

2021

## Terrorism and Social Media: Extremist Groups and College Student Recruitment

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Walden University  
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Abstract

Terrorism and Social Media: Extremist Groups and College Student Recruitment

by

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MA, Georgia Southern University, 2010

BA, University of Georgia, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration: Homeland Security Policy and Coordination

Walden University

November 2021

## Abstract

College students are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist organizations. Social media is the primary tool used by extremist groups to target college students. This research was conducted to examine the extent to which college students are affected by extremist groups on social media. A qualitative research design was implemented to collect data from a diverse group of college students. Participants consisted of five experts in homeland security or law enforcement and 12 individuals who were students or recent graduates in fields related to law enforcement and homeland security. Social learning theory provided the theoretical foundation for this research. Results indicated that college students were targeted by extremists on social media. Results also indicated that enforcement experts failed to grasp the extent to which college students are affected by extremism on social media. Several strategies to address this gap in understanding exist, which represent the opportunity to produce positive social change.

Recommendations to enhance national security include additional research on college students and the impact of social media, increased collaboration among security officials at various levels of government, and improved cooperation among social media companies and the federal government. College students play an important role in the effort to combat terrorism. National security is enhanced when college students are involved in the process.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To Krista, you are all my reasons. To our miracle babies, Madeline, and Donnie, I did it for you. Dad, Dr. Bell sounds great. Mom, the prayers worked.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Jones for his dedication throughout this process. I am grateful for everything he has done for me and all of those who have been fortunate to know him. Aloha.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Social media is being used as a recruitment tool for terrorist organizations worldwide. From 2003 to 2017, the number of terrorist websites increased from fewer than 100 to more than 5,000, and terrorist groups recognized the benefits of the internet, specifically social media platforms, as a recruitment tool (Eze, 2018). Social media has provided terrorist organizations with a cheap way to transmit radical messages to international audiences (Kwon et al., 2017). For example, the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has used social media to recruit more than 30,000 fighters (McDowell-Smith et al., 2017). This recruitment process includes action-packed recruitment videos on YouTube and villainizing political speech on Twitter (Amedie, 2015). As a result of these recruitment tactics, more than 200 college-age Americans traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS, and they were recruited almost exclusively via social media (McDowell-Smith et al., 2017).

Terrorist organizations that are domestic to the United States have used social media in a manner similar to international religion-based terrorists. These domestic organizations, called *right-wing extremist organizations*, that espouse White supremacy, have also been using social media as a recruitment tool, specifically in the form of broadcasting their message via YouTube (Dean et al., 2012). This recruitment by domestic terrorist organizations has been effective and deadly. In 2018, right-wing extremists were responsible for every extremist-related murder in the United States and

the Federal Bureau of Investigation made more than 100 domestic terrorism arrests (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.).

Online recruitment is possible because of the large number of social media users. Social media provides a low-cost platform for extremist groups to disseminate information to a global audience (Archetti, 2015). For example, more than 90% of college students in the United States were active on social media as of 2017 (Birnbaum et al., 2017). As such, various terrorist groups found success in recruiting American college students (Gates & Podder, 2015; Weismann, 2014).

Heightened use of social media has presented new opportunities for terrorist organizations and new challenges to law enforcement organizations (Khader et al., 2016). Due to this upswing in online recruitment, global security needs to improve their capabilities of using social networks to monitor and disrupt the activities of terrorist organizations (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015). To better understand this, I investigated the extent to which U.S. college students were contacted by extremist groups via social media. In this chapter, I present the background of the problem, the problem statement and purpose of the study, my research questions, and my theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study. I then present the nature of the study, useful definitions, and my assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background**

Extremist groups target specific demographics. Sureka et al. (2010) discussed how extremist groups used YouTube to radicalize young men. The authors found that 90% of those targeted were men with an average age of 25 years old. In 2019, men

between the ages of 20 and 30 were responsible for the majority of mass shootings in the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Extremist groups understand which groups are most vulnerable.

College students are targeted by extremist groups. Thompson (2011) explained that college students are targeted by extremist groups because they used social media extensively and they are the ideal age to be recruited. Research has shown that college students became more susceptible to recruitment efforts as new social media platforms became available. As a result, extremist groups use innovative recruitment methods to entice new members while law enforcement struggles to disrupt their efforts.

Social media applications are consistently evolving. Weimann (2014) focused on the functionality and popularity of specific social networks. Extremist groups use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube differently, according to their usefulness in uploading videos and sending messages. Gartenstein-Ross (2015) discussed social-media based strategies for undercutting the recruitment ability of extremist groups, such as ISIS. The goal was to counter the group's power and strength by publicizing their losses on the battlefield. In doing so, their power and legitimacy were reduced, which compromised their ability to recruit new members (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015). Effective use of social media hinged on the ability to understand the latest updates across various applications.

There are extensive costs associated with monitoring extremist groups on social media. Klausen (2015) explained the nature of these costs. Gathering intelligence provides information that can help disrupt potential terrorist attacks, but this process is

complicated and costly (Klausen, 2015). Hiring security officials who understand the intricacies of social media is another challenge.

There is a discrepancy in how extremist groups and law enforcement use utilize social media. Stevens and Nuemann (2009) described the cultural and generational gaps that exist between law enforcement and extremist groups as they attempt to monitor and disrupt on social media. Evidence has shown that law enforcement officers lacked awareness of how people communicated on social media applications (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). My research helps to address the gap in how students and experts in the fields of law enforcement and homeland security communicated and interacted with others on social media.

### **Problem Statement**

Various social media networks are being used by extremist groups to recruit members, organize attacks, and incite violence. Twitter was one of the primary tools used to orchestrate the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai (Birnbaum et al., 2017). Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a spokesperson for ISIS, acknowledged that social media was used to incite violent attacks against the West (Chatfield et al., 2015). Domestic terrorists in the United States use social media to recruit new members and orchestrate attacks (Dean et al., 2012). As a result, U.S. national security has been compromised because security officials fail to grasp the nature and influence of extremist groups' messages on social media.

There is evidence that countermeasures to radicalization are effective. McDowell-Smith et al. (2017) investigated the impact of antiextremist group messaging on

American college students. Participants viewed videos of ISIS defectors denouncing the extremist group, which resulted in strong anti-ISIS sentiment among the participants. (McDowell-Smith et al., 2017). McDowell-Smith et. al (2017) concluded that students who were exposed to counternarrative messages of extremists became less vulnerable to recruitment by these groups. Failure to address this threat represents a national security issue.

Additional research is needed to address what college students and recent graduates view on social media, particularly the extent to which they are contacted by extremist groups. Further, it needs to be determined whether there is a discrepancy between what students and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement are subjected to online.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My research examined the extent to which students are targeted by extremist groups on social media. Prior researchers identified cultural and generational gaps between online extremist recruiters and law enforcement officers who attempted to monitor and disrupt them via social media (Stevens & Nuemann, 2009). I spoke with students and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement to evaluate the contrast in how the groups navigate social media.

### **Research Question**

My central research question was:

How are extremist groups using social media to recruit college students?

