guns on Facebook. I mean it could be veiled, or it could be just maybe just a guy who likes his guns." Leah said, "If there is someone with weapons in a picture, people can see this as a threat to them if they are directed at a person." Two participants addressed how pictures can be used to blackmail a person in order to lower that person's social status. Colton stated how the blackmail can be used in two different ways, one of which being friends with high-profile athletes at the university. He explained how someone could use the picture of an athlete at a party drinking as blackmail. Second, he expressed a personal experience with blackmail, as a woman he once was romantically involved with created a fake Facebook page in Colton's name. Subsequently, she posted pictures of herself in revealing clothes on Colton's Facebook friends' walls. Because these pictures were being posted by a Facebook account that was believed to be

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managed by Colton's, it was assumed he was the one posting the pictures. The woman would use her real Facebook account and comment on the pictures by saying she had only sent the revealing pictures to Colton and thought he betrayed her trust by posting these pictures on his friends' Facebook walls. Colton described this as a personal threat to him, as he felt it negatively affected him and changed his Facebook friend's perception of him. Wayne Royce believed pictures could be considered threatening, and cited a personal example:

> Absolutely pictures can certainly be threatening, and the threats do not need to be words.
>
> A picture can show a visual representation of a threat against him or her, or a group of people. An example that comes to mind, for me, involves a good friend of mine since high school. We became acquainted during some volunteer/community service work, and we spent countless hours together. I knew she struggled with an eating disorder; however, I believed she had overcome her battle. Within the last few years, her pictures have depicted her continuing struggle with the eating disorder, as she has become grossly thin. While this may not be a threat, as commonly thought of, I believe it does fit the definition of "threat" according to Webster, which is being used in your study. Beyond my example described above, I can certainly see the reality of an individual (or group of people) posting an intimidating/threatening photo.

Based on the responses from the participants, pictures are not typically considered threatening language unless there is either a history or context to the person making the threats, or it is placed in conjunction with some type of verbal statement. Eric said to include pictures as threatening language, they need to be "pretty vulgar." Initially all participants were puzzled with the question relating to pictures and how they can be associated with threatening language. They

articulated how they only considered pictures to be a part of threats, when placed in conjunction with written threats.

Veiled threats were identified as the most common type of threat. As Ryleigh pointed out, "I would say probably the veiled because they're more joking. I don't think I've ever seen anyone with the 'I will kill you' or at least I hope not." The message is left open to interpretation by the reader. This fit directly in with the definition of veiled threats. Direct threats were the second most common type, and conditional threats were not witnessed by this group. Kadi was the only person who said she had made a threat on Facebook. She reported, "Now mine was direct, I directed it, knowing for sure, knowing I was already in a pissed off mood. When I woke up in the morning, it was the first thing I did when I got up. I did it and it was like, since it happened on a Saturday, I did not go to church. She just ruined the whole day; it just ruined a whole freaking weekend for me."

To understand what is considered threatening language, a starting point, or *trigger point* was explored. Again, the theme of association with the person has a great deal to do with understanding what prompted the threatening language. Because there is a great deal of information shared, the communication can become distorted and change due to the nature of what is said and how close the people are to each other. As Kadi pointed out, "that is the thing with Facebook, especially when you're dealing with friends or any other person; if you share deep secrets with the person, and you and that person get into it there's just so much you can say that she knows. Compared to you don't know anything about me." Based on past interactions, the threats can have different meanings. All of the trigger points identified by the participants centered on three topics; politics, change in relationship status and mental health concerns.

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The political theme emerged as the most prevalent trigger point for threatening language, and was identified in the greatest detail. This is likely attributed to the fact that this research was conducted at the end of the highly contested 2012 presidential election. A great deal of political discourse was expressed via Facebook over the course of the campaign. For some of the participants, the political aspect of threats caused an adjustment to their individual definitions of threatening language. This shift moved from threats to an individual to threats to a group with common ideology, including membership in a specific political party. Some of the participants view Facebook as a way to broadcast threatening language not directed at an individual, but aimed at an individual's political affiliation or ties to a political party. Jared said "Maybe they could be threatening toward an idea or a group of people, but I never saw people singling out individuals. People don't threaten other people; they threaten groups of people, or ideas or the ideas groups' people hold up." The threatening language centered on politics and posted on Facebook is another personal definition of threatening language. Jared, Kayla, Sara Kopp, and Wayne Royce all stated they had witnessed threatening language within Facebook that specifically targeted political ideologies. Kayla cited the threats she witnessed within Facebook originated from a friend's political post. The Facebook argument began when Kayla's friend, Breezy, posted a political statement and misspelled a word in the post. A Facebook friend (acquaintance) of Breezy commented on the post in a derogatory manner, pointing out the grammatical error and how all democrats are stupid like her. This argument continued to escalate in volume of posts as well as angry tone, growing to a string of more than 80 comments from more than five people. Within the string of Facebook posts, the male who had made the original derogatory comment also made a threat to Breezy's mother by stating, "you stupid bitch I'll meet you somewhere and hit you." Other threatening language associated with political

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affiliation center on how and what people hold as political beliefs and how the person utilizes his or her Facebook wall to display his or her personal thoughts.

The second most common area addressed a change in a person's relationship status. Largely these relationships were identified as romantic, but also include platonic relationships. The participants identified the relationship trigger point as aimed at lowering a person's social status. The threatening language is aimed at a person to embarrass or threaten the person's emotional health in a "public" manner, such as postings on Facebook. Leah identified she was a part of a group of four friends who had grown up together. Other than Leah, this group was not considered a part of the *in* crowd in her high school. Leah was close to this group as well as being accepted into the *in* or popular group of students in their high school. The more popular students did not like the other three people she was friends with, and would make fun of them and harass them in various ways. As stated in the personal definition area, the nature of the threats was aimed at lowering one's social status. The most prevalent threat was aimed at how the other three people did not belong in the popular group sections at the high school events. Many times the three would physically come to support Leah and her participation in activities, such as dance competitions or cheerleading at athletic events. After the events, the three reported they would receive Facebook posts threatening them for their attendance as they were not accepted into the popular groups. The three were told if they showed up at future events, they would be physically removed from the section. The threats continued to escalate to the point where two members of this outcast group took their own lives. It is apparent from her telling of this story that these threats have had a profound impact on Leah's definition and understanding of threatening language. Ryleigh said during her high school years, there was a group of popular girls, dubbed by the group the *Fine nine* who believed they were better than

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others in their high school. They used Facebook as a way of putting others down and elevating

their social status: "back in high school, it was targeted more toward the group. There is this

group called the '*Fine nine.*' Many of the other girls in school did not like them because they

(the *Fine nine*) thought they were better than others not associated with the group. A friend at

that time would post all these things about them." Colton believes there is a connection between

how a change in a relationship status can also lead to mental health concerns. In his case, he was

the target of the threats and speculates: "I think with me, obviously it was the breakup; her

mental state is probably a big one. I think when she told my family that she was pregnant,

basically the day I told her I was breaking up with her. I don't believe it, I am 17 years old, and I

am like 'please, no!' And it has happened before." Colton related the ending of a romantic

relationship with a person's mental status, which leads to the final area identified by the study

participants as trigger point of mental health concerns.

The final area identified as a stimulus for threatening language was categorized as mental

health concerns. The mental health area lends support to the three types of identified threats,

direct, conditional, and *veiled*. Of the participants who witnessed a person make threats to harm

themself, he or she identified the threats as *direct* or *veiled*; no one identified *conditional* threats

posted in Facebook. As Daisy outlined, "Some veiled ones where people are depressed and not

going through a nice time or they are going through a tough patch; they may not directly say it,

but they may say I wish I weren't here." This topic is broad, and encompasses different areas,

including how people deal with death and loss. This is the first area outside the participant's

personal definition of threatening language in which the participants focus on threats of harm to

self. This type of threat has a significant negative stigma attached to it, more than any other.

The participants who witnessed a person make a threat to harm him or herself typically would

dismiss the post by calling the person "crazy," or would diagnose them as bipolar, or depressed. Assumptions were often made about the person posting the threat, Anthony pointed out, "I don't recall what the trigger point was at that point, but he had a long history of depression and I think he had some type of mental illness. I don't think there was one particular thing that set him off at that point." Jared stated, "basically I assessed it and I felt like this guy was just moving toward depression" and Sara Kopp said, "we suspect he is bipolar or some other psychological thing."

Five of the participants believed threats are pervasive on social networking sites; however, they are not limited to Facebook. Three of the participants thought other social networking sites, such as *tumblr* and *Twitter* experience a greater deal of threats and cyberbullying than Facebook. They also identify threatening language and cyberbullying as associated with social media. Harassment and cyberbullying were both addressed, and were closely related to the definition of threatening language. According to the participants, cyberbullying and harassment were similar, yet there is an identifiable distinction. Colton pointed out, "I think it depends on what it is; if it is something that is deliberately threatening, there is a difference between harassing and threatening. Harassing is viewed as giving somebody a hard time; maybe joking, you know. Sometimes they won't take it as a joke. But threatening is very clear; I feel I can tell the difference. When you're threatening somebody, it's out there; there is no question about it. So whenever there is a threat, I want to say I help, at least say hey, man, it's not worth it." The participants identified how harassment can range from giving each other a hard time in a good natured way, to being aggressive with the intent to harm or threaten with the harassing behavior. Colton said much of the harassing in Facebook can center on sports themes.

Do People Take All Posts of Threatening Language Within Their Facebook Friends Seriously?

Friends

The participants defined annoying posts as repetitive senseless thoughts, quotes or depressing statements which appear in Facebook. When analyzing threatening language to determine credibility, the participants weighed different factors such as severity, tolerance of annoying posts and relationship to the person. This was supported by Jared's statement, "it's a balancing thing; if you were to view it on a sliding scale; how well do I know this person, and how much of a tolerance do I have for their opinions being expressed? Like I said earlier, if I knew someone super super well, and they are a little bit 'off' on their Facebook status, I would immediately follow up." The participant's believed they are aware of what is considered normal posting for their close friends, and feel they can tell what is atypical or out of line with usual information shared by that person via Facebook. The participants typically will respond to the post, especially if the post is a perceived threat. The participants also believe there are differences between irregular posts and threatening posts as it pertains to close friends; interestingly, this delineation does not occur when they were addressing an acquaintance's posts. Jared reported, "So, I guess I take it a lot less seriously than somebody I know really well. Even with somebody I do know, it could be a very innocent looking comment from someone else. Maybe someone who I don't know as well as a person, and they said, 'I can't take it anymore.' It could be something subtle, but if I knew that person and the way they communicated with others was not somebody who's gonna say hey, 'help me' or something like that. Then I would be much more sympathetic to that. I don't have many Facebook friends that I have not met in person [sic]." The response to these threatening or abnormal posts occurred in a more personal manner, such as in person or via text message; not within Facebook. All reported if the decision were to

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respond within Facebook, the response would fall into one of, or any combination of, these three methods of response:

- Make a humorous post to defuse the content

- Utilize the message function in Facebook to send a message directly to the person

- Post a message on the person's Facebook wall with a message to request personal contact

No study participants stated they would respond to the threat in any other manner in Facebook. The study participants believed responses outside the above methods will only call attention to the threatening language. Anthony pointed out, "If it's between close friends, usually I will respond and say, like, 'hey, let me call you.' Especially if it's directed toward me or somebody I know. Or I will try to do something to defuse the situation, especially if I see comments going back and forth, back and forth, I will say, 'what are you concerned about it's not a big deal,' or maybe I'll message them so it's private not in front of everybody." This is consistent with Facebook pages that contained threatening language found via news coverage, and analyzed as supporting information for this study. In all but one, the person made threats of harm, and there are either no responses on the Facebook wall or very few. One person's public Facebook used as supporting information is pseudo named "MG." MG's Facebook page was addressed in a news story about the use of Facebook, and the following was posted on their wall: "I've hurt a lot of people and their lives would be better if I wasn't around to potentially hurt them again. They would be happy." There were no responses to this post. In addition, about two hours later, MG posted the following to which there were no posted responses: "I thought we were friends...guess not. Knowing that I'm in a dark place you choose to stop being my friend?? Thanks for helping

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me go further into the darkness. Maybe it'll be enough to end it..." That was followed up with, "hahah what does one do when his closest friends give up on him [sic]?" After MG posted the last statement, there was only one response: "We all love you and would never want anything to happen to you. You have so many people standing next to you and nothing is worth doing anything to harm yourself ♥ [sic]" (MG, 2013). Another supporting page used was a news story posted on a local news outlet's public Facebook page. The story was about a local film maker who dressed up in traditional Middle Eastern garb and used a fake rocket launcher to aim at passing cars on a busy street. A person pseudo named "JP" shared the video link to the news story on his personal Facebook page and posted the following caption above the video "HOW THE HELL IS THIS ASSHOLE STILL ALIVE [sic]." Under the video, "JP" posted "NO SHIT!!!!!! If i saw this asshole with a launcher i would slam on the brakes and open fire instantly!!!!! And i would be in my LEGAL right to kill the fucker!!! To do this in where EVERYONE has a gun is blatantly ignorant and dangerous!!! [sic]" Only one person commented on the post, utilizing humor to make light of the situation. The same video link was shared on pseudo name "RRK's" Facebook page, to which the caption read; "He's dam lucky someone like me didn't see him & give him a serious case of lead poisoning or body dis-memberment, what jury would convict me? What a dumb-ass! [sic]" to which there was one response from a Facebook friend in the form of a humorous post (12 News, 2012).

