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# Graduate social work students' attitudes about the use of social networking sites in social work and the possible ethical implications of such use

Christina Irene Dillon

GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ABOUT

THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN

SOCIAL WORK AND THE POSSIBLE ETHICAL

IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH USE

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

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ABSTRACT

Social media and social networking have been embraced by the world with unsurpassed enthusiasm. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites (SNS) are transforming the way individuals share information and communicate. The purpose of the study was to investigate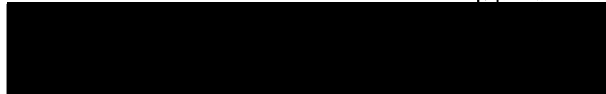 graduate social work students' attitudes about the use of social media in social work and the possible ethical implications of such use. The study used an exploratory quantitative survey design with self-administered questionnaires. Data was collected from 56 graduate social work students at California State University San Bernardino. Participants in the study were provided a six-page questionnaire, including demographic questions and eight hypothetical vignettes, involving ethical choices.

This study's findings indicated that the great majority of students used social networking sites and of those sites, they used Facebook the most. In addition, the study found that the great majority of the participants felt that posting client's information online was completely unethical. However, participants' views were split on the issues of seeking professional

knowledge and information online, responding to an online

friend request from a former client, and conducting a

Facebook and/or Google search on a client.

A need for future empirical research is evident as

there are no previous studies examining SNS use with

social workers or social work graduate students. The

graduate social work students are relatively unaware of

the ethical dilemmas that SNS use could create, or how to

appropriately react to the situations. This study also

illustrates the importance of ethics trainings specific

to social media use for all employees in child welfare

and social work, and the urgent need for the National

Association of Social Workers to create ethics standards

that are specific to social media use.

## DEDICATION

I would like to acknowledge Juan, because I would not have been able to go to graduate school without your support. Thank you for your kindness, generosity, patience, love, help, understanding and encouragement. I am truly lucky to have you as my partner in life.

I would like to dedicate this project to my parents. To my mother, because she is the strongest woman I know, and to my father, so that he may find his own inner strength one day.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM STATEMENT


Social media and social networking have been

embraced by the world with unsurpassed enthusiasm.

Social media provides an easily accessible, no-cost

global platform to educate, mobilize, alert and improve

the world (Robb, 2011). Blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and

other social networking sites (SNS) are transforming the

way individuals share information and communicate.

Certainly, social media represents one of the most

significant cultural milestones in recent years (Robb,

2011).

Employers and other professional groups are alarmed

at the potential abuse of the technology as social

workers use social networking at work and home (Arce &

Morin, 2011). As stated in Reardon (2011, p.11), Lynn

Grodzki, LCSW, MCC, of Private Practice Success, states,

"We're still learning about technology as a profession.

Perhaps the most important piece of advice right now is

to just be careful." Everything that is posted on the

Internet is public information or can be made public.

For example, a social worker may set their personal

Facebook account's privacy settings to "friends only."

However, there is no assurance that a "friend" will not

disseminate any information (postings or pictures) to

"nonfriends" via email or other social media outlets

(Arce & Morin, 2011). Employees should use good ethical

judgment and common sense when using social media (Arce &

Morin, 2011; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010; Reardon, 2011;

Robb, 2011).

Off-duty social networking use may be grounds for

an employer to discipline its employees. This is

especially true if the use undermines the agency's

purpose, mission and credibility with the public (Arce &

Morin, 2011). Social media use by social workers

violates agency rules and policies when confidential

information is disclosed. Confidential client

information divulged by employees can also lead to

invasion of privacy claims in a court of law against the

employer and employee (Arce & Morin, 2011).

When helping professionals misuse social media

tools, they may irreparably damage clients, sabotage

their careers, and jeopardize the social work profession

(Robb, 2011). While the digital age materializes,

alarmed ethicists fear the emergence of a new kind of

social worker, the turncoat blogger. These individuals