### **Framework of the Study**

Social media is a vital resource for both terrorist groups and the security officials tasked with policing these groups. Extremist groups use social media to recruit new members, raise money, coordinate attacks, and inflict political violence, while law enforcement uses social media to monitor, disrupt, and capture extremists (Thompson, 2011). Klausen (2015) acknowledged that security forces have failed to implement an effective strategy for large-scale disruption of terrorist activities on social media. My research sought to examine how college students and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement interact with others on various social media platforms.

Social media plays an integral role in shaping the minds of young people. Typically, American college students spend more than 25 hours per week on social media, (Huey, 2015). In my research, I sought to examine the impact of social media interactions for college students. I hypothesized that experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement lack awareness and understanding on social media. This contributes to the failed counterterrorism strategy, which is discussed at length in Chapter 2.

I observed how individuals were affected by their interactions on social media. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provided the theoretical framework for my research. Social learning theory is used to explain behavior as a learned response to others' behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's model aligns with the functions and behavior of present-day social media in terms of sharing, liking, communicating, and motivating responses. Extremist groups identify recruits according to what posts and



videos they view and share. Recruiters from these groups prey on individuals who like and share their posts, which represents a type of learned behavior. Social media users are motivated by videos distributed from extremist groups, and then they become targets.

In previous studies, researchers have used social learning theory as the theoretical framework. McDonald and Conway (2018) used social learning theory as a framework to explore effective ways to counter violent extremism. The researchers concluded that social media applications needed to do a better job working with law enforcement to disrupt extremist groups from fundraising on their platforms. The scope of the research was international, with participants from the United Kingdom, Australia, Denmark, Sweden, and The Netherlands (McDonald & Conway, 2018). In my research, I sought to analyze social media usage and experiences from students and recent graduates of a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the South.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative research approach to collect data. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) used qualitative research to gather data about cyberbullying via the Internet and social media web applications. The researchers developed a list of what bothered the victims the most, and they found that being contacted by unfamiliar people on social media was the most traumatizing (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Qualitative approaches were more likely to produce data, which tended to be multilayered, nuanced data, and often revealed from in-depth interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). My approach sought to collect this sort of rich data.

In my research, I sought to determine the impact of extremist language and videos on college students and recent graduates in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement. I observed how different social media applications influenced their thoughts, relationships, and ideas. I analyzed how they used social media to interact with others and what impact this has on them.

### **Definitions**

Homeland security describes the effort to detect, prepare for, prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from attacks (Martin, 2018). Extremism is characterized by political opinions that are intolerant toward others, forming the ideological basis for political violence. Extremists are those who hold such views (Martin, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

I interviewed students and graduates in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement. I felt students would be able to identify extremism while providing detailed, honest feedback, because of their subject matter knowledge and their familiarity with me as a professor. I felt that random participants would have been hesitant to provide personal information about social media interactions.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I interviewed college students and recent graduates due to their familiarity with me, and I felt they understood the research topic. Homeland security and law enforcement experts agreed to be interviewed because they knew me from academic conferences and community events. There was low potential for transferability, as findings were unlikely to be transferred to other settings. My research elicited responses

from a diverse group of students and experts in the fields of law enforcement and homeland security who would have been unlikely to participate if they did not know me. Results were not intended to be generalized, as participants were selected based on familiarity.

### **Limitations**

Participants were selected via convenience sampling. Results from this sample were not intended to make an inference about a larger population. Participants were selected because of their familiarity with me and the research topic. This presented potential for biased responses. Participants may have embellished their experiences during interviews to affirm that my research was addressing a societal problem.

None of the students interviewed were current or future students of mine. Participants did not receive compensation, promise of a letter of recommendation, or any other type of reward for participating. I reiterated several times throughout interviews that the vast majority of people are not targeted by extremist groups via social media. Further, I acknowledged that familiarity with participants did not guarantee honest or accurate responses, although I did encourage honest, thoughtful feedback throughout the process.

### **Significance**

My research sought to measure the extent to which homeland security and law enforcement students at Savannah State University were targeted by extremists via social media. Law enforcement experts were included in the study to determine if they understood what college students typically experience on social media. I felt that if

students and experts use social media differently, there would be a gap in understanding the threats and dangers across various platforms. Results exhibited that experts fail to comprehend the risks and complexity of social media.

Research has shown that experts struggled to grasp the extent to which college students suffered abuse on social media. Results have demonstrated a disconnect between experts and the extent to which young people are targeted by extremists via social media. Lawmakers are likely influenced by information presented to them by experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement. Policy could be impacted by data that provided a more accurate picture of the threat posed by extremist groups on social media.

College students should be included in the discourse on national security, specifically in terms of addressing threats on social media. College students and recent graduates possess a profound understanding of the complexities and dangers that exist on various social media platforms. This population has knowledge and skills on these virtual networks that must be communicated with supervisors and administrators of law enforcement and homeland security in order to capture a clear picture of how people use these platforms to inflict harm. College students and recent graduates are a vital resource to securing the United States, but they must be afforded the opportunity to do so. My research investigates the extent to which experts are coordinating security efforts with college students and recent graduates.

### **Summary**

I identified the social problem as extremist groups targeting college students via social media. Prior researchers have discussed this topic, but my research was focused on

college students and recent graduates with backgrounds in homeland security and law enforcement. Participants were selected based on their familiarity with me and their ability to identify extremism.

I included experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement to compare their experiences on social media with the experiences of college students and recent graduates. I hypothesized that a gap exists between the two groups in understanding the threats and dangers of social media. Social learning theory provided the theoretical framework for my research.

My research was not intended to draw inferences about how larger populations of students used social media. The aim was to gather rich data from a group of college students who were able to recognize extremist language on social media, to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem. I conducted interviews with students, recent graduates, and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement to determine the extent to which college students are targeted by extremist groups via social media.

Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature for my research topic. I will describe how I gathered relevant information about the subject matter, which provided a basis for the theoretical framework. An explanation of how prior research influenced research design and methodology will be included. Information will be integrated to inform how research questions were formed and how key concepts were investigated

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

I identified the social problem as college students being recruited by extremist groups via social media. My research sought to determine the extent to which college students perceive they are affected by extremists across various social media platforms. The primary focus of this chapter will be the literature review. I will also discuss how I compiled the literature review and provide the theoretical framework for my research.

Social media is the primary tool for extremist groups to recruit new members, raise money, and incite political violence. College students are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups on social media (Thompson, 2011). Dean et al. (2012) explained that domestic terrorists in the United States use social media to expand membership and coordinate attacks. Birnbaum et al. (2017) acknowledged that the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai were coordinated via Twitter. ISIS officials have claimed social media is instrumental in organizing violent attacks against the United States and its allies (Chatfield et., 2015). Sureka et al. (2010) identified YouTube as the primary method extremist groups use to connect with young people. Klausen (2015) described the challenges of tracking and disrupting extremist groups on social media. Social media is a vital resource for various types of extremist groups, which presents several challenges to counterterrorism agencies.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used Google Scholar to compile literature related to my research topic, which addressed how extremists use social media to recruit college students. I searched the

following terms: *social media and extremism, extremist groups and social media, college students and social media, social media and terrorism, counterterrorism and social media, and social media and radicalization*. I also broadly searched for qualitative research on extremist groups and social media, and extremism on social media at historically Black colleges and universities. I reviewed and selected articles from the following journals: *Journal for Deradicalization, Journal of Terrorist Research, Harvard National Security Journal, and the Journal of Strategic Security*.