The message function is utilized when the post is not serious or concerning to the reader, but does need attention from someone; if the post is deemed serious a more personal manner is used to follow up. However, the principle form of addressing close friends remains outside Facebook in a more individualized manner, such as a text message, phone calls or face-to-face conversations, typically in this order. Leah reported she confronted two people in person who

threatened her friends via Facebook; "Umm, I think they were a little taken aback by it, just because the nature of the situation, it was all happening kind of over social media, I think they were expecting to see the back lash over social media. So they were a little taken aback by it, maybe dumbfounded by it. I just kind of walked away from a situation and said that doesn't matter to me." All others supported the more private response concerning close friends. This personalized method of response was in line with the way the participants report they use Facebook to communicate with close friends in general.

All but two of the study participants identified they have witnessed threatening language within Facebook itself, with the largest amount of threats being posted by acquaintances and not close friends. Daisy supported this, "most of the percentage that I hear those threatening things from are from acquaintances that I met or maybe just hung out with in high school." Two of the participants were directly affected by threats received by close friends or family members; however, neither of the participants responded to the threats. They believed the person being threatened could handle it alone, and did not feel the need to intervene. Half of the participants reported that they see a great deal of threatening language posted on a regular basis, ranging from daily to weekly. The frequency of the threats has desensitized them to threatening language on the Internet and within Facebook itself. The type of threats seen on an ongoing basis tends to be on the lower bounds of what is identified as the threatening language threshold, including statements, such as how someone wants to hit, punch, or beat someone up. Andrew supported this by saying "any kind of threat on Facebook or other websites nowadays seem really idle; I've seen so many threats, not necessarily on Facebook only. I have seen so many threats online where people are anonymous and people make threats and never really act on them, so threatening stuff online, doesn't really present itself as a real issue. I mean I'm not threatened by

it. Maybe if somebody texted me it would be different." Colton identified how threats are a part of everyday banter, especially when it is related to sports. As he sees it;

> I think you are surrounded by it. It is tough when people are joking, giving somebody a hard time; whether they are talking trash about sports or someone's relationship status changed, and everybody wants to know what is going on, those are super popular. You always see stories, are you on Facebook? You see all those stories and pictures that come up on Facebook, and you don't know if they are true, you don't know what happened. Reading some of those just makes you think, but unfortunately everybody has diluted it where you don't even know if the stories are real or not, but yeah you're surrounded by it.

The main reason given for not responding to a posted threat is that the participants feel they surround themselves with close friends who would not engage in threatening behaviors or post threatening language. If they did post such language it can easily be explained regarding how and why they decided to post it in Facebook. Kadi believed close friends will share a preponderance of personal information with each other, and when they are in conflict, they will use this closeness/sharing of information against the other person. "That's the thing with Facebook especially when you're dealing with friends or any other person; you share deep secrets. If that person and you get into it there's just so much you can say that she knows" (Kadi).   She believed that close friends will not act on the posted threat, but rather will simply engage in an argument, and she expects others to know that this is how she uses Facebook. Kayla reported she did not take the threat she witnessed seriously as she knew the person and did not believe he was capable of following through with this type of behavior. Liz witnessed a threat directed toward a close friend and thought it was funny and not serious. The threat was

based on a Facebook post between two male friends of hers, who stated they were going to take a third male out for his upcoming birthday, get him drunk, and beat him up. Liz said she is close friends with the two males who made the threat, as well the male who was threatened. She did not take the threats seriously, as she knows them, and realizes this is typical communication among this group of her friends. She stated she is aware of how the threatening posts are perceived by others, especially acquaintances: "People were like, 'that is terrible,' you know, they were all going on. I did comment on that one. Like, if you know the three of them, you know they are joking. They are not serious; I didn't think it was a threat, but people who did not know them that well kind of freaked out. Especially since the guy they were talking about beating up was not on Facebook, so it is not like he was there to defend himself or to even see it." In addition Liz pointed out how, she believed people who post threatening language are not serious, as she viewed it: "I also think people abuse that, like, if you are posting on Facebook, you are not extremely intentional: you just want some attention." Threats posted by close friends within Facebook are easily explained when confronted by others, and less likely to be considered serious and in need of further follow up.

Acquaintances

There is a very different response to acquaintances who post atypical status updates, including ones that can be viewed as threatening. These atypical status updates are ones that go against normal popular topics or flow of everyday conversations. Part of this is due to the privacy settings within Facebook; as not all status updates for acquaintances are posted on others walls, one would need to go to the person's Facebook page to see what is occurring. The lack of personal contact had an effect on how seriously the participants perceived the posted threats. All of the participants stated there was a distinction between friend and acquaintances. The

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differences can be summed up with Jared's statement: "It could probably manifest itself in a lot of ways; it would depend on the relationship I had with that person. For instance, if I had a close friend and said something that was just a little bit off that would be a way bigger red flag than someone I did not know saying something a little crazy. My sympathy to the language being used depends on my relationship with that person." When threatening language was posted by acquaintances there were three reasons cited for not taking the post seriously:

- not knowing the person well enough to understand if the statement was a threat

- not knowing the person well enough to feel comfortable responding, or having contact information for the person

- not wanting to become involved in the conversation

When people do not maintain regular contact, they believe they do not know the person very well, and thus failed to respond to the language. Going to college in a new location and maintaining the friendship status within Facebook was important. The participants describe a change in a relationship between friends due to the physical distance the relationship was often changed to acquaintance. Facebook was used to maintain a sense contact and connection with past friends, including ones from high school or college. Half of the participants reported they would not respond to a person who posted threatening language due to geographic distance or lack of regular personal interaction. This included Ryleigh's statement that sums up the geographic distance: "I don't think there is much I can do, because I'm not close friends with her anymore. I am here and she's in Boston, and I think the distance has something to do with it. I cannot be there with her to help her with all those people talking horrible things about her." Therefore, lack of contact and physical proximity had an effect on the nature of a response to threatening language.

Without regular interaction there was little understanding of the of the person's everyday life and minimal basis for putting Facebook posts or status updates in context. With this lack of awareness of current events in the person's life, the participants did not feel comfortable responding to something that could be considered a joke, as it could be taken out of context. Cory stated, "knowing how many Facebook friends I have really they are acquaintances. Probably like 100 are ones I've interacted with for more than like 10 hours, so you don't really know what the relationship is with the other person; you don't know if it's an actual threat or if it is a joke. So I would not really classify it as a threat without knowing more about it. Or maybe I just know really great people." Daisy echoed the lack of information by saying the majority of her Facebook friends were from high school and current college friends; she continued to say most of the threatening language she has witnessed is from her high school Facebook friends or acquaintances. Eric stated if the post comes from a person he has recently met or recently added as a Facebook friend he considered him or her an acquaintance; even if it is a direct threat, he will not understand the circumstance for the post, and would consider it spam. Liz saw a post appear on her wall from her friend's mom stating, "I swear I am going to jump" and reports: "I am like, 'whatever, people post weird stuff.' I did not even think jump off a building or bridge, 'like kill yourself' kind of jump" she did not respond to the post in Facebook, as she presumed her response would not have an effect on the person. She believed the woman was in a desperate place and did not know her; therefore, she did not feel her response would have an impact on the woman and her desperate state. Furthermore, she saw others did respond to the post, and believed it was the role of the woman's close friends to response, and feels the threat was addressed. Liz continued on to say she feels the threat was addressed by the other people's responses.

Only three of the participants reported they had responded to threatening language posted by an acquaintance. All three reported the reason they decided to respond was they believed they had a personal connection to the topic being discussed, and not necessarily the person. In Sarah's case, she aspires to become an academic advisor in higher education. A person she is acquainted with in Facebook made a disparaging remark about a community college academic advisor, which she took as threatening to her chosen future career. Sarah chose to respond out of defense for her chosen career path. Daisy reported a Facebook acquaintance posted a status update on his Facebook wall centered on the topic of people being gay. She said the comment generated a long string of posts that escalated in tone. The responses to the original post continued to grow and escalate to the point that she believed the author of the post was being threatened. She believed she was obligated to come to his defense, and is quick to point out she did not come to his defense for his post. She did not agree with the content of the post, but responded because it seemed like all involved in the string of posts were ganging up on the original author. She did not feel it was right to gang up on the person, so she felt the need to respond via Facebook. Charlotte Smith responded to an acquaintance's post in Facebook who threatened to harm themselves. Charlotte Smith responded to the acquaintance by saying, "I appreciate you, don't do it." She said the person let her know they appreciated her response, but she continued to post statuses that indicate she were depressed, and Charlotte Smith stopped responding and communicating to her and the posts.

In addition to this avoidance of taking threats posted by acquaintances seriously, the participants believed that it is someone else's role to respond to the threatening language. They believe this allows them to opt out, and not be involved in the post or response. The belief is the person who made the statement should have close friends whose responsibility it is to respond or

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address the posted threats. This non-response seemed to give the participants an opportunity not to be responsible if the person followed through with the posted threat. They expressed they would not want to become involved in the post as it not any of their business. Anthony summed it up by saying, "I try not to get involved if it's acquaintances." The participants also expressed a difference between how they use Facebook and how they feel others should use Facebook to communicate. The participants shared that if they responded to a post that could be perceived as a threat, it would be intruding in that person's business, and because they do not interact, it would not be socially acceptable to comment or respond. Liz supported this by saying, "I don't really know her; I'm not going to call anyone about this random chick because I got a Facebook status update." Also, there was a negative sentiment toward acquaintances who post threats or questionable material, such as objectionable political posts, sexist or raciest materials. When Facebook friends post this type of status, the persons who posted tends to be deleted from the list of Facebook friends. This negative view supports the statement of how the participants believed others should be using Facebook to communicate. Andrew stated: "But if it is one of the acquaintances, I would be like, 'oh that sucks,' but I probably would not know them enough to help them; hopefully they have close enough friends on their side that can step in outside of Facebook to help them. I really don't think Facebook is a good means for doing that." Liz also supported the belief that the person's friends should respond, "if others had not responded I would have, but others responded very quickly, so I did not even need to worry about it from there." Daisy believed it was a "little frustrating; maybe if it was someone I cared about it would have been a stronger perception or feeling toward her, but it was only on Facebook. If I was not (on Facebook) she was not in my mind, so it is only if I saw her post." The content of the Facebook post and the relationship with the person were closely linked.

The participants indicate the content of an acquaintance's post did change the perception of the person. The majority of the participant's stated he or she changed their opinion of a person by what the other person posted in Facebook. One perception people had was others who post threatening language are immaturity. Anthony said, "Usually when I see people using threatening language, or using Facebook as ways of dealing with their confrontation, it makes me think that they are immature or irrational." Daisy shared her experience of knowing a person as an acquaintance outside Facebook, and subsequently adding him and seeing his posts within Facebook. "He's like a thug or whatever, and I met him and in a very different setting, and I thought 'man this is a good kid.' He might have the experiences that led to what he is doing, but he is a good kid; I never saw that side of him. Then he posted on Facebook, I thought he was pathetic, like, 'you're grown; you're 19 or 20, why you still posting this kind of stuff?' I was more embarrassed and I looked down on him; with the violence I feel it is very uncivilized. So, I did think negatively of him. I think I deleted him after a few times, and not sure we're friends anymore." The study participants identified Facebook as a tool to get to know a person; they would go on to another persons' Facebook page to peruse the content of the page (pictures, likes, friends, etc…) and this would form their initial impression of the person. Kayla states, "It definitely was my first impression. I would get very personal on Facebook, so I feel like people who do (post threats) are very hotheaded or kind of immature, you know, posting stuff like that on there. It definitely changed negatively." In addition a lesser theme emerged related to social status; when a person posts threats, a small number of the participants believed these threats are loosely related to social status. They believed the person posting the threat has a lower social status than others. The data supports this sentiment and may be explained in two ways. The first being the person posting the threat is in a lower social status than others. Kadi reported she did

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not feel she and the person making the threat were on the same level, the other person was below her in education level and they were interacting in different social groups. She believed her enrollment in college has elevated her social status. Second, a larger portion of the participants support the notion that the person making the threat is attacking the other person's social status. Ryligh reports the threats she has witnessed are directed at the person's social status; "I think she's doing this because she thinks she's better than other people."