My research focused on college students and recent graduates with backgrounds in homeland security and law enforcement. Prior researchers have addressed the social problem, but I did not find similar studies conducted at historically Black colleges and universities. I felt it appropriate to include participants who are historically underrepresented in research.

There has been extensive research regarding social media and radicalization. Thompson (2011) provided an overview of social media and radicalization. Archetti (2015) described how extremist groups use social media to circulate radical ideas and messages. Chatfield et al. (2015) explained how ISIS uses Twitter to radicalize new members. Mather (2017) discussed various campaigns designed to counter the radical messages from extremist groups on social media. McDowell Smith et al. (2017) discussed strategies to combat the radicalization efforts of ISIS on social media. Social media is a vital resource for extremist groups, while counterterrorism forces use it to disseminate information designed to counter radicalization efforts.

Social media is an essential aspect of effective counterterrorism strategy. Dean et al. (2012) provided an overview of how terrorists communicate via social media. Hardy (2018) discussed methods for combating radicalization via social media. Khader et al. (2016) described the challenges associated with combating extremist groups on social media. Klein and Flinn (2017) discussed the role of social media networks in combating terrorism. Van Brunt (2017) explored the risks of online violent extremism on college populations. Waldman and Verga (2016) explained various methods for countering violent extremism on social media. Social media is the primary tool used by extremist groups to incite violence, while security forces use it to deradicalize individuals and capture terrorists.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My research focused on observing the behavior of college students on social media. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provided the theoretical framework. Social learning theory is used to assert that learning occurs in four stages: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977). This correlates to the functionality of social media applications. Extremists target college students on social media according to their likes, shares, and page views (Thompson, 2011). Members of extremist groups produce videos and posts to capture the attention of their targets. Extremists understand that these individuals would reproduce material with likes, retweets, and shares on social media. Thompson (2011) explained this process is replicated to portray a sense of power across various social media platforms. Research has shown that the motivation for political violence and other attacks is generated from



communicating on social media (Amedie, 2015), which aligns with Bandura's (1977) theory of learned behavior. There are several research projects that have focused on social media and radicalization in which social learning theory provided the theoretical framework.

One example is a study in which the researchers analyzed a group of American college students who were radicalized on Facebook and Twitter. McDonald and Conway (2018) found that participants were motivated by learned behavior on social media, which supports Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. My research sought to build on this research by examining the extent to which college students are affected by extremists on social media.

Social media shapes the course of society. Sabatier and Weible (2014) described social networks as important tools for producing societal change. My research viewed social media as a mechanism for promoting positive or negative social change. Social media is a tool used by terrorists to organize their efforts and commit acts of violence, while law enforcement uses social media to track and prevent acts of violence. I interviewed college students and recent graduates to gain a better understanding of their experiences on social media to determine if the platform is being used more effectively by those working to protect society or those attempting to incite violence.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

Social media plays a vital role in the radicalization process. Martin (2014) discussed the link between extremism and terrorism explained that someone could hold extremist beliefs without being a terrorist. Martin (2014) wrote that extremism becomes

terrorism when an individual commits an act of political violence, threatens the use of political violence, or inspires another to commit or threaten an act of violence. Van Brunt et. al (2017) described how individuals moved from holding radical beliefs to committing acts of terror. In both cases, social media is the primary tool used to precipitate this change.

Social media is an integral aspect of counterterrorism efforts. Archetti (2015) discussed the threat of radicalization by extremist groups via social media and acknowledged that most who viewed extremist videos and read terrorist propaganda are not radicalized by the material. Thus, law enforcement needs to focus on counter-terror initiatives with potential targets, rather than working to remove content from social media (Archetti, 2015). Archetti also addressed the challenge in accounting for cultural norms, specifically in parts of the world where anti-US sentiment is pervasive. Security forces struggle to adapt to the ever-changing nature of social media.

Extremist groups adapt as security forces implement new counterterrorism strategies. Weimann (2014) explained that the internet used to be the primary tool for extremists to recruit new members, spread their message, and orchestrate attacks. As internet sites were shut down by counterterrorism agencies, social media provided a more convenient way to reach large audiences. Weimann (2014) discussed the growing threat of *lone-wolf terrorism*, members of which are often radicalized on social media. He suggested that security officials look beyond current challenges to understand the nuances of social media to better anticipate and preempt violent attacks. Social media platforms present new challenges each day for security forces.

College students are attentive to upgrades and advancement across various social media applications. Amedie (2015) discussed why college students are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups on social media. College students use social media to meet new people and stay connected to old friends (Amedie, 2015). Amedie (2015) portrayed social media networks as providing benefits and challenges to law enforcement officers working to combat extremist groups. More research is necessary on college students and their social media interactions to gain a better understanding of the threats that exist on various social networks (Amedie, 2015). Extremist groups are mindful of the extent to which college students rely on social media.

College students are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups via social media for numerous reasons. Huey (2015) explained why college students are commonly targeted by extremist groups on social media. The author described how memes, videos, satire, and other counter-culture norms found on social media appealed to young people. ISIS and other groups are successful in recruiting college students because they understand that these individuals gained a sense of development and growth from their experiences on social media (Huey, 2015). Additional research is necessary to gain a better understanding of what attracts young people to extremist groups. Extremist groups manipulate various social media applications to attract young people.

International terrorist groups use social media to connect with college students. Eze (2018) discussed how the extremist groups Boko Haram and Al-Shabab use social media to plan attacks and incite violence. Nigerian defense forces attempted to gather intelligence on the groups and warn citizens of potential attacks. The extremist groups

made effective use of various social media platforms, while government forces were unable to do so (Eze, 2018). Eze (2018) recommended that the Nigerian government develop counterterrorism strategies rooted in effective planning and communication via social media. Recruiting young people on social media represents a threat to global security.

Domestic terrorists use social media in a similar manner. Dean et al. (2012) described the role of social media in recruiting, planning, fundraising, and disseminating information for homegrown terrorists. Homegrown terrorists rely on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to build and expand their networks. Dean et al. (2012) recommended a counter-terrorism approach that improves intelligence gathering using practitioner-based knowledge and integrating this knowledge with appropriate technological support systems. Terrorist organizations exploit social media regardless of country of origin or type of terrorism.

European countries have been victimized by political attacks that were initiated via social media. McDonald and Conway (2018) discussed how extremist groups in Europe used social media to expand membership and raise money. There is a need for a partnership between security forces and social media companies (McDonald & Conway, 2018). Social media companies should be compelled to provide law enforcement with relevant and timely updates of extremist language violations on their platforms (McDonald & Conway, 2018). Social media companies play a critical role in national security.