In relation to threatening language, one factor that emerged from acquaintances that did not occur with close friends was exploring the acquaintance's Facebook page to look for more information. Even this had a correlation with the relationship between the users. The closer the person was to friends, the more likely the person was to investigate why the statement was made. Daisy said she would be more apt to look at a person's Facebook page for additional information if she knows him or her well. Jared "creeps" on other people's Facebook pages; he was more apt to do this on an ex-partner's Facebook page as a way to determine who they are currently dating and to see what is going on in their lives. The majority of the participants (11) stated if they see atypical or concerning posts, especially if they deal with some form of threat, they would search the person's Facebook page to see why the person posted the statement. They did not say they would respond to the threat; they would simply investigate why it was posted. This occurred no matter if they are friends or acquaintances. There were various reasons for the inquiry, but the overriding sentiment was curiosity. Andrew pointed out, "I kind of feel guilty saying it, but it is like saying 'oh shit, drama!' I might want to go back and see what the context of what's going on kind of thing. But if something is happening on Facebook and some people are fighting or something like that I want to go and find out what is going on."

The study participants seldom requested assistance from people in authority for guidance in responding to threatening language. Authorities were identified as police, mental health professionals, school administrators (including teachers or professors), and parents or guardians. When the threat was directed outward or toward another person, all of the participants believed they could address the language themselves, and did not contact any authorities. If the threats were directed inward or involved self-harm, all reported authorities were involved and provided assistance; however, the participants did not initiate the contact. The participants stated they were uncomfortable, as they did not want the person to get in trouble due to the posts. They also did not want to report the behavior or the statements to anyone, especially the parents of the person making the threats. The majority of the participants believed people who make threatening statements in Facebook require some sort of intervention; however, they did not think it is their place to inform the person of this need or initiate the call to authorities.

The influence a person had on someone who is making threats has a strong correlation with the relationship with the person. The closer they were to the person making the threats, the more influence he or she has on the person. Kadi reported her mom and her current supervisor at her work responded to her as she (Kadi) was making threats in Facebook, and although others had told her to stop, her supervisor, whom she identifies as a second mother, and her biological mother had the most influence on her postings. Cory reported her sister being threatened by a woman who attended the same high school. She said she only offered guidance to her sister off-line, because she did not want to give the perception her little sister could not address the threats on her own. Friends have a large influence on each other in various ways, including the way people speak, or how they interact. Five of the participants stated they had sought guidance from a friend in some manner when addressing a post in Facebook. Cory supported this sentiment

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with a personal example: the more you interact with a person, the more influence he or she has on you. She states a former boyfriend had a great deal of influence on her to the point of her taking on phrases he would say. She believed most people were influenced in some manner with whom they are close. Kayla's close friend Breezy was being threatened, and Kayla felt compelled to guide her regarding what to say and how to respond to the threats. She believed this guidance would provide her assistance, as she is not as close to the threat and can be more level-headed and deescalate the threat. Yuki thought it is important to provide positive feedback, and to assist by being uplifting in his responses.

All report they believe the best way to respond to influence close friends is off-line and not within Facebook itself. This is consistent with how they continued to use Facebook with close friends and acquaintances. However, they saw little influence on acquaintances, as they do not know them well enough to provide proper guidance. Daisy noted, "most of the time these are people I am not close with, so whatever they're posting about I don't care about anymore. Like I said, I don't think violence is ever the answer, so these people's values and views don't align with mine. I don't care what those have posted on my newsfeed."

How do People Feel They Will Respond to Threats Posted in Facebook?

Getting a sense of how a person believed he or she would respond to a posted threat is also important in understanding how a response can have an effect on the person making the threat. The participants were asked a series of questions similar to how they have responded to threatening language to gauge how they feel they will respond to threatening language in Facebook. Two of the participants had not witnessed threatening language, and provided strong support for how they believe they will respond if they see threatening language. The difference between close friend and acquaintances continued to be evident in how the participants believe

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they would respond when threats are observed within Facebook. The data is consistent with how

important the relationship is between close friends and acquaintances when responding to threats

within Facebook. In addition, the data supported the participants' feelings of how they will

respond, which is off line and not via Facebook.

Friends

If threatening language was posted in Facebook by a close friend, the participants

believed they would respond off-line, typically via text messages or a personal phone call.

Ryleigh experienced a series of threatening posts from a person she is an acquaintance with on

Facebook. The threats were directed at another person, in their home town. Ryleigh has since

left and does not live close. During her high school years, she was very close to this person, but

has since drifted apart while attending college in a different state. This distance has changed the

relationship from friendship to acquaintance, but they have maintained contact via Facebook.

Ryleigh has not responded to the threats, but believes if she were in proximity to the friend she

would respond in a more personal manner: "I probably would have texted her, just make sure

things are okay, or even grab a coffee with her." She stated she does not know what is occurring

in her life that would instigate these statements; therefore she would not feel comfortable

responding. While in high school, Anthony stated how a friend posted threats of self-harm in

Facebook, and simultaneously texted him with identical threats.   The multiple methods of

contact regarding the threats raised the concern level for Anthony. Anthony reported he only

responded to the person via text messages and phone calls, not within Facebook. He continued

to say if presented with the same scenario today, he believes he would respond in the same

manner, as he thought his response provided a positive outcome to mitigate the threat. This data

was consistent with how responses to friends and acquaintances differ. Andrew pointed out "At

this point there's only a few close friends; if it was a close friend or maybe a family member, I would not respond through Facebook, I would call them or text them." This sentiment was evident with the responses by the majority of the participants, Wayne Royce felt;

It would depend on the situation and who's saying it, and, what my relationship is with that person or with those people. If it is a danger to somebody else, but I firmly believe in not just reading something of that nature and saying, 'it is going to take care of itself' and sitting back and ignoring the situation. I am a firm believer if there is something that I can do; I am going to do it. I am going to do it by doing what is best for the situation and most effective for the people and their safety.

The majority of the participants stated they can identify when a friend is in trouble, and can assist him or her when it does occur via the content of the posts he or she choose to put on the individuals Facebook wall. Half of the participant's state on rare occasions they feel it is appropriate to respond via Facebook, but if they choose this method, they would do so with the private message function. As they describe it is a more personalized method of response.

A number of the participants noted one reason for not responding to threats is the feeling that the person making the threats is seeking attention, and if a person responds he or she is providing the attention, thus reinforcing the negative behavior. This was supported by Wayne Royce in his statement: "I think they could either be giving the attention that person wants to achieve through this post. They could be at least instigating a response from other people. Some people's intentions I would also suspect would just want to appear out of concern, and that's their way of responding. This is different than my way of responding." Ryleigh also pointed out she believed they were "ranting and venting, just wanting that attention out there and getting people to say '*oh what's wrong,* let me text you and see what's going on.'" The majority of the

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participants stated they believe they would respond to threatening language if it is a serious

threat, such as if they saw, "I am going to kill someone," they believed they would respond no

matter their relationship status with the person who posted the threat. Four of the participants

acknowledged it is important to surround yourself on and off -line with people with whom you

are comfortable. Wayne Royce believed it is important to pick your friends wisely, both on and

off-line, as you will be less likely to experience concerning post within Facebook. He continued

to say, "a part of it is who a person chooses to surround themselves with both in person like in

everyday life, but also on social media. While I may be friends with people in real life and while

I may be friends with them in social media, there are things I choose to pay attention to and

things I choose not to pay attention to." It is important to note Wayne Royce was the one

participant who had not witnessed threatening language within Facebook, yet at the same time

had the largest number of Facebook friends at 1750.   Anthony stated he currently does not

respond to many Facebook posts that are deemed concerning; "But definitely when it is people I

feel comfortable reaching out to, I should be more vigilant reaching out." He shares he is

comfortable responding to close friends, but feels he wants to respond more broadly, including

friends and acquaintances when he sees concerning posts in Facebook.

Acquaintances

Consistent with the data related to threatening language, there was a difference in

responding to friends and acquaintances. The participants expressed an interest in responding to

acquaintances; however, they believe their responses are limited and will have little effect on

mitigating the threat. They cited a number of factors, as well as explanations for why they

thought it is better not to respond, including lack of understanding or context of the threat to

know if it is considered valid, and lack of ability to make personal contact with the person

making the threat outside Facebook. As pointed out by the participants, the majority of a

person's Facebook friends are composed of acquaintances, and this is the group identified as the

people who post the majority of the odd or threatening language. The participants cited they did

not feel comfortable responding to threatening language posted by acquaintances as they are not

sure why the person made statement, and are largely unable to ascertain if it is joke or if the

person is serious.

Because there was little or no context to understand where the post is coming from, it was

difficult to decipher which posts contained threatening language and which were meant to be

humorous. The majority of participants believed there are a large number of social media

postings that can be considered threats but were in reality meant to be humorous. Cory said;

> I know my roommate and I post online stuff like, "for finals tomorrow! If I jump off my
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> balcony you could have my closet" or something like that, and it is not serious at
>
> all. It is just that people are kind of desensitized to that; they do not think twice
>
> about it. So when people post like that, you don't know if it is real or fake.
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> Obviously for me it is fake, that's why I would not think anything of it, unless I
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> saw it or a person has shown signs of previous behavior that would suggest that
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> it's more serious.

To look beyond the humor or jokes, threats can be viewed as venting of frustrations as well.

Anthony reported; "You don't know whether they are just a dramatic girl or they are being

serious, and it's not like I can call every single person every single day. It is a shame when that

does happen." In addition, Anthony pointed out "I don't think most of time it's my place to start

calling people; of those 967 (Facebook) friends they are not my closest friends. Those people I

just know, I don't think they would appreciate me just calling them and telling them that they

shouldn't be talking about things. They would be like, 'I have not talked to you in two years, what you talking about?'"

There was a strong theme of how the participants feel acquaintances have close friends, and those close to the person making the threat should respond to him or her when he or she posts odd or threatening language. When asked if she would respond Liz stated, "No, I don't think I would, because if I saw other people step in, that knew them better, knew their situation better, and most likely were going to handle it." Andrew believes he would not respond to a threat by an acquaintance, because "I rarely respond any more to anything on Facebook. So I would have to see that and go 'Damn,' if I saw a threat on someone else's wall I would probably say, 'whoa that's crazy,' and move on." In addition, the participant thought responding on-line is not adequate to either friends or acquaintances, and does not have an effect on the person making the threat. Wayne Royce suggested "I don't believe responding electronically to any concerning situation like this would not be a wise idea nor would it be the most effective idea. So if I could not meet him face-to-face then it would be at least a voice conversation." All cited off-line and more personal contact is best when responding to threats. The reality with acquaintances is outside Facebook there is a real lack of ways to make personal contact. As Sarah pointed out, "If it's an acquaintance, I probably would not even have their phone number to text or call, and would probably respond as such."

Does He or She Feel They Will Respond the Same Way via Facebook as they will in Person?

As previously shown in other areas, it is evident from the data there was delineation between close friends and acquaintances, and the response to threatening language was typically limited to friends.   The data showed when threats are posted in Facebook, nearly all participants

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choose to respond in the most personalized manner available to them and not via Facebook. In addition, nearly all of the participants considered text messaging as a form of personal contact. Text messages were viewed as personal contact by the participants, and are included as a personal response in this research. The lack of personal contact is cited as one reason people choose not to respond. This is supported by Jared's statement:

>Text message would be to lower bounds of me reaching out. I would probably lean more toward just giving them a call. If there was something they posted on Facebook that was concerning, I would not even bring it up in the call. I would give them a call and say 'hey how are you doing?' 'We have not talked in a long time' 'what is going on in your life?' And not 'I just saw you post on Facebook…' Once again that plays into the level of relationship I had with him in the first place. If it were more of an acquaintance, and time of being acquainted with them and I knew they behaved the way that they would not post something, I probably would be much more of a text message. You know, even if it is really on the peripheral, I would feel weird, especially if it is somebody of the opposite sex because they could view that differently. Facebook is used to cross the line sometimes. I would maybe reach out to a friend of theirs, like maybe if I knew they had a friend that they were close with. Maybe this is something I should change about myself; if you are in trouble, say something, maybe like 'I am gonna call you, or text you, then we will talk.' Whereas if you are someone who is just posting downtrodden messages and statuses and don't actually talk to people.