ISIS has garnered international notoriety for committing acts of political violence in multiple countries. McDowell-Smith et al. (2017) described the social media recruitment effort by ISIS, which has resulted in more than 30,000 people leaving their homes to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight for the extremist group. ISIS uses social media to recruit new members, circulate their message, and orchestrate attacks (McDowell-Smith et al., 2017). Furthermore, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism conducted interviews with 43 ISIS defectors and showed these videos to a sample of 75 college students (McDowell-Smith et al., 2017). Results demonstrated that the project was effective; college students found the videos appalling and developed strong feelings against the extremist group. Effective counterterrorism strategy, therefore, involves efforts to diminish the influence of extremist groups via social media.

Social media accounts are often linked to extremist groups. Chatfield et al. (2015) described the role of social media in spreading propaganda and radicalizing new members. The researchers analyzed social media messages and posts from global mass media, regional Arabic media, ISIS supporters, and ISIS fighters (Chatfield et al., 2015). Chatfield et al. (2015) identified one Twitter account that tweeted 3,039 times in support of ISIS. Security forces continue to work to identify users affiliated with extremist groups on social media networks.

Social media allows people to connect, regardless of whether they speak the same language. Gates and Podder (2015) explained that ISIS relies on social media to recruit international combatants. Social media allows them to recruit on a global scale, using technology to overcome language barriers. Typically, ISIS uses recruits born outside of

Iraq and Syria to engage in suicide attacks. This allows homegrown soldiers to fight on the front lines as snipers (Gates & Podder, 2015). Social media allowed ISIS to recruit thousands of recruits to travel to Iraq and Syria. Further, there was no meaningful intervention from global security forces on social media platforms to counter this development.

Effective counterterrorism efforts require consistent monitoring and awareness on social media by security officials. Thompson (2011) discussed the need for law enforcement officials to be engaged on social media so they can fully understand the threats posed by extremist groups. Challenges are presented by the rapidly changing nature of social media. At an Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance conference with 150 national security officials in attendance, only five attendees were active on Facebook and only one used Twitter (Thompson, 2011). Thompson (2011) explained that law enforcement officials failed to comprehend the threat capabilities of social media because they are not actively engaged. As a result, national security is not only compromised but also out of touch with younger generations and their use of social media.

There are significant costs associated with tracking extremists across multiple social networks. Klausen (2015) described the extensive costs of monitoring extremist groups via social media. Law enforcement officials collected intelligence, which helped to apprehend suspects and prevent attacks, but the process was complicated and costly. Sureka et al. (2010) described methods for law enforcement to detect and disrupt extremist groups on YouTube. The approach resulted in the discovery of hidden

communities on the social network by searching users: their friends, subscriptions, favorites, and related videos. It also helped to reduce costs. Security forces are continuously working to employ cost-effective counterterrorism strategies.

Efficient use of resources is another focus of national security. Gartenstein-Ross (2015) discussed the inability of security forces to disrupt the work of ISIS, whose power and legitimacy were diminished each time news of their losses were circulated on social media. Further, U.S. security forces needed to expose the myths associated with ISIS on social media. Gartenstein-Ross (2015) acknowledged the importance of countering the power of extremist groups on social media and suggested that security officials disseminate information on social media to help demoralize and destabilize the extremist group. ISIS relied on social media propaganda to convince potential recruits of the group's strength and success on the battlefield. The response needed to be concentrated and swift, because the race to combat social media propaganda is a battle against time and content (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015). The reactionary response represents the problematic nature of policing social media.

Collaboration among stakeholders is another crucial aspect of national security. Waldman and Verga (2016) discussed methods for governments to combat extremist groups on social media. They suggested that governments incorporate the private sector to establish a grass roots campaign in local communities to counter extremists on social media. Waldman and Verga (2016) recommended that researchers continue to conduct large-scale qualitative and quantitative research projects to gather relevant data regarding

countering violent extremists. Lawmakers require relevant information to make informed decisions regarding effective counterterrorism strategies.

Governments work together with private companies to secure the nation. Klein and Flinn (2017) discussed the role of social media companies in combating violent extremism. The authors explained that while Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube already had rules against extremist language and videos, they should be legally required to report violations to federal authorities without delay. Klein and Flinn (2016) argued that social media companies who failed to report extremist speech violations in due time be charged with a federal crime. Compelling social media companies to share information regarding extremists could enhance national security.

There are challenges associated with collecting data in extremist environments. Atran et al. (2017) discussed the challenges in researching terrorism from the field. The authors felt that research on the topic should be centered upon young people, since they are ones who are most likely to be targeted by extremist groups. Young men were regarded by researchers and security officials as problematic, while their group understood the extent of the problem. Antran et al. (2017) suggested that counter extremist violence initiatives be locally based to allow for personal engagement, considering cultural norms. It is standard to implement initial security measures at the local level and counterbalance the lack of data on the ground from remote parts of the world.

The nature of social media makes it problematic to research. Winter et. al (2020) addressed the challenges of conducting research on how extremist groups use social



media, specifically the rapidly changing technological aspect of social networks. The landscape was likely to change dramatically in the 2-3 years it took to collect data and publish findings. It was vital for academics and experts in the field to collaborate on future research. National security is enhanced by effective communication and information sharing among stakeholders.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Relevant literature established that social media was the primary tool used by terrorist organizations to recruit new members, orchestrate attacks, and commit acts of political violence. College students were particularly vulnerable to recruitment on social media. Numerous studies exhibited that security officials failed to grasp the severity of the threat that existed on social media. One recommendation to address this gap was for future research to include college students as participants, to gain a clearer understanding of what they experienced on social media. Other recommendations focused on the relationship between social media companies and the federal government. Researchers felt that federal governments should compel social media companies to report users who violate rules, and they recommended that companies who failed to report such violations be penalized. In Chapter 5, I discuss tactics to improve U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

My research sought to address the gap in understanding what college students experienced on various social networks. College students and recent graduates were interviewed to enhance my understanding of what they faced on Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media applications. Chapter 3 will

describe the research design and methodology implemented to explore this research problem.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

In my research, I sought to analyze how college students are affected by extremists on social media. In Chapter 3, I provide the rationale for my research design. I will discuss my role as the researcher. The methodology will be described in a manner that allows other researchers to replicate the study. I will discuss data collection instruments used and include a description of procedures for participation, recruitment, and data collection. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns will be addressed. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and relevant information regarding IRB approval will be included.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

I felt that interviews would allow students to describe their experiences on social media in a detailed manner. Fusch and Ness (2015) explained that qualitative approaches are more likely to produce multilayered, nuanced data, which is obtained primarily from interviewing participants. I found several studies in which scholars used qualitative research to analyze how extremist groups use social media to recruit new members. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) used qualitative research to investigate cyberbullying on social media web applications. Participants in the study reported being distressed because of interactions with extremist groups on social media. The authors felt the qualitative approach was instrumental in gaining this insight. My research design provides students the opportunity to express their experiences on social media.

In similar studies, researchers employed qualitative research designs. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) used a qualitative approach to gain a better understanding of how

college students rely on social media to fulfill personal needs such as growth and belonging. Of course, terrorist organizations are aware of this. Huey (2015) explained that extremist groups targeted college students because they understand their reliance on social media to meet new people and grow as individuals. College students are particularly vulnerable to being recruited by extremist groups on social media. My research sought to determine the extent to which extremists use various social media platforms to recruit college students in the United States. My research question was: “How are extremist groups using social media to recruit college students?”

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was able to recruit college students and recent college graduates with backgrounds in homeland security and law enforcement because I am a professor in the homeland security emergency management program at a historically Black college and university in the South. Students and recent graduates agreed to participate because of their familiarity with me as a professor at the university. None of the students who participated were current or future students of mine. Experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement agreed to participate because they knew me from our work together at trainings, conferences, and other community events.

I explained my role as researcher to all the participants. Throughout the process, I reiterated that I was not acting in my role as professor, but rather, as a doctoral research student at Walden University. I made this distinction to encourage open and honest responses to interview questions.

When students agreed to be interviewed, I explained their participation would not affect their ability to receive a letter of recommendation, nomination for any university organization or club, or any type of recognition or preference within the campus community. Throughout the process, I reiterated that participation was voluntary, and participants could remove themselves from the study at any point. I explained several times that choosing to participate or opt out of the study at any point would not impact their relationship with me or other professors at Savannah State University.

### **Methodology**

I took a qualitative approach to gathering data. I sought to determine the impact of communication between extremist groups and college students via messages, posts, videos, and other forms of communication on social media. I used convenience sampling to collect data. I interviewed 12 students and recent graduates from Savannah State University with backgrounds in law enforcement and homeland security. I also interviewed five law enforcement and homeland security experts who had at least 10 years of experience in the field. Both participant groups were asked same questions. I gathered data from these experts to help identify differences in how the two groups interact with people on social media. My aim was to determine if they use social media differently. I sought to identify gaps between students and experts in terms of what they experienced on various social media applications. I sought to identify gaps in social media usage, awareness, and understanding between the two groups.

I used telephone and WebEx interviews to collect data. Time spent on social media each week, social media applications used regularly, and preferred social media

apps were the independent variables. Dependent variables were the amount of extremist messages viewed and the impact of these messages. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. What social media applications do you use?
2. Which social media applications do you use the most?
3. Which social media applications do you use on a daily basis?
4. On which applications have you viewed extremist language, conversation, or videos?
5. Which social media applications do you use to communicate with friends, family, and acquaintances?
6. Which social media applications do you use to communicate with people you do not know personally?
7. Has anyone ever directed extremist language or messages toward you?  
If so, on what application did this occur?
8. Has anyone ever attempted to recruit you toward any cause or fundraising operation on social media?
9. Has anyone from an extremist group ever tried to encourage you to learn more about their group or cause?
10. Have you ever felt pressured to join an extremist group via social media?

Follow-up questions were administered accordingly.

I interviewed a diverse group of college students and recent college graduates to determine how they are affected by extremist language and videos on social media. I felt they were able to identify extremism on social media because of their backgrounds in homeland security and law enforcement. My research was not intended to draw conclusions about larger populations.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed via the Rev Voice and Call Recorder app. The Microsoft Word transcription tool was used to identify key themes during the coding process. I developed tables in Microsoft Word for my results.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Students, graduates, and experts in the fields of law enforcement and homeland security participated in my study because they knew me. Responses were influenced by their perception of the research topic and their relationships with me. None of the participants were current or future students of mine. Regardless, participants were aware that I was a professor who was investigating the extent to which college students are affected by extremist groups on social media. It is possible that responses were impacted by the desire of participants to answer questions in a manner which aligns with my research.

Participants were briefed on the purpose of my research. I reminded the participants that they could opt at any point. Further, their names would be kept confidential. Participants were assured of confidentiality. I explained that data would be secured in my password protected computer in my office on campus for 5 years.

I obtained IRB approval from Savannah State University and Walden University to conduct research involving students from Savannah State University. The Institutional Review Board approval number from Savannah State University was 20-1-744. The IRB approval number from Walden University was 01-14-21-0560221.

### **Summary**

I used a qualitative approach to determine the prevalence of extremism on social media. Atran et al. (2017) urged researchers to include young people as participants in counterterrorism studies, due to their vulnerability and awareness on social media. I interviewed college students and recent graduates of Savannah State University to gain a better understanding of how they are impacted by extremists on social media. I implemented several safeguards throughout the process to protect the participants. I obtained IRB approval from Savannah State University and Walden University. I was mindful of ethical concerns throughout the process, and I worked judiciously to preserve the integrity of my research.

Chapter 4 will describe the results of my research. It will provide a discussion of data collection methods and analysis. Ethical procedures and issues of trustworthiness will be included. Chapter 4 will display tables which indicate the results of my research.



## Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present the findings from my in-depth interviews with college students, recent graduates, and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement regarding their usage of social media. The aim of my research was to determine the extent to which college students are targeted by extremist groups via social media. Khader et al. (2016) explained how social media offers a world of opportunities for extremist groups and presents a host of problems for security and law enforcement. I interviewed 17 individuals about their social media usage: focusing on how often they use social media, what applications they use, who they interact with, how they interact with others, and what they view on various platforms. The research question was: How are extremist groups using social media to recruit college students?

### **Demographics**

Thompson (2011) explained that national security supervisors and administrators often lack knowledge and awareness of social media platforms. For this research, respondents were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of five individuals who were experts in homeland security or law enforcement and had a minimum of 10 years of experience in the field. All the experts were at least 35 years of age. The second group consisted of 12 individuals who were students or recent graduates in fields related to law enforcement and homeland security between 20 and 24 years of age. Participants were college student and recent graduates who majored in fields related to homeland security and law enforcement. None of the participants were students of mine. Experts had 10+ years of experience in fields related to law enforcement and homeland security.

Students and experts were recruited to the study via word of mouth and by my colleagues. The expert group consisted of three White men, one African American man, and one Native American woman. The student group consisted of three African American men, two Hispanic men, two white males, and three African American women.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered from college students, recent graduates, and experts about what they view on social media applications. Interviews were conducted via phone and WebEx. Questions focused on how different social media applications allow for the formulation of new ideas, relationships, and other influences. Specifically, I sought to determine how participants use social media to interact with friends, family, and acquaintances and how this differs from how they meet new people and form new relationships via social media.

Participants were asked about their social media usage and their views on how it is used as a recruitment tool for extremist organizations. Data gathered helped identify differences in how each group uses social media. Gaps were identified in how students and experts use social media and the extremist messages they view.

Tables 1 and 2 below summarize key findings and questions posed to interviewees. Both groups were asked the following questions:

1. What social media applications do you use?
2. Which social media applications do you use the most?
3. Which social media applications do you use on a daily basis?

4. On which applications have you viewed extremist language, conversation, or videos?
5. Which social media applications do you use to communicate with friends, family, and acquaintances?
6. Which social media applications do you use to communicate with people you do not know personally?
7. Has anyone ever directed extremist language or messages toward you? If so, on what application did this occur?
8. Has anyone ever attempted to recruit you toward any cause or fundraising operation on social media?
9. Has anyone from an extremist group ever tried to encourage you to learn more about their group or cause?
10. Have you ever felt pressured to join an extremist group via social media?

Follow-up questions were administered accordingly.