When threats are posted in Facebook, it is viewed as if the person is waiving a "*red flag*." The term "*red flag*" was used by three of the participants to identify when a person was in crises;

this is signified by concerning or threatening posts in Facebook. Wayne Royce suggested that to

have a better understanding why red flags are waived, one will need to look into other posts in

Facebook and look at those posts for "*yellow flags*." *Yellow flags* are considered warning signs

that may have been missed, or other distressing post witnessed in Facebook and not picked up on

by people. The most efficient way to understand the red and yellow flags is to determine what

was occurring for the person making the threats, which was typically done via Facebook.

However, the participants believed Facebook was not the correct place to waive the red flags, nor

is it the place to respond when the red flag is waived.   As Anthony said;

> I think Facebook is a very lonely way to vent your feelings, and nobody is going to reach
> out to you, nobody is going to be posting on your comments 'no man your great I
> love you, you are fine, don't hurt yourself' it just does not happen. One-on-one
> you sit down and it makes you feel someone really cares about you. That is what
> I think is the biggest problem: people do not really spend enough time with each
> other, talking things out. Things just build up and that leads to certain things,
> when you have so many little things that happened, that you do not take care of
> over years and years and years because you choose to use social media to deal
> with those kinds of issues. Instead of using your friendships, using your family, it
> builds up for so long, and it could escalate to the events that have happened.

Have Publicized Acts of Violence Affected the Study Participants Understanding of Threats?

It is important to note some of the interviews occurred within days following the Oregon

mall shooting (December 2012) and Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting (December 2012).

The data gathered from the participants regarding the public acts of violence had two distinct

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linked areas. The first being how public acts of violence have affected the participants' response

or lack of response as it pertains to public acts of violence. The second being the link between

the public acts of violence and the impact on the participant, as they view threatening language

in Facebook.

All of the participants reported they have the Facebook app installed on their phone and

use it to log into Facebook more than one-time per day. The data indicated there is little

connection between these public types of violence and the participants' response to a Facebook

friend making threatening statements within Facebook. As stated earlier, most posts that are

viewed as threatening are responded to outside Facebook in a personal manner. In addition, the

responses are typically limited to close friends. The majority of the participants believed the

people they are associated with within Facebook are not capable of making such serious

threatening statements, and if for some reason they did make the statement, they would not act

on such violence. The majority also believes these acts of public violence are random, and

would not occur from any of the people they are associated with on or off-line. However, four of

the participants pointed out that responses by others could have a major impact on a person who

has threatened violence. This is consistent with the statements from the participants who

believed people close to a person making threats should respond and address the threatening

language. As an example, Yuki stated if the people close to James Holmes (accused in the 2012

Colorado theatre mass shooting) had responded to him, they could have "had a big impact to

prevent something like that happening." However, Yuki based his response to threatening

language on the relationship with the person making the threat. When asked if these acts of

violence have any effect on their personal response to threatening language posted by their

Facebook friends, the majority stated they do not. Anthony pointed out, "I guess it does not

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usually. I guess I can see those as rare cases, I mean I guess there are more and more all the time but they are still rare cases; There are millions and millions of people online, and the odds that there's going to be the one person that actually does act on it and come and shoot up where I am, or something like that, I do not see it being likely, so I do not think about it." The threat would need to be very blatant in order for the participants to respond either on or off-line. Eric minimized the threatening language, "I really do not see anything that points to any kind of shooting. Maybe if I saw some kind of status saying, 'I just want to kill people' I would freak out." As an example, the previously referenced post by Sean Lentz on his wall; prior to his account being removed from Facebook there were 910 comments on this status and 32 likes. Many of the posts were from people who went to his Facebook page after learning of the statement from the news and who were not friends of Lentz. Of Lentz's Facebook friends who did respond to his Facebook post, some were in support of him by saying it was a joke, others viewed it as a red flag, and he needed some type of professional assistance. The majority of those who responded to his threatening post were not Facebook friends with Lenz, and some of their posts consisted of threats of harm to Lenz and his family. In some cases, Lenz's Facebook friends would defend him in their Facebook response(s). As a note, Sean Lentz was arrested and charged with terrorism after this post and his home was searched for weapons. The police did find a number of weapons, ammunition, and drug paraphernalia in his home (The Inquisitr, 2012).

Beyond the responses to posts in Facebook, the participants identified how threatening language and public acts of violence had influenced their perceptions of threatening language. Overall, the participants did not indicate a connection between the publicized acts and the way they view threatening language when posted in Facebook. There are two themes identified as a

connection point between threatening language and publicized acts of violence. The first being

how these acts could inspire others to copy the violence that has occurred. The second being a

newer use of social media called an Internet meme. Current events and topics tend to be

perpetuated on Facebook by users sharing web links, and news stories via their Facebook walls.

Wayne Royce pointed out: "Whatever is currently going on in the world, yeah there's a spike in

conversations that happen on social media. With whatever's going on, whether it's the election,

whether it is today in the Connecticut shooting. Let's take today for example; I have already

seen a debate on gun laws and gun control, and even one on repealing the Bill of Rights. I think

most conversations are certainly shaped by social media nowadays." Four of the participants

stated they believe these public acts could influence others to carry out similar actions. Charlotte

Smith stated: "I think the odds are slim, for that to happen to me. I feel like a lot of people think,

'gosh, I can't go the grocery store,' kind of thing. I think the chances are pretty slim, but when

big things like that happen, it does go out and inspire other people to do it." Kadi said she did

not make a connection with these acts and threats until the interview, and points out how the

posts in Facebook can influence another person's actions:

> See, I have not really tied all that together; I have not thought that my post or any other
>
> persons would cause a person to go do that. That is a thought I have not really
>
> processed but now since you mentioned it, it could have. You have to think of it
>
> in a way, well what caused this person to go do this. Because in a way our actions
>
> do cause a lot in a person's life and sometimes when a person is mad, of course
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> you do not think about the long term effect of it; everything is short term, that
>
> moment, right now, that's what I am going to do. If I would have really thought
>
> about it, like I said, I would not have done that. Because I know I am better than

that and I could've handled it differently, but because of anger, frustration and anger, whatever the case may be, that is why I acted the way I did. I am not going to sit here and be like, 'oh I am sorry about this;' I do not take back any of the things I said to her I do not take those things back at all. Because you hurt me and not only did you hurt me but you hurt my entire family. You jeopardize the relationship between two families, over just a freaking post. That is irrelevant to anything that you have done. If something would have happened, God forbid, to her or to me, and police came across those. You already know what is going to happen because one of us is going be tied to something. We do not think about that when it comes to Facebook, when it comes to texting, or any of it, social things.

Kadi also said she feels a person who cyber-bullies another person could go on to perpetrate an act of violence.

I just think it is a discipline thing when it comes to bullying, cyberbullying, whatever type of bullying it is. Like to us, since I am African, we verbally cuss that person out, but personally we would just cuss them out, and that is just a part of my culture, and it a part of my values and what I was taught as a kid and what my parents were taught. Yeah, we may say, 'don't talk to them, blah blah blah,' in our language, but we would not go as far as the shootings; that is just too mainstream for us. That is where we are in a country that does do that, it makes us so scared, because wow, that is how those people, or that person handles it, and it is not right. That is the thing, you don't link all these little things together as far as the shootings because something triggered on the Connecticut shooting. What

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triggered him to go kill so many kids and adults? Was he bullied too? What was

happening on the web? Who pushed his buttons? Yeah it is sad, don't get me

wrong; he took away kids' lives, but who took away his life? Although he was

living, someone took away the life he was living. That is what I believe. Yeah, I

have no sympathy for him, but someone took away something called life, and he

thought he needed revenge for that and that is what I thought.

Kadi admitted she was cyberbullied, and states she would not do it to anyone else. At the time of

the interview, Kadi reported she is engaged in two different Facebook arguments, both of which

she has initiated and has threatened the other people in the process. Wayne Royce did not view

threatening language as having an impact on his personal behaviors, but does understand how the

posts that occur in Facebook can have an impact on other's responses and actions. "I don't think

it influences my decisions when reading posts and seeing people's behavior. I think I'm always

concerned when something arises, so my concern has not increased or deteriorated with recent

events or with current events that are happening. I think other people may, and I think it also

could come in spurts, people you know get more concerned and it falls off until the next thing.

Then it gets more concerning again, like a cycle."

As the participants were discussing the public acts of violence, the second theme that

emerged did not pertain to violence, but a newer form of viral information sharing, in the form of

the *Internet meme*. An *Internet meme* may be a picture, concept or image of a person or

character with a sarcastic saying on the picture, which has gone viral. Typically, the meme's are

done in a series, with different types of sayings. As an example, a recent series of an Internet

meme is a male drinking a beer from a glass; posted at the top of the picture is the statement:

"professor announces exam will be open book" at the bottom of the picture is the statement:

"time to buy the book" (quickmeme, n/d). The participants identified the meme's as humorous, as well as considering them threatening to a person's social status. Three of the participants addressed one particular series of meme's entitled "Bad Luck Brian." Bad Luck Brian is a series with various statements in which there is a White male dressed in a white collared shirt, and a red and black plaid sleeveless vest. An example of one Bad Luck Brian Meme's states, "Takes Benadryl" across the top, and "Dies from Allergic Reaction to Benadryl" across the bottom (quickmeme, n/d). Colton reported what he understands about Bad Luck Brian:

> I read this story about the boy named Brian. It was, like, his seventh-grade yearbook picture, a goofy looking kind of guy, I read the story of how his life is forever changed. He cannot go online without seeing that picture; he changed his name from Brian to Tray, which is his middle name, and I definitely think that is huge, the fact of you can't go anywhere without seeing this kind of stuff. Seeing this picture or, you know, it is all in fun, it is nothing to hurt him, it is just a picture that somebody found that just happens to be him and it is part of all the people's jokes. It is nothing because all they have is his first name and his picture, nothing is directed toward him but he still does not feel comfortable, and I cannot blame him. All of a sudden you log onto Facebook, and there is your picture. I can totally understand where he is coming from but I do not think I would be affected, but I am not in that situation.

Colton did not identify the Bad Luck Brian series as threatening to anyone individual person, but did identify how he can relate to anyone's picture being used for a meme. Sarah Kopp also addressed the series of memes with her statement: "He's now chosen a different name; I think it's Bad Luck Brian or something, and how it can be destroying for somebody's career or their

educational career, their friendships." The Bad Luck Brian memes were addressed by the three participants, and each added to the Internet lore of how the series started.

Essence of the Data

The electronic connection between this group of participants was viewed as a valuable connection. This is evident by the number of friends they maintained even though most were identified as acquaintances. This connection had the effect of providing a future benefit by maintaining the contact through electronic means. The number of Facebook friends was viewed as a status symbol, with a high number of Facebook friends elevating the person's status. Even when the participants identified a person using Facebook in a manner contrary to how, he or she perceives its use, the contact remained. The fear of someone using Facebook against him or her was identified as a true fear, as the negative information could have an effect on his or her social status.

When Facebook friends were engaged in an argument or fight, the participants stated they would lurk to see what was going on as a matter of curiosity, as long as they did not become involved in the Facebook drama. Many of the participants articulated that the use of Facebook does have an overall impact on the relationships between people. This was evident from two of the participants, and how they identified a more genuine connection to friends when they had taken a break from their use of Facebook. They believed the use of Facebook had a negative effect on personal interactions, as they acknowledged they would continue to check Facebook even when meeting face-to-face. Both went back to using Facebook even though they had deemed the use as problematic. No one stated he or she were willing to stop using the site, as the use of Facebook was seen as an opportunity to connect and communicate. The participants stated they did not check their Facebook account on a regular basis; however, all identified they

had the app on their phone and would check it multiple times a day. He or she would even check the app when spending personal time with others to see what was happening on Facebook.   How and when the participants posted status updates varied a great deal, with most stating he or she did not post that much status; however, in the interview most mentioned they did post statuses updates on a regular basis.

When the participants viewed threatening language, they were more likely to associate the person making the threat with mental illness or concerns if the threats were of self-harm. These types of threats were also viewed more as a cry for help than a threat of self-harm. In addition, they were unclear of ways to address or respond to the threatening language when the threats were seen as harm to self.   When the threats were outward or toward another person, the threats were more likely to be ignored when they came from acquaintances rather than from people identified as close friends. When the person making the threat was identified as a friend, the response to the threatening language was outside Facebook or outside the public's view, in the form of a personalized response.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Through this study, the researcher looked at how people use Facebook as a communication tool and how he or she responds or believes they would respond when exposed to threatening language in Facebook.