In Table 1 and Table 2, the first column indicates the code name given to each participant. The second column denotes which social media applications the respondent is active on. The third column shows which applications they use at least once each day. The fourth column shows designates what application they used the most. The fifth column shows how many hours they spend on average each day on social media. The sixth column denotes where they saw extremist material and what it consisted of. The

Participant	Social media apps are you in use	Apps used at least once per day	App used the most	Hours spent on social media per day	Apps with extremist language, messages, posts, or videos	Pressured to join an extremist group or cause via social media
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seventh column conveys the extent to which they felt pressured to join an extremist group.

**Data Analysis**

Experts were interviewed to determine if their experiences were different from those of the students. Results showed that there was a stark difference in how the two groups used social media to interact with others. The results from the experts are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Experts in the Field

NC (retired officer)	FB, IG, YT	FB	FB	1-2	FB- QAnon stuff	No but can see how others would be more vulnerable
RD (officer)	IG, Twit, Reddit, Snap	Twit & Snap	Twit	1-2	None online	Nope just derogatory stuff about everything
TC (educator)	FB, WhatsApp,	FB, IG, WhatsApp	FB	2-3	Yes- FB (can easily stumble upon stuff you don't intend to)	Nope but can see how others can be
RW (officer)	FB, IG, Twit	FB	FB	1-2	Yes- FB (military, religious, LEO- anti and pro right wing)	No- but if younger more inexperienced yes
PW (communications Officer)	FB, IG, Twit	FB	FB	1-2	Yes- FB	Not really but see how students are vulnerable

*Note.* FB= Facebook, IG=Instagram, YT= YouTube, Snap= Snapchat, Twit= Twitter,

HS= Homeland Security and LEO= Law enforcement officer

Students spent much more time on social media each day, and they were more active on a wider range of apps than the experts. Student results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

### College Students

Participant	Social media apps in use	Apps used at least once per day	Apps used the most	Hours spent on social media per day	Apps with extremist language, messages, posts, or videos	Pressured to join an extremist group or cause via social media?
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BK	FB, IG, Snap, Twit	FB, IG, Snap	Snap	5-6	FB- all over it	FB was so bad I deleted the app
LL	FB, IG, Snap, Twit	FB, IG, Snap, Twit	Snap	6-8	FB and IG- go back to your country remarks	Nope but racism in comments and replies
MF	Twit, FB, Snap	FB, Snap, twitter	Twitter	6-7	Racism against Hispanics on FB and Twit	Nope but asked about anti-LEO stuff
GF	IG, Snap, YT, FB	IG, Snap, FB	Snap	5-6	Extremist language and messages on snap	Nope just lot of discrimination and hate
DB	Snap IG FB TikTok	Snap IG FB TikTok	TikTok	8+	HT on FB	Regular msg and invites to group for modeling human trafficking
CF	FB, IG, Twit, Snap, TikTok	Snap, IG, FB, TikTok	Snap	4-6	Yes- IG someone identifying as Antifa	Little bit
BS	IG FB Twitter Snap Parler	IG FB twit snap Parler	Parler	6+	Lot of racist stuff on Parler	Anti-govt/ far right and racism
TM	IG, Twit, FB, Snap	IG, Twit, FB, Snap	IG	7-8	FB- violence groping of women	No but constant comments about groping women seemed to be ok
KE	FB, Twit, IG, Snap	FB, Twit, IG, Snap	IG	6-8	FB- violence against black people/women	No- but scary/intimidating
AH	Twitter, Snap, IG, FB TikTok	Twitter, Snap, IG, FB TikTok	TikTok	8+	Twit, IG, and TikTok had terrible comments toward women	Not really but I'm smart/aware because of HS background
KH	Twit, Snap, IG	Twit, Snap, IG	IG	6-7	Twitter-not at me personal but just people putting it out there	Yes- DMing me for HT- sexual trafficking \$\$ (Sugar daddies)
GW	FB IG Twitter Snap	FB IG Twitter Snap	Twitter	5-6	Twitter- anti human rights/religious talk	Not at me but it's there. My background helps.

Each student spent at least 4 hours each day on social media, with some spending 8 or more. CF explained that he used social media much less than most of his peers.

I check it first thing in the morning, usually on the bus and during lunch. If I'm bored in class or at the gym. Then maybe after dinner and when I get in bed. Lot of my friends never get off it. They're scrolling through or have it open all day. CF still spent 4-5 hours a day total on social media.

Four of the five experts browsed Facebook every day. None of the experts typically spent more than 3 hours per day on social media. A common theme among experts was that they scheduled certain parts of their day to check social media, and they rarely accessed applications outside of that time. Nearly all the students admitted to checking social media out of boredom or habit. NC noted, "My wife and I check Facebook at night when we get home. Gives us something to talk about. I don't get on it at work."

Four of the five experts said Facebook was the social media app they used the most. None of the students or recent graduates uses Facebook the most. Snapchat and Twitter were the most popular among the student group. Instagram and Tik Tok were mentioned as two applications most of the student group uses at least once a day. Parler and Tik Tok were two applications used by the student group that none of the experts mentioned in their interviews. Two of the students said TikTok was the app they use the most, while none of the experts were active on the app.

Students spent more time on social media, used a wider range of social media applications, and had different experiences than the group of experts. Four of the five experts explained that they saw extremist speech on social media; all of it came on Facebook. Students and recent graduates experienced extremist messages and posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Parler, and TikTok. Students experienced hate speech and extremist messages on social media applications that experts in the field never used.

None of the experts felt pressured by extremist groups or individuals via social media. They said that their knowledge, experience, and training were the reasons for this. They felt like students and those with less experience might be more vulnerable to being attracted to an extremist organization or cause. The expert participants explained that extremists target young people for a variety of reasons and young people are a vulnerable group.

The results were mixed in the student group when it came to feeling pressured from extremist groups or individuals. Two students admitted they were pressured by extremist groups via social media. Others stated they did not feel pressured but acknowledged how college students are especially vulnerable. Most of the students felt that taking classes in their respective majors and being aware of online threats protected them. Others felt students with different majors might be more vulnerable.

Student BK deleted Facebook because it was filled with extremist posts and videos. He received several threatening messages and responses from people he did not know personally. Multiple students encountered racist remarks across various platforms. The group of experts acknowledged that political and religious extremist groups were a



problem on Facebook, but none of them had experiences with racism, threats, or pressure from a group or individual.

Two of the female students received multiple messages regarding private modeling and being paid for dates with older, wealthy men. These participants explained how they were pressured multiple times over the course of a few months, and they feared these men were involved in human trafficking. Student KH explained, “I got a bunch of messages about sugar babies/sugar daddies. Instagram was the worst for that. I got rid of my old account, and it’s not bad on my new one.” Two other female respondents in the student group were sent multiple videos and messages in which women were groped and brutalized. One student, AH, said she felt pressured to join or participate in the activities, but all four were contacted by multiple individuals over the course of a few months about criminal activities. None of the law enforcement experts experienced anything similar.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Process for Credibility**

I interviewed students, graduates, and experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement. During the coding process, other professors checked the data and listened to voice recordings. I included quotations from the interviews as part of the analysis to support findings.

#### **Evidence of Transferability**

I strictly adhered to procedures described in previous chapters. Open-ended questions, such as the ones used in this study, should allow any researcher to gather rich data from respondents regarding their social media usage. Being familiar with

respondents influenced responses, likely resulting in deeper conversations and answers. For data to be credible and to contribute to the existing literature, they must be applied to other contexts and studies.