Meaning of Emergent Themes

The categorization of friends and acquaintances was pronounced throughout the study, and was infused into all aspects of how the participants used Facebook, viewed threatening language, and responded to the posted language. At the onset of the study, when the participants were asked about their Facebook friends, there was not a difference between friends and acquaintances; however, a short time into the study the participant's delineated between the two groups. Facebook was identified as a communication tool by all of the participants; however, all identified personal means of communication as the preferred method of communicating with friends, not Facebook. Facebook was used more frequently for communication with acquaintances than with friends; this communication was short, and tended to be limited to status updates and wall posts. When a friend posted threatening language, the participant was much more apt to respond to the post, but not in Facebook. This knowledge can be useful in the threat assessment process, and the ability to use information from people associated with a person making threats. Identifying, who is considered a friend can save time and resources when addressing threatening language.

Social status has been identified as the largest fear of threats via Facebook. The participants shared that feared how rapidly images and information can go viral on Facebook; with the large number of people associated with each person, and their Facebook friends, the lowering of one's social status can occur very swiftly. The use of Internet meme's such as Bad Luck Brian addressed how the participants viewed the viral effect of threats and fears of the

Facebook and the Internet in general. Three of the participants cited how an old high school

picture of a person named Brain was used for this series of meme's and believed it could happen

to anyone.

In addition to the threats to social status, threats were viewed on a continuum, with

threats to harm others identified as on the lower bounds of a threat, and the most prevalent

threats. These threats were identified as individuals posting threats to hit or fight another person.

The participants said they have become desensitized to this type of threat, as it occurs so much

on the Internet they dismiss it more than take it seriously. Threats to self were generally not

viewed as a threat, but more of a cry for help, or waiving the red flag. This was the one type of

threat that the participants were willing to reach out for assistance to deal with. This type of

information is helpful for mental health professionals to know and educate others on warning

signs, and to provide tips for dealing with depression and talk of self-harm. The threats that were

viewed as the most serious were threats to kill another person. This was also identified as threats

that would most likely be dismissed, as the participants believed their group of Facebook friends

would not engage in such talk. The participants had the belief that threats are things that happen

among other people and not within their group of friends. They could not identify what type of

person would broadcast such threats, but it would not be associated with his or her friends.

Literature Related to the Use of Facebook.

People are utilizing social network websites in large numbers, according to a recent study

conducted by the Pew Research Center "61% of 14–17 year olds use social network sites"

(Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228). Pempek et. al. highlight the number of

college students using SNSs is almost universal. The average student uses an SNS an average of

10-30 minutes per day (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228). They are using the

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sites for communication of all types, including assistance with school, looking for jobs, keeping

current with trends and, pop culture, and remaining connected with family, and friends.

Addressing personal information posted on the SNSs by young adults is imperative in

understanding how and why young adults connect and communicate via the Internet. Williams

and Merten conducted a study that included profiles by young adults on social network sites. In

the study they identify technological advances such as blogs as "updateable public records of

private thoughts" (Williams & Merten, p. 253). They also stated, "the process of blogging

involves individuals voluntarily posting information about themselves: personal thoughts,

feelings, beliefs, activities in a public arena, with unlimited access for anyone with an Internet

connection" (Williams & Merten, p. 254). The need to post information and share personal

thoughts and ideas seems to fit with identity formation, and may be necessary as a part of natural

growth and development. As Williams and Merten highlight, a natural part of identity formation

for adolescents is done through mood swings, and conflict with peers and parents; some of the

adolescents who feel they have lost their voice can find it via journal writing, and online posting

such as SNS. Some of the posts can be viewed as concerning but is a natural part of identity

development (p. 257)

There are Facebook pages for individuals as well as groups, including social, cultural,

and businesses. The goal of these pages is to connect people to the messages that are meant to be

shared. The participants described their use of Facebook as a means to communicate with

others, including family, friends, and acquaintances. Even though users described their use of

Facebook as a communication tool, the use is in line with Facebook's mission to *connect*,

through this connection reaches further than the accepted Facebook friends and acquaintances.

This aligns with research completed by Boyd, which states: "While it is common to face

strangers in public life, our eyes provide a good sense of who can overhear our expressions. In

mediated publics, not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability

introduce audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created" (Boyd

D. , 2007, pp. 2-3). One of the most common activities in Facebook was the trolling of the user's

news feed, which can move to lurking. Trolling involves looking at pictures and, reading the

latest status updates from other users that appear in the newsfeed. If something is interesting for

the user, they may go to that Facebook friend's page and view other posts or read other

information posted on the person's wall. Many times, the participants went to the other person's

page to lurk. The identified lurking by the study participants supports the literature: "A 2008

study reported that as many as 90% of a large online social network activity involved lurkers"

(Pei-Luen, Qin, & Yinan, 2008, p. 2759). They may "like" or make a comment on the post(s)

(picture, status update, quote, etc…) as a way to remain connected and understand what is

occurring in a person's life. If the people do meet again in a face-to-face setting, the Facebook

posts can serve as conversation points.

There tends to be minimal substantive communication within Facebook as it mainly

consists of wall posts comments on status updates or pictures or one way communication within

Facebook. This one way communication is in the form of status updates but is not truly viewed

as communication. If the person is someone the participant interacts with on a regular basis *off-*

line, and identifies him or her as a "*friend*," the use of Facebook was more of a connection tool.

The study participant's identified how important it is to be connected via Facebook with friends

and family. With identified friends communication occurs in more personalized manners such as

texts, phone calls, and face-to-face interactions. Text messaging was the number one method of

personal communication with friends. Within Facebook, the communication with friends tends

to occur more with the private message function than via the Facebook wall post.

Facebook was identified as an important method of connecting individuals to each other

as well as connecting individuals to groups with similar interests. Users of Facebook described

their use as personal, professional, and for academic pursuits. Most of the participants

established a Facebook account to add close friends and family to their list of connections

electronically. They expand their group outward to include acquaintances to their connection of

Facebook friends. These acquaintances can be friends from the past, such as close friends from

childhood with whom the person has lost contact. Many times when a person meets new people

in a social setting, he or she is added to the list of Facebook friends but remain labeled as

"acquaintances." A large number of Facebook friends are viewed as a positive attribute, as it

increases the amount of social connections and builds social capital. This supports other

research regarding the number of Facebook friends: "Hence, it should not be surprising that

young adults report that having a presence on sites such as Facebook connects them to a social

network, and being visible within a social network is perceived to be an important aspect of

popularity" (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 342). This type of use is consistent

with social capital theory and how relationships can be mutually beneficial providing support

and assistance to the people connected. When a person has a large number of Facebook friends,

many are seldom communicated with; they are simply linked in an electronic manner and

maintained in case the connection becomes a benefit. This is evident by the connection to

acquaintances via Facebook. Most articulate they have a small number of Facebook friends they

identify as friends in their daily lives. Even though a person does not communicate on a regular

basis with a person, the person continues to be connected via Facebook. The individuals see the

connection as beneficial or have maintained this link for a long time and do not wish to end the association. When Facebook was used as a tool to communicate, the use increased as it pertained to acquaintances. The majority of communication with close friends is more personalized, such as face-to-face, text, and phone conversations, and even Twitter; much of the communication with acquaintances was limited to Facebook.

There was a large amount of information shared in Facebook pertaining to threatening language; however, it was up to the user to define what was considered threatening language in Facebook and how to respond to the person who posted the threats. Because Facebook users had such a varied use of Facebook, and threatening language was so prevalent and associated with depression that can be expressed through Facebook posts, the reader must cypher out what is serious and what is venting via Facebook. How the participants reported they view threatening language is consistent with literature related to threats to self:

It is possible that students experiencing depressive symptoms place greater investment in social networking sites as a communication outlet, as it could be viewed as a safe and indirect outlet for emotions. Second, references to depression were more commonly displayed on Facebook profiles in which a response by another Facebook user was generated. This suggests that those who receive reinforcement to a depression disclosure from their online friends may be more likely to discuss their depressive symptoms publicly on Facebook. From another perspective, this also suggests that depression disclosures on Facebook often elicit responses from peers who view these references" (Moreno, et al., 2011, p. 453).

It is important to respond in some manner to language deemed threatening. The responses can have an impact on the person making the threat, and may prevent the threats from escalating from words to action.

One area that was inconsistent with the literature is related to the reported number of times the participants log in/check the site, and how many times they physically logged in/check the site. The majority report they logged in/checked it one or two times a day, and were only in the site for short amounts of time. However, all indicated they have the Facebook app installed on their phone, and referred to checking it multiple times a day, such as after class or work. Literature indicates most teens spend more time looking at Facebook: The average student uses an SNS an average of 10-30 minutes per day (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228).

Literature Related to Threatening Language in Facebook

Rosenblum states unless one uses emoticons (representation of a facial expression to express emotions via computer mediated communications using punctuation marks and letters) the tone and control of language is lost. Even then the message is still left up to the person receiving the message, and what is said is permanent. The use of the Internet currently serves as a point of broadcasting such threats (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 45).

The study participants reported how and what is shared in Facebook continues to develop, including pictures status updates, and current events. The study participants tended to share exciting events via status updates, pictures, and stories, as a way to broadcast what is occurring in his or her life to their Facebook friends. Pictures were not directly included in the definition of threatening language, but are viewed as secondary, and support written threats. When pictures are associated with threatening language, they are mostly associated with blackmail, and are contextualized as a way of threatening or as a way to lessen one's social

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status. Threatening language was identified as being prevalent in Facebook and other social media that it is typically dismissed.

Threatening language was largely identified as an outward direction of threats to another person or group of people. The study participants do not commonly associate threats to self as threatening language. When threats of self-harm are received, they are typically associated with mental illness, and people will use small bits of information to make assumptions about the person's mental state of mind. How the study participants perceived threatening language was dependent on the relationship with the person posting the threat. If the person posting the threatening language was a close friend, the perception of threatening language was lessened. This was explained by showing how people feel they have a connection with the person making the threats, and how they did not believe a friend would post threatening language. In addition, when they were considered friends, the threats were more veiled and were better rationalized by both the person making and receiving the threat. If the person posting threatening language was deemed an acquaintance, the threats tended to be dismissed. The person who was reading the threat tended to rationalize it by assuming the person was venting frustrations, or they conclude the person suffers from some sort of mental health problems, including depression.

Even though threats tended to be viewed as a physical act, the use of Facebook and social media has changed the focus of the threats from physical harm to emotional harm. This is different from how threats were viewed by the literature: "Violence is usually directed toward someone who becomes the victim. Victims of violence are also known as targets. Targets may be an individual person, groups of people, or physical property, such as cars, buildings, or computers… There are a number of different categories of targets that are differentiated by how they were selected as a target and how they are impacted by the violence" (Axelrod, 2009, p. 34).

Included in the personal definition of threats is the use of profanity and aggressive language. At times threatening language was confused with aggressive language, especially when profanity was included. Most study participants considered the aggressive language is laced with profanity as threatening. This is consistent in literature related to threatening language:

"Those studying and assessing threatening behavior have linked angry, insulting, and pejorative language (Milburn and Watman, 1981), language describing violent behaviors and weapons (Turner and Gelles, 2003), and profanity (Davis, 1997) with threatening language, offering a heightened sense of violence and anger within the genre. For example, in workplace violence threats, it is stated that 'almost all of those persons who do commit acts of violence use profanity and other offensive language – before, during, and after the act – to describe or discuss both the victim and the violence itself" (Davis, 1997: xiii) (Gales, 2011, p. 28). When the language did not include threats of harm, but included profanity and aggressive language, such as belittling someone or other demeaning terms, this was interpreted as threats to the person's social status. In addition, the term "cyberbullying" was associated with threatening language, but is not directly related. Threatening language was seen as a part of cyberbullying; however, they can be very different. Threats were viewed as short-term, focused, clearly directed at a person or group of people, and stated by an identified person. Threats of harm to others are usually centered on a conflict between a person and or a group of people, and have an identified person associated with the threats and an identified starting point. In contrast, cyberbullying can be ongoing, and is generally anonymous. Many times, the person being cyberbullied cannot identify why he or she is being bullied. Cyberbullying can happen to anyone, but it is generally associated with younger people, where threats of harm can occur to people of any age. With threatening language, people fear attack to their social status and being humiliated in front of their Facebook

friends. Threatening language in Facebook includes a form of public humiliation and lessening

of a person's social status. This area supports the work of Christofieds, Muise, and Desmarais,in

addressing the importance of information disclosure and Facebook Friends:

> Popularity and disclosure thus become inextricably linked. Zhao et al. explored identity
>
> construction in what they call "nonymous" environments and found that in
>
> environments such as Facebook, where people are linked with their offline
>
> identities, individuals show rather than tell others about themselves. In this way,
>
> identity is constructed by sharing information such as pictures and interests. From
>
> this perspective, identity is not an individual characteristic but a social product
>
> created not only by what you share, but also by what others share and say about
>
> you. Disclosure thereby becomes an aspect of identity construction, and that
>
> construction is linked with popularity: the people who are most popular are those
>
> whose identity construction is most actively participated in by others.
>
> (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 343).