### **Process for Dependability**

I used the Rev iPhone app to record and transcribe all the interviews. This allowed for successful coding of the data. University professors reviewed the data as well. Participants were made aware that all the interviews were being recorded. Each participant gave consent to being recorded.

### **Confirmability**

To ensure confirmability, I took separate notes during the interviews, monitoring specific themes as they appeared. As noted, the complete transcripts helped in the coding process, but the brief notes I took with each interview allowed me to pay attention to specific themes and common replies I heard from respondents. Some of the interviews were conducted via WebEx, so I was able to monitor body language and other nonverbal communication. Rich data resulted from the interview method of using the Rev app to record and transcribe while taking brief notes by hand.

## **Results**

The research question asked how extremist groups were using social media to recruit college students. There was evidence that this occurred as three students were contacted by various extremist groups via social media. Others stumbled upon extremist videos and were exposed to extremist literature. There was evidence that at least one of

the students felt pressured to join a radical group. None of the experts were contacted by extremist groups via social media.

Students received several threats from racist individuals and groups on various social media platforms. One of the respondents felt like he was targeted specifically because he was a Black student at a Black college. When asked about feeling pressured to join an extremist group, BK responded,

No, it's not like that. But when I used to have Facebook, people said racist stuff all the time. When I'd comment on a post, I guess they clicked on my profile and it said Savannah State, so they knew I was Black.

BK explained that the harassment and abuse got so bad that he deleted the app. Other students complained of similar racist comments and abuse on various social media applications.

The abuse that these students and recent graduates described was obviously troubling. None of the experts experienced similar abuse or threats. TC, one of the experts, acknowledged the existence of racism and other derogatory language on social media, but he explained that there were ways to avoid it:

I use WhatsApp to speak to family and friends when I travel around the world.

I'm active on Facebook, but only connect with people I know. There's definitely hate speech and terrible stuff out there, but there are ways around it if you know what you're doing.

He felt that his training and expertise insulated him from threats and attacks.

As a group, experts agreed that extremist language existed on the platforms, but for various reasons, they did not feel like they were targeted by real threats or abuse. When asked if he had ever been pressured to join an extremist group, one of the experts, NC responded, "I haven't felt pressured, but I could imagine that a lot of people that are not solid in their own convictions and their own ethics and their own morals could feel pressured to do so". He acknowledged that many do feel this pressure for various reasons, but he and others with training and experience in homeland security were not targets of extremist groups.

### **Summary**

My research was intended to determine the extent to which college students were targeted by extremist groups online on social media. A diverse group of current students and recent graduates with majors related to law enforcement and homeland security were interviewed. I felt these students understood common terrorist recruitment strategies as well as what constitutes extremist language and hate speech. Experts were interviewed to determine if there was a difference in how they used and experienced social media compared to the students and recent graduates. Further, if experts in the field used social media less overall, were active on fewer applications, and were ignorant of new, popular applications, was there a gap in understanding of how prominent extremism and recruitment of young people were on social media applications?

Research showed that these experts, who all had more than 10 years of experience in the field, were out of touch with how college students and recent graduates used social media and what they saw on various applications. The experts claimed they were aware

of threats but were not as vulnerable because of their knowledge and experience in the field. They rarely felt like they were targets or intimidated by extremist groups and speech. Students thought they were less vulnerable due to their knowledge and education, but they experienced far more threats, discrimination, recruitment, and illicit offers. Both groups felt their training and schooling prepared them for threats and dangers on social media, but it was apparent students and recent graduates were targeted far more frequently and more intensely than the group of experts.

A handful of students discussed the power of hashtags in social media posts. They explained how groups and individuals use hashtags to circulate messages, photos, and videos to a larger audience. Also, hashtags allowed people to search and find more posts related to a common subject, term, or phrase. Research showed that students were familiar with dozens of popular hashtags across various social media applications. Most of the experts knew what hashtags were, but none elaborated on how they were an instrumental tool on social media. They were unfamiliar with some of the most common hashtags on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. It was clear the experts used these applications, along with Snapchat, much less frequently, but it was also apparent they were unaware of much of the message in the posts they were viewing.

Research showed that students were far more susceptible to discrimination, leud contact, and racism on social media. Both were diverse groups, but none of the experts expressed concerns about being targets because of their race or gender. Racial insults and discrimination were some of the most prevalent claims from the students. One student deleted his Facebook account because of all the threats and intimidation he experienced

due to his race. Experts said nothing about trafficking or making sexual advances at young women. Multiple female students were targets of leud and aggressive behavior toward women. Two of them were solicited for sex, and one was intimidated by videos of violent sexual attacks on women. These experiences were all unique to students.

Results showed that there were two, separate social media worlds for the two groups. Experts saw extremist language, mainly on Facebook, and acknowledged how it could be readily circulated. They felt many could stumble upon new, dangerous ideas even intentionally. Further, others without their experience, education, and training were certainly more vulnerable. They admitted that young people used social media more frequently in a way in which they did not. In sum, they recognized the violent prospects of social media, but personally they experienced very little of it.

Almost half of the students said that Facebook used to be more popular, but said it was mainly for “old people” now. Many students experienced intimidation, threats, and other issues on Facebook, but as a group, they expressed what they experienced on Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok was much worse than Facebook by itself. Female students were solicited for sex on Instagram and multiple students were victims of racism on Tik Tok and Snapchat, platforms the experts never used. Research was clear that a gap exists in how young people and their bosses, managers, superior officers, and supervisors use social media and what they experience on various platforms.

This research identified a possible gap in understanding of how individuals use social media and how their experiences influence their lives. College and recent graduates were more vulnerable to threats, but they were more aware as well. They use

social media more, and they use it differently than their professors, supervisors, and superiors. What can be done to address this gap that might impact positive social change?

Dialogue between the groups must be established. Perhaps entry level positions consisting of young people and recent graduates should be given more consideration in homeland security and law enforcement jobs related to social media and online security threats. The counterterrorism community must continually adapt to new threats. College students are essential to national security.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

My research was intended to determine the extent to which college students are targeted by extremist groups via social media. Prior research has shown that social media is the main tool used by extremist groups to connect with young people (Archetti, 2015). As a professor, I had access to students and recent graduates in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement who recognized the threat of online extremist groups. I interviewed 12 students and recent graduates about their experiences on social media. Then, I interviewed five experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement to determine what gaps, if any, existed between the two groups.

Weimann (2014) explained that college-age students were much more active on social media than prior generations. The results of this research showed that students and experts have different experiences on social media. Students and recent graduates were more active across a wider range of social media applications than the group of experts. There was evidence that extremist groups contacted students and sent them information about radical causes. Students were also much more likely to be victims of racial and sexual abuse via social media.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Amedie (2015) indicated that failing to effectively monitor extremist groups online represents a threat to U.S. national security. Stevens and Neumann (2009) acknowledged the cultural and generational gaps that existed between counterterrorism experts and those typically recruited by online extremist groups. This research showed several differences in how experts and young people use social media and interact with



others on various applications. Students and recent graduates spent more than twice as much time each day on social media as experts did. Students and recent graduates were active on applications experts were not familiar with.