The use of Facebook to promulgate the threatening language raises the concern level for people,

as these types of threats are more likely to occur than a physical attack. This could be because

what is posted in Facebook can be viewed by a large audience; this can be humiliating, and can

be done semi-anonymously. Even when threatening language was posted in Facebook, the

person making the threat was usually known to the person, and yet the use of the computer can

provide a sense of anonymity. With this sense of anonymity, people believed they are freer to

post language that can be considered threatening, as they do not receive any feedback from the

person he or she is threatening. The participants felt more apt to post a threat on Facebook than

to say it to a person in a personal interaction. When posted this way, he or she does not receive

immediate response from the person as he or she would in a face-to-face setting. The perception of anonymity tended to play a large role in threatening language, as there were no verbal cues to read or understand when the language is not accepted or wanted. Users of Facebook tend to post what they are feeling, whether it be excitement, frustration or mundane information. As it pertains to threatening language, they may post without thinking about the consequences. This is supported in the literature related to deindividuation and anonymity in an online environment. There is a "tendency to react to situations quickly without considering all the consequences and to give little thought to the way others might view the behavior, all of which tends to give rise to impulsive and unrestrained behavior" (Williams K. S., 2005-2006, p. 691). The threats to social status were identified as a concern of Facebook users. An example of threats to social status on the Internet is *Bad Luck Brian*. This meme was addressed by the study participants while discussing public acts of violence; however, the participants shared how it is a true fear, and how the Internet can very quickly be used to lower one's social status. The knowledge of how *Bad Luck Brian's* picture quickly went viral on the Internet points out how quickly this type of threat to one's social status can spread and impact an individual.

Political discourse and affiliation was identified as one of the largest catalysts for posting threatening language. This may be attributed to the timing of the study and the 2012 political election. As with many elections, political ads were prevalent and strong emotional reactions to the candidates' and their ideologies were expressed through the use of Facebook. Facebook is a tool in which people can share their ideas and thoughts about political issues and affiliation to a large group of people. Many of the participants stated he or she would unfollow or unfriend a person based on the number and content of his or her posts, especially when the posts were related to political topics. Facebook and social media were identified by many of the study

participants as a very important use of spreading political ideas and thoughts, unlike any time in the past. People can share their political beliefs and viewpoints through status updates, pictures, "liking" a candidate via Facebook or posting pictures for a ballot initiative. The political ideologies run deep within people, and when others share contrary ideas or thoughts, it opens up the opportunity to respond. Political beliefs are identified as very personal, and many become passionate about what they hold as their own beliefs and were identified as one of the main prompts for threatening language being posted in Facebook. In addition, the study participants identified political-based threatening language has redefined the target of the threat. When the threatening language posted in Facebook was politically motivated, the threatening language was directed at the political party or ideology and not necessarily the individual person. Not only were the threats to affiliation in a specific party but also to the person's political view such as liberal, conservative, etc…. The most controversial issues in the election were identified as gay marriage and gun control; these two areas elicited the most threatening language, from the users Facebook friends.

The study participants also identified other reasons for threatening language in Facebook, including mental health concerns and change in relationships. Mental health concerns tended to be viewed by the study participants as a rational explanation as to why a person would post threatening language, as well provide a reason to dismiss the threatening language. They may be dismissed because the person is depressed or it is believed the person suffers from other mental health issues. Even though the number one trigger point was identified as political affiliation, the mental health concerns were woven into the explanation of the majority of the posted threatening language. Many made the assumption that those who post threatening language are mentally ill. This was especially true when the posted threat is viewed as self-harm; the person

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reading the threat is much more likely to seek out authorities for guidance or assistance. Harm to self was stereotypically associated with mental illness; specifically, the participants who saw others post threats to harm themselves are viewed as depressed or suffering from some form of mental illness. When people witnessed threats of harm to self, they were more likely to seek out assistance from others, as they were unsure how respond or what services was available to the person making the threatening comment. This is congruent with literature related to the disclosure of mental illness and the use of Facebook: "Although 30% of college students report that in the last 12 months they have felt so depressed that it was difficult to function, only 10% of college students report having sought care and been diagnosed with depression.[3] Concerns about the stigma related to mental illness are also associated with less perceived need for help and decreased treatment-seeking behavior within this population.[18] Other barriers to help seeking include lack of knowledge about available services and privacy concerns.[1]" (Moreno, et al., 2011, p. 448). In addition, threats of harm had a negative stigma associated with the threat, where a threat to others did not. Users who witnessed threats of self-harm tended to make the assumption the person was depressed to the point of taking his or her own lives. It was puzzling to see how a person can be so depressed while posting the threats within Facebook for anyone with access to the Internet to see. Threats to harm others tended to be associated with anger and frustration toward another person. The prevalence of threats of self-harm has continued to increase to a point where Facebook has dedicated an internal Facebook page of resources and links to assist the people in linking the person to proper resources. This page contains methods for reporting the threat to Facebook as well as web links to other pages for suicide prevention.

A change in one's relationship status, such as a break up with a partner, was associated with depression, and tends to be intertwined with mental health concerns. The connections via Facebook were not limited to the people in a relationship; many times when people were dating, they became Facebook friends with their partner's friends as well. If the relationship ends on bad terms, the Facebook friends have to choose a side. This choosing of sides would cause hard feelings and threats could be posted from any number of the Facebook friends. This is supported in research related to unfriending in Facebook: "being unfriended by someone an individual is typically closer with, which we classified here as family members and current or former friends or romantic partners, was associated with greater rumination than being unfriended by more distant Facebook friends, such as co-workers and acquaintances. On Facebook, negative acts such as unfriending by those in closer relationships appear to carry more cognitive weight than that of more peripheral Facebook friends, despite them both having similar access to the information on a user's profile (i.e., 'leveling' the online relationship playing field)" (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012, p. 1462). This was one area where threats of harm were seen both toward self as well as toward others. One possible reason for the threats to be posted is in relation to a break up is the people know each other so well, and when they end the relationship, they lash out toward the other person.

Literature Related to Taking Threatening Language Seriously

"The most significant concerns were how to identify serious threats and how to respond to them. Principals from elementary, middle, and high schools expressed concern that there were no guidelines for evaluating student threats, and said that they relied on intuition in making decisions about the seriousness of a student's risk for violence. The school psychologists

expressed concern that they had little training in how to conduct psychological evaluations of students who made threats of violence" (Cornell, et al., 2004, p. 527).

Threatening language that was observed by the study participants was not always taken seriously. As stated previously, much of the threatening language was dismissed by the participants, partially because of the sheer volume of threats posted online, which subsequently de-sensitizes people to such language. Third party responses to threats played a role in minimizing or deterring the threat; however, the impact of this response was based on the relationship between the two. The relationship also played a role in determining if the language were perceived as threatening as well as if a response was warranted. If the two are acquaintances, usually there is little or no response to the threats. As it related to acquaintances, there is a difference between online responses and face-to-face responses. A reason cited for the lack of response to acquaintances is geographical differences, such as not living in proximity of the person. Personalized responses were the preferred method in responding to threatening language. If the person making the threat does not live close enough to interact in a personalized manner, it was viewed as ineffective to respond, as the person does not have context or understanding of why the threatening language was originally posted.

Because they are acquaintances in face-to-face settings as well as online, there was little contact or communication between the users, thus there was not an opportunity to engage in face-to-face interactions. The connection for a Facebook acquaintance was merely an electronic connection, and typically is used if there is some type of benefit to act on the connection. In addition, many acquaintances did not maintain regular contact outside Facebook. Facebook was not a preferred method of communication, thus acquaintances choose not to respond to threats posted within Facebook. The second cited reason was people do not wish to become involved in

any type of action related to the threat. The participants believed the person should have close friends who respond to the threats; those close friends should play a large role in addressing the person and the posted threat. This was supported in research on bullying, as "some children will intervene if a friend is being bullied (even if it means risking becoming a target), but those who are not friends or who are deemed to have deserved it will not be helped" (Entenman, Muren, & Hendricks, p. 335).

It was uncommon for people to remove others from the Facebook friends list; the usual response to continual annoying posts or threatening language was to hide the person's post or unsubscribe from the person's feed. Removing a person from a Facebook friend list connotes a feeling of finality and can have negative feelings associated. This is consistent with other research on reasons for unfriending: "ruminative and negative emotional responses were greatest when individuals perceived that they were unfriended for Facebook-related reasons. This reason was a combination of Sibona and Walczak's (2011) posting on Facebook too frequently, posting about polarizing topics, and making crude comments due to low cell sizes" (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012, p. 1463). As a side note, in 2011 Facebook added the setting of *acquaintances* to the Facebook friend list. If the user enabled this privacy setting, each of the user's Facebook friends will be limited to what can be seen on the person's Facebook page. This setting allows only major events to come through to the persons news feed, which may not permit a threat to be observed in the user's Facebook wall. It is not common for people to utilize this setting, as it must be done for each individual Facebook friend. In this study, only two of the 16 people had filtered their friend lists in this manner. This filtering or adjusting of security settings within Facebook is consistent with research on use of Facebook: "only 13 percent of the Facebook profiles at Michigan State University were restricted to ''friends only.'' Also, the category

"friend" is very broad and ambiguous in the online world; it may include anyone from an intimate friend to a casual acquaintance or a complete stranger of whom only their online identity is known. Though Jones and Soltren (2005) found that two-thirds of the surveyed users never befriend strangers, their finding also implies that one-third is willing to accept unknown people as friends" (Bernhard, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009, p. 87). Most would adjust the Facebook friend's status in his or her list of Facebook friends when the person continues to post annoying information. This adjustment would be to hide the person's posts but not remove him or her from their list of Facebook friends. The decision to remove or hide has a great deal to do with the relationship between the users. The closer friends they were, the less likely they were to be removed from the Facebook friends, as the person did not want to insult or address the reason for the removal. If threats were viewed in Facebook, most were not likely to remove the person from the friends list, as he or she do not want to lose the access to additional information from the person posting the threat.

If the people were close friends, the person who witnessed the threat was more likely to respond to the threatening language; however, the response was less likely to be within Facebook. The users thought Facebook is impersonal, and not the preferred method of communication with friends. Outside face-to-face interaction, text messaging was identified as the preferred method of communication. The relationship between the people plays a factor on the influence to the person making the threat; the closer the relationship, the larger the influence on the person. There was a marked difference between online responses and face-to-face responses as it pertains to threatening language. There was minimal online response, and if the response were online, it was done in a private manner, such as the message function within Facebook. The individualized responses were directed at why the person made the statement,

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and offering support to the person; the most popular manner continues to be text messaging. Once a text message was sent, if the two people are close enough to meet, the text exchange tends to be followed up with a face-to-face meeting, again to offer support and understand why the threat occurred. If the two were not close enough for an in person meeting, the text messaging can continue, and may be followed up with a Skype (Internet video call) or phone call. The way the study participants reported they had responded to threatening language and the way the participants believed they would respond were consistent. The way people thought they will respond to threats would be personalized to friends, and little, or no response to acquaintances. There was little connection to large-scale acts of violence, as the participants do not see this type of occurrence in their lives. However, people associated with threat assessment were concerned with threats posted in Facebook, as this could be an indicator of some form of violence. Facebook is a fertile area to gather information related to the person making a threat, including information on the targets of the threats. Research indicates there is a link between publicized acts of violence and advanced notice of acting on the suggested violence. In most cases, people who carry out large-scale acts of violence provide some type of warning prior to acting. This warning can come in the form of journal writing, conversation, or more recently social media posts. This area was surprising, as the researcher felt there would be a larger connection to acts of violence, especially as the research was being conducted while information regarding Sandy Hook was being shared on the Internet and Facebook.

Literature Related to Public Acts of Violence

Following recent mass or public violence, articles cite activity on the suspected person's Facebook page as a possible reason, motive, or warning. "Without intervention, practicing efforts can escalate from fantasy to violence against property to harassment or deadly force. When

practicing behaviors are noticed, protectors (people who observe the threats) must work to create barriers to further escalation" (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, & Bollinger, 2001, p. 71).

As indicated by the study participants, there was little connection between a person who views a Facebook post containing threatening language, and the belief the person will follow through with a threat to the magnitude of school or public place shootings. As pointed out in a recent article regarding school shootings there were: "approximately 120 known but thwarted plots against schools between 2000 and 2010. The list is not comprehensive and many incidents likely went unreported" (Goldman, 2012, p. 1). The key statement is how many reports may have gone unreported. This is consistent with how the study participants did not want to become involved in a perceived incident, as well as how they did not engage authorities when they witnessed threatening language. The study participants witnessed threats of harm, such as the desire to engage in a physical altercation with another person, or wanting to harm themselves, but not threats directed to kill a large number of people. The threatening language posted in Facebook is viewed on a continuum, with all of the threats viewed by these study participants being on the lower end of this continuum. The way threatening language is viewed, such as threats to harm someone physically, e.g., hitting or fighting, is on the lower bounds of the continuum and is not perceived by the participants as overly concerning. Threats to harm themselves are viewed as more in the middle, and are more disturbing. The study participants did not feel confident and were unsure how to respond to these types to threats. Finally, threats to kill someone are perceived as the most serious of the threats, which is confusing in response and perception. This is supported with other research pertaining to threat assessment and how to assess the severity of the language. Administrators are faced with the same type of question when threatening language is viewed: "The particular challenge that schools face in trying to

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prevent targeted violence in school is to assess the nature and degree of risk posed by a student who has come to official attention because of some threatening communication or behavior of concern. The question is not whether the student might be at increased risk for engaging in some form of aggressive behavior during adolescence, but rather whether he or she currently poses a substantial risk of harm to another identified or identifiable person(s) at school" (Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekul, Fein, & Modzeleski, 2001, p. 160). No participant reported to have witnessed such serious threats to others, such as a threat to kill another person. If they did see such a post, they would likely dismiss it on the grounds that do not believe their friends would be capable of following through with such a statement. Thus, when threats of harm are witnessed, there is not a connection between the threats witnessed in Facebook and large acts of violence. No matter how minor the threat, most people do not take posted threats seriously. It was difficult to connect directly large-scale publicized acts of violence and threatening language within Facebook.

There are two loosely connected areas that affected the group when the public acts of violence occur. The first occurred when a person does carry out large-scale acts of violence, as the desire grows to gather more information about the person carrying out the act of violence from Facebook. When a person was in the news for a public shooting or serious incident, there was a tendency to search the Internet with a focus on Facebook for information about the person and the incident. A Facebook page can display a large amount of information about a person. Facebook was used as a way of gathering information about people, as a person's Facebook page tells a story about the user. This is similar to when Facebook friends view posted threatening language among acquaintances to their Facebook friends. As an example, when threatening language was viewed on a Facebook wall, there was a tendency for people to go to the person's

Facebook page to seek out more information, such as motive or other details about the conflict, even if the people were not associated in any way. People tended to be curious, and had a desire to know why the conflict or threatening language occurred.

Friend's responses to someone making threatening statements can mitigate the threat; the closer one is to the person the more the impact his or her response will have on the person making the threat. In cases, in which there was a threat of harm to others, authorities were not commonly involved, as the person feels he or she can address the issue individually. When the posted threat was self-harm, people are more apt to reach out to others for some type of assistance. People are using Facebook at a rapid pace, and are posting all types of information on their personal Facebook page. Facebook has an expansive base of individual users, companies, groups, and organizations. With this increase in use, Facebook is described by the participants as more mainstream than other social networks, and the amount of information posted in Facebook is perceived as overwhelming. With the popularity and rising use of Facebook, other sites have attempted to capitalize on Facebook's success. Some of the more popular sites include *Twitter, Instagram*, and *tumblr*, all of which have increased their use and membership in recent years. tumblr is designed as a hybrid social network site and blog (a blog is considered an online diary). The nature of tumblr allows for the sharing of personal information, such as one would share with a diary; however, this diary is open with the potential for the entire Internet to see. tumblr is identified as a site where high occurrences of threats are observed, including threats of self-harm.

Facebook is a tool that continues to grow and allow for people to connect and communicate via the social network. The information shared in Facebook is permanent, and can provide a great deal of information about a person and the individual's state of mind at different

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times. Facebook can let others know when a person is happy and willing to share exciting news with his or her Facebook friends, as well as let others know when the person is in conflict with someone. It all depends on how and what is posted within Facebook itself. A person who is a heavy user of Facebook will post status updates and information on a regular basis. This is evident in research regarding how much information is shared in the site: "General tendency to disclose and need for popularity were the only significant predictors of information disclosure on Facebook. In contrast, information control was negatively predicted by general tendency to disclose and by trust and self-esteem. In addition, participants reported being significantly more likely to disclose information on Facebook than they were in face-to-face conversations. Together, these findings suggest that there is something different about the ways in which people act when interacting in the Facebook environment as compared to other means communication" (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 343). When they are upset, perceived threatening language may be posted and viewed by others. This threatening language needs to be investigated for validity and credibility of the threat; this investigation can be conducted by a trained professional such as an administrator, police officer or mental health provider, or may be conducted by other Facebook friends by simply responding to the post. Most threats of violence do not escalate to the level of school or workplace violence; however, it is not known what a credible threat of harm is and what is merely the idle venting of frustrations. It is important to respond to the person making a threat to assist in defusing the situation. Seeing how threats posted in Facebook are threats of violence, it is important to alert others when threatening language is viewed to assess for credibility, and respond in a way to alert others who may play a role in intervening or stopping the action associated with the threat. The public acts of violence mentioned within this study were planned, and the men who carried these acts out did provide

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some type of warning signs prior to acting. They were *everyday* people, and not on any police or school watch list. This is evidence for how posted threats can move from perceived venting of frustration to a life altering situation very rapidly. Thus there is a need to alert others when a there is a concern due to threatening language, and to respond to the person posting the concerning language.

Discussion

The participants in this study shared their experiences regarding the use of Facebook and how they have viewed threatening language. Many of the participants came into the interviews with minimal acknowledgment of threatening language, as they did not view it as serious, and believed they had not witnessed this type of language. As the interviews progressed, the researcher was surprised by the openness and candid information that was shared by the participants. The study participants were willing to share, in vivid detail, information regarding their experiences with threatening language, including how they had posted threats all the way to how they have responded or not responded when they witnessed threatening language. Three interviews in particular stood out with the amount of personal information shared. The first was Kadi and her willingness to share how she was currently engaged in Facebook arguments with two other people, as well as how she had made threats to her Facebook friends in the past. The second being Leah, and her sharing a deeply personal story of two close friends who committed suicide, after being harassed and threatened. Finally, Colton shared his personal experience with being harassed by an ex-girlfriend via Facebook. All of the participants were forthcoming and willing to provide private information germane to this research. The openness of sharing information is consistent with other literature related to how much personal information people

disclose on Facebook. However, the amount of information shared by this group of study participants in the interviews was in a face-to-face setting and was unexpected.

There were two predominant themes related to threats, which were not expected. The first identified area is how threats to social status were identified as valid fears for the users of Facebook. It was the assumption going into this research that threats of physical harm to self or others would be a concern of this group. When the threat to social status emerged, it was viewed as ironic, as Facebook is a tool to build social capital, and maintain connections, and yet at the same time is the mechanism to spread threatening language. The other identified threat to social status that emerged was the identification of the Bad Luck Brian Internet meme. It was not the meme itself, but rather the notion of how quickly something could go viral on the Internet. The participants were fearful of their personal information going viral on the Internet, and how this could damage their social status. In addition to threats to social status, threats of harm to self were not identified as threats. The participants viewed threats of harm to self as a cry for help and not a threat. Threats of harm to self only emerged and were identified as the individual interviews progressed. The interview with Sara Kopp stands out as an example of this, as she identified how a close friend repeatedly posted significant threats to harm himself, though she did not identify these as threats until well into the interview. Threats of harm to self are associated with a negative stigma and may be viewed as a cry for help but not a threat. This is an area which can be of assistance administrators to assist bystanders in referring people who disclose signs of depression to appropriate resources.

It was equally surprising at how large of a gap there is between *friends* and *acquaintances*. Over all, there was not a delineation between friends and acquaintances; however, when it pertained to responding to threatening language, nearly all participants

provided a clear and logical divide, as well as reasons for not responding to acquaintances when threatening language was posted. The participants quickly identified the friends with whom they interact on and off-line. As it pertains to threatening language, there was a greater sense of control when responding to friends. They did not believe he or she had the same control with acquaintances and thought the responses would not have an impact on the person making the threat. In the threat assessment process, it is important to gather information as quickly as possible about the person of concern from all areas, including Facebook. Understanding who is a friend on and off-line and who is an acquaintances can be an important understanding of the threat assessment process, and can assist providing adequate response to address a potential credible threat.

When this research idea began, this study was to identify if there was a connection between threatening language posted in Facebook and large-scale acts of violence. The premise was to see if users of Facebook drew a conclusion there was a connection to threats posted in Facebook and public acts of violence. Literature associated with public acts of violence pointed out there is prior warning via journals and possibly other warning sign before the person carries out the violence. The researcher had the idea to see if people are using electronic means, specifically Facebook, to post the threats and if so are they taken seriously by other Facebook friends. In the middle of collecting data, two large acts of public violence occurred and the participants made little connection to the incidents. Most people assume they are not associated with people who can perpetrate such violence. Much of the research indicates there is prior warning given or testing boundaries before an act of violence occurs. However, as this research indicates, there is a large gap in how people respond to friends and acquaintances when they post threats. In addition there is desensitization to such language as it is prevalent in Facebook and on

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the Internet. The addition of pictures to threatening language was surprising as it was not considered in the original definition, and warrants further investigation. Facebook and other popular social media sites allow for the posting of pictures, videos, and images to the sites. These pictures and videos in some context can be considered threating on their own merit.   The participants identified tumblr and Instagram as sites which are heavy picture based further investigation into how and what is interpreted as threats via pictures is warranted.

Recommendations for Practitioner's

The threat assessment process at most educational institutions includes the searching of Facebook for information regarding the person making the threat as well as the target of the threat. In addition, there is a limited understanding of what is considered threatening, as the participants in this study stated they believed they are desensitized to online threats. The desensitization came from the large amount of threatening language witnessed on-line including playing on-line video games. Based on the participants responses there is a need to explore educational opportunities between threat assessment practitioners and social network security teams to better respond to and report serious threats of violence. There are many issues that could come into play, such as 1st amendment rights; however, educational institutions, and SNS's have an opportunity to open a dialog regarding threatening language and discuss how to educate bystanders, streamline reporting, and better dialogs for understanding of the concerns. Most institutions of higher education provide proactive education to students in regards to the use of alcohol and drugs. There is a need to provide a proactive bystander education as to how to respond to the use of on-line social media, specifically how to respond to individuals who harass and or threaten others. This is especially true with threats of harm aimed at one's self.

In addition, the understanding of how a person is connected to another in Facebook is vital in addressing threatening language. Practitioners of threat assessment need to factor in the status of Facebook friends, such as friends or acquaintances when gathering information from Facebook and other social media sites. Authorities need to provide proactive education to bystanders on how to respond to threatening language, including, resources available when threats are posted. One means of accomplishing this would be to establish a Facebook page dedicated to ways to respond to a person who is threatening another person. The use of short public service videos and links to other resources such as local suicide hotlines would be a part of the page.   This is especially true for threats of self-harm, as this was the one threat that the participants identified that they would seek out assistance to address, though they were fearful of getting the person in trouble if assistance was requested. With the rise in the use of Facebook, and the link to the amount of information shared, including the amount of depressive posts and information, these partnerships and support would be beneficial in addressing potential threats.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are three significant areas the researcher has identified for areas of future studies as it relates to the topic of threatening language and social networks.

The first area would be to include a person who has made a threat of harm, and a person who has responded to this threat, or a close friend of the person. This would provide a firsthand account of the intent of the threat and how the response affected the person making the threat. The depth the interviews with the people involved in a threat would add to a greater understanding of how the threatening language is viewed. The interviews would also provide an understanding of why a person chooses to broadcast a threat in such a public manner and how the response impacted and addressed the follow through of the threats. Included in this,

exploration of the person making the threat and the person(s) responding could provide a better understanding of what method is best for addressing threatening language, be it text messaging, face-to-face, or online, such as within Facebook itself. This study provides beneficial information on threatening language posted in Facebook; however, it would be beneficial to explore firsthand a more timely response to threatening language and responses.

The observation of the involved people's Facebook pages could provide a better understanding of the context of the threat. The observation of the person's Facebook page that originally made the threat could indicate if there were other factors that precipitated the threat, as well as if similar language has been posted in the past with or without response. The observation of the person's Facebook page responding to a threatening language could allow for an analysis of past posts to ascertain if similar threats were ignored, and better clarify the responses, and the relationships among Facebook users.

The second area identified as an expansion of this research is the need to analyze more in- depth threats of harm to self. This study was heavily focused on threats of harm to others as the participants did not identify threats to self as a major threat. The literature shows there is a link between depression and threatening posts in social media. Such a study could examine how and why people post such threatening language aimed at themselves. Further study could also look at how and why people choose to respond to threats identified as self-harm, and the link between posts indicating depression and threatening language.

Much research also needs to be done into the exploration of threats in other social media sites specifically Twitter, and tumblr. When the research of this study began, the two main social networking sites were Facebook and MySpace. MySpace quickly dropped in popularity and use as others have gained in popularity. The study participants articulated they do not solely

use Facebook, and have gravitated toward the use of Twitter and tumblr for more personal sharing of information, while maintaining their Facebook accounts for other types of connections and use. tumblr is a blogging site, and was identified by at least two of the study participants as being full of threatening language. In the area of threat assessment, the expansion to other social networking sites is critical, as they are full of valuable information. There is no way to predict who will be a person who perpetrates an act of violence, but people can intervene and address warning signs. As technology continues to advance, examining how people chose to connect, communicate, and broadcast information, such as threatening language will continually be a challenge. These social media sites can provide a plethora of information; it is the responsibility of people to understand how to effectively use these sites, and how best to respond to concerning information.

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APPENDIX A

For the purpose of this study the following terms are used:

Application (app): An application or *app* is an independent program which is linked to Facebook and allows the user to complete a specified task or activity. App's can range from functional such as compass or aid in directions to entertainment such as games or challenges to other Facebook users.

Checking in: Is a mobile application that is installed on a person's phone or mobile device and linked to a person's Facebook account which allows the user to check into local businesses. This check-in will show up on the individual's Facebook wall to alert their Facebook friends they have arrived in a specific location or business. The "check-in" can provide discounts at the business and is a way of advertising within Facebook to the user's Facebook friends as well as alerting their Facebook friends of the location of the person and where they like to go.

Cyberbullying: Ongoing, intimidating language meant to hurt or threaten another person by using an electronic device such as a computer or cell phone.

Direct observation: First hand observation of threatening language such as posted on the participant's wall or appearing in the participants news feed or observing a threat posted on a friend's wall.

Facebook friends: A Facebook friend is a person who has been given access to the registered user's account. This friend can see information about the person and can communicate in various ways within the account, including posting on the wall. In September 2011, Facebook made a change to the Friends list, expanding the list to friends and acquaintances. This change allows for viewing of posts to be altered depending on the security setting selected by the user.

Indirect observation: Viewing of threatening language on another Facebook user's wall.

Hide: Hide information from a newsfeed, similar to unfollowing.

Like button: is defined as a "mechanism used by Facebook users to express their positive association with (or like) online content such as photos, friends' status updates, Facebook pages of products, sports, musicians, books, restaurants, or popular Web sites." (Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013, p. 1).

News Feed: Post from Facebook friends which appear on the registered users Facebook wall.

Nonverbal communication: It is reported that 60-70% of human communication is non-verbal, the voice accounting for the majority of the spoken word, which leaves approximately only 10% for words (Smith, n/d).

Posts: Thoughts, comments, pictures, status, statements which are posted on the user's wall or another person's Facebook wall.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs): This can be any number of websites which require a person to join, for the purpose of connecting with and maintaining a group of friends and social acquaintances. There are a number of websites dedicated for this purpose; however, Facebook was the chosen focus due to the popularity of the website.

Social Media: Interchangeable with Online Social Networks, such as Facebook.

Status: A method of sharing information with other Facebook friends such as thoughts, current locations or how the person feels.

Threats (used for this study): Webster's New World Dictionary from 1984 defines threatening language as: "1. an expression of intention to hurt, destroy, punish, etc., as in retaliation or intimidation 2. an indication of imminent danger, harm, evil, etc." (Websters, 1984, p. 1482).

Threats (legal definition): Outward expressions of intent of harm to oneself or to others. "Threat is thus a purely psychological concept, an interpretation of a situation by the individual" (Baldwin, 1971, p. 72). "True threats encompass those statements where the speaker means to communicate a serious expression or intent to commit an act of unlawful violence to a particular individual or group of individuals. The speaker need not actually intend to carry out the threat. Rather, a prohibition on true threats protect[s] individuals from the fear of violence and from the disruption that fear engenders, in addition to protecting people from the possibility that the threatened violence will occur" (Virginia v. Black, 538 US 343 (2003)).

Unfollow: Simply involves removing the information from the users news feed. The user will discontinue receiving updates from the person, the access to the person's Facebook page remains.

Unfriend: To remove a person from the group of Facebook Friends, he or she will not remain in the user's group of friends, and will depend on the privacy settings as to what access the user will have to the other person's page and vice versa.

Wall: Place within Facebook where registered users and Facebook friends can post thoughts, comments, pictures, ideas, questions relative to a specific person. This wall can be public or private depending on the user's privacy settings.

APPENDIX B

Cover Letter

Date

Dear Participant,

My name is Ron Hicks; I am a Doctoral Candidate researcher from Colorado State University in the College of Applied Human Sciences, School of Education. I am conducting a research study on how people respond to others on Facebook when they post threatening language. The title of my project is *Threats of Harm Posted on Facebook, The Viewing and Response by Friends*. I am the Co-Principal Investigator and the Principal Investigator is my advisor, James Folkestad, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University.

You have been identified as someone who could add valuable information to this study because of your use of Facebook as a communication tool. The intent of the study is see how people respond to threatening language posted in Facebook. Participation in this research would include participating in up to three 1:1 interviews which will last no longer than two hours each. Your participation in this research is voluntary. At the onset of consent you will pick a pseudo name which will identify you throughout the study. Only the researcher will know your true name/identity. All information will be kept on a password protected drive and will be permanently deleted upon completion of the study and the required record keeping policy. While there are no direct benefits to you, I hope to gain more knowledge on how people respond to threats which are posted in Facebook to address threat assessment.

There are no known risks for participation in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

If you have any questions, please contact me directly at 720.317.9683, or Ronald.hicks@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at Colorado State University at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Ron Hicks
Ph.D. Candidate

APPENDIX C

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY:

THREATS OF HARM POSTED IN FACEBOOK, THE VIEWING AND RESPONSE BY
FRIENDS

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

James Folkestad, Ph.D. Associate Professor, College of Education Colorado State University,
PhD Education and Human Resource Studies, contact information-970-491-7823;
James.Folkestad@colostate.edu

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Ron Hicks, Ph.D. candidate in the College of Education, Education and Human Resource
Studies, Colorado State University, contact information-720.317.9683;
Ronald.hicks@colostate.edu

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

Your use of Facebook as a communication tool, and having over 100 Facebook friends, and
logging into Facebook on a regular basis has allowed you to participate in this study.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

This study is being conducted by PhD Candidate Ron Hicks from Colorado State University.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This study is designed to address how Facebook friends respond to Facebook posts which are
threats of harm to self or others. Such as wanting to punch, hit or hurt someone or posting
threats of harm to self. Facebook friends or bystanders can play an important role in mitigating a
threat. The high rate of use of Facebook, and including the information shared within the
network itself, lends to an opportunity to explore the role friends play in mitigating threatening
language.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT
LAST?**

This study will be conducted over a month's period and will occur at Arizona State University. You time commitment will be limited to no more than 6 hours over the course of the month. The most you will be asked to do is to complete up to three 1:1 face-to-face interviews lasting no more than two hours each. The time and location will be in a private location to protect your identity and free of distractions.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

The process will include:

- ➢ You will pick a pseudo name for the study to protect your identity.

- ➢ You will be asked to participate in **up to** three- two hour audio recorded interviews with questions ranging from how you use Facebook to more detailed questions addressing your knowledge and response to threatening language posted in Facebook by your friends.

- ➢ Your responses to the interviews will be transcribed and you will be asked to review the responses to ensure the information is accurate.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you have deleted your Facebook profile there would be no ability to gather information from this medium.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

- ➢ There are no known risks associated with this research; however, since the topic of the research involves emotional comments, you may feel sad and or worried about the person who made the threats as we discuss these Facebook interactions. If there is a concern that the person may follow through with the threat they have posted, you will have access to the Counseling Center, as well as other mental health resources. If necessary local authorities can be notified to address the concern.

- ➢ The researcher will take the following steps to ensure that your data is protected and cannot be linked back to you personally: At the onset of the study you will pick a pseudo name all information from that point on will utilize this name. Any link between your name and your pseudo name will be stored on separate password protected drives. All recorded interviews will be deleted once the study is completed.

- ➢ It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no direct benefit to you associated with participation. The possible overall benefit for participating in this study may be adding to current threat assessment literature.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

- No, participation in this study is strictly voluntary.
- Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

We (the researcher and supervising professor/department) will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

Your name will not be used in the study. Once you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to pick a pseudo name which will be used throughout the study.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored on two different password protected storage devices. Any identifiable information such as the name of a specific school you attend will be changed.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you fail to show up to all the required interviews you may be removed from the study.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Ron Hicks at 720.317.9683. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, Colorado State University at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on November 16, 2012.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

➢ All interviews will be recorded and saved on a separate password protected drive. Only the researcher will have access to the interviews, and will be deleted upon completion of the study.

➢ All information will be permanently deleted at the end of the study.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing ____ pages.

_____   _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____
Name of person providing information to participant   Date

_____
Signature of Research Staff

APPENDIX D

Study Participants Questions

1. What do you consider threatening language?

2. How would you describe it to others? (personal definition)

    a. The definition of threats from <u>Webster's New World Dictionary</u> states: "1. an expression of intention to hurt, destroy, punish, etc., as in retaliation or intimidation 2. a) an indication of imminent danger, harm, evil, etc." (Websters, 1984, p. 1482)

3. Do you agree with this definition?

4. Given the definition, do you have anything to add to the definition?

5. Given the definition which was read from the Webster's Dictionary does this change your mind as to what a threat is?

6. Do you know there are different types of threats?

7. They are defined as:

    Direct- A direct threat is one that is a clear intent to harm someone

    Conditional -A conditional threat is one that will occur if a certain condition is met or not met.

    Veiled- A veiled threat is one that is 'hidden' or only picked up by the recipient; others typically will dismiss the threat with the notion that this is the way that the person talks or expresses themself

8. When were you were first introduced to Facebook?

9. How do you currently use Facebook?

10. Have you ever witnessed someone make a threat on Facebook to them self or others?

11. If NO- have any of your friends shared with you an experience of someone posting a threat on Facebook?

12. How well do you know the person who made the threat?

13. Are you still associated or friends with them?

14. Are you still Facebook Friends with them?

    Why or why not?

15. If no, who ended the friendship/acquaintance?

16. If no, who removed whom from the list of Facebook friends?

17. Why did you choose to respond in the way you did?

18. Do you think you would have responded the same way if this were said in a face-to-face setting?

19. Did you follow-up with the person in a more personal manner or off line?

20. How did the person respond to your comments?

21. Did you talk to other friends about this?

22. Did others respond to the threats?

23. Did you observe others respond to the threats?

24. Do you feel how others responded (or failed to respond) to the threat influenced your response?

25. Would you have considered contacting the authorities about this threat?

26. Do you think this person needs some type of professional assistance (i.e. counseling, or authority to talk to them about their language?)

27. How organized is this person's thinking or behavior?

28. Have all recent postings been coherent?

29. Were they ranting or venting frustrations?

30. Was there a particular incident or person that triggered the anger and frustration that you are aware of?

31. Is the threat targeted at one person or a group of people?

32. To your knowledge has this person been in conflict with a group of people?

33. Has he or she posted threatening language like this in the past?

34. If so, how many times?

35. After thinking back on this person's Facebook posts, can you recall other threats that they made in the past?

36. Did you respond to those threats?

37. If no, what is different about this post?

38. To your knowledge has he or she ever engaged in physical altercations?

39. Do you worry he or she will follow through with the threat(s)?

40. Did current events such as other school violence come into your thought process when you saw this post?

41. If so, did these events have an effect on your response?

42. Has the person's behavior changed in the recent past?

43. Do you know why they made the threat?

44. Given the chance would you change the way you responded?

    a. How would you change?

Scenarios:

You find in your news feed the following post:

There is no reason to go on…

They are so wrong for what they said last night, if I had a gun I would shoot their ass.