Security officials face several challenges on social media. Klausen (2015) explained the importance of security forces monitoring extremist groups on social media while noting several challenges. Research showed that experts were unaware of the extent to which students and recent graduates suffer abuse on social media. Experts felt they were insulated from being targeted by extremist groups and other threats due to their training, knowledge, and experience. Students and recent graduates felt they were less vulnerable than their peers who had not taken classes in homeland security or criminal justice, but they reported habitual racial and sexual abuse on various applications.

Students were contacted by extremist groups, and one student felt pressured to join. GF explained,

I first heard about them on Facebook. Then I looked at some of their stuff on Twitter and YouTube. Videos were cool. They kept wanting me to get in a text group. After a few messages, I got out, but they kept tweeting me stuff and tagging me in comments on YouTube. It went on for like a month.

They stopped contacting him after a month, but they connected with him across multiple platforms.

Other students were approached by men claiming to work for modeling agencies. Two female students stopped posting pictures on their accounts because of prior messages they received from men who expressed an interest in being their *sugar daddies*.

Other students expressed similar concerns and explained they made private accounts with a nickname to avoid additional abuse. Research showed a clear distinction in what students and experts were subjected to on social media.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I interviewed a group of students and recent graduates and a group of law enforcement and homeland security experts, who I knew from conferences and community events. Students and experts were willing to participate because they knew me. BK explained,

I know you teach that Terrorism class, so I figured you could use some of what I had to say about social media and stuff. I also know you can't use my name or anything because you teach.

I was able to recruit a diverse group of students and experts in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement who were willing to answer personal questions about their social media usage. This would be problematic for a researcher who was unfamiliar with their participants.

Participants shared personal social media habits and experiences with me. I was able to gather rich data, in part, because of my familiarity with the participants.

Numerous participants mentioned that their responses would be different if someone else was asking the questions. KH stated, "I wouldn't just tell anyone that. But I remember you speaking at that trafficking group about how it happens all the time in the U.S." She said this after describing how multiple men solicited her on Instagram for modeling

auditions, which entailed sexual acts. Participants unfamiliar with a researcher would likely be hesitant to provide such personal information.

My research was not intended to draw broader conclusions about a larger population. Interviews were conducted to gather rich data from a diverse group of students. Participants provided detailed explanations of their interactions and experiences on social media. Quantitative research is recommended to generate knowledge and insights about how my findings might extend to populations.

Most of the interviews were completed over the phone, while a few of the interviews were conducted via WebEx. Not all participants had access to video calls, and social distancing precautions due to the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible to meet face-to-face. WebEx interviews resulted in clearer communication. These conversations, which allowed the participant and I to see each other, allowed me to interpret responses based on facial expressions and body language. Future studies using face-to-face interviews and video conferencing will likely improve data collection due to observing facial expressions and body language.

### **Recommendations**

As a professor, I had unique access to a group of students and experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement who were willing to answer questions about their personal lives on social media. For future research, I suggest having a personal connection to the participants. As mentioned, this helped recruit participants and likely increased their willingness to share details about social media interactions and experiences with racism, sexual harassment, and other issues.

Interviews were the sole data collection method for this research. I felt that interviews allowed participants to share honest, personal social media experiences, and I was able to collect rich data through this method. For future research, I suggest conducting interviews and focus groups. Allowing students and experts to discuss their experiences together might encourage more open, thoughtful discussion about what each is subjected to on social media and perceptions of why this occurs. I recommend focus groups that consist of only students, mixed groups of students and experts, and a group exclusively made up of experts. This will allow for gaps in understanding to be observed more thoroughly.

I asked each participant the same 10 questions. For future research, I suggest asking 15-20 detailed questions. I had issues with short responses for questions that were not open-ended. Participants often spent most of their time giving extended answers to one or two of the questions. I suggest implementing time expectations for each question.

### **Implications**

Social media is the primary tool for violent, extremist groups to recruit new members (Eze, 2018). To produce positive societal change, security forces must implement a multilayered plan, involving vertical and horizontal partners, to monitor and disrupt extremist groups from targeting college students on social media. Law enforcement officials at the local, state, and federal levels must communicate effectively, sharing relevant information in an efficient manner. Educational institutions must cooperate with government agencies and organizations, while companies and businesses become involved in the process as well.

Research has shown that experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement failed to grasp the extent to which students and recent graduates are threatened and abused on social media. Students were subjected to conduct and threats that experts never experienced. Predatory individuals attempted to exploit female students on applications that experts never used. Experts acknowledged the potential dangers of social media, but they failed to understand the magnitude and proximity of the threat.

Both groups of participants described instances of extremism on Facebook, a social media application each group used regularly. Expert participants indicated they felt one could insulate oneself from extremist language and abuse on the application. One student, Bk, was harassed so badly on Facebook, that he deleted his account. He felt compelled to do so after reporting more than 25 racist comments and posts aimed at him. Research showed a clear difference in how students and experts were affected by the threats of the online world, specifically on social media.

Failing to understand the extent to which college students are targeted by extremist groups via social media is a serious impediment to national security. It represents a threat to the mental health of college students, young professionals, and others who experience similar threats and abuses on social media. If experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement are not well versed on perils of social media, national security is compromised.

At a minimum, communication between young professionals and their supervisors in the fields of homeland security and law enforcement must improve. Recent graduates,

who are likely to be more active and aware on social media, should be emboldened to advise decision makers. These young graduates, who have superior knowledge and understanding of social media, should be given discretion to monitor threats across various applications. The counterterrorism strategy must continually adapt to growing threats of the cyber world. Including young people and recent graduates in the decision-making process is a vital step to effectively monitoring extremist groups on social media.

Social media platforms displayed the ability to restrict disinformation during the 2020 United States Presidential Election. Applications such as Twitter and Facebook further demonstrated this during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the federal level, the United States government must do more to compel these companies to address issues of racism, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse.

### **Conclusion**

Huey (2015) illustrated the complex world of online extremism. The purpose of this research was to determine the extent to which college students were impacted by extremists on social media. Twelve students and recent graduates of Savannah State University were interviewed to gain an understanding of what they typically experienced on social media. They described an extensive list of threats and dangers on social media. One student, GW, explained, "I don't know if it happens everywhere, but everyone I know here has heard it before. Some more than others but we've all seen it. It sucks, you know, but who can stop it?" Further research is needed to determine if this is a typical experience for college students in the United States. This study revealed the impact hate speech, racism, sexual exploitation, and other abuse has on college students.

Research showed distinct differences in how college students and experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement used social media. As a professor at Savannah State University, I had access to a group of diverse students who had been historically underrepresented in similar studies. They shared details about what they experienced on social media: recruitment by extremist groups, racism, physical threats, attempted sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse. Experts in the field of homeland security and law enforcement acknowledged the dangers and risks associated with social media, but they failed to comprehend the extent to which students and recent graduates were impacted by various threats.

Monitoring extremist groups on social media is an important aspect of U.S. national security. College students provide a window into the true perils and dangers that exist on social media. They are integral factors in promoting positive social change; opening our eyes to abuse and exploitation, while guiding us to a solution.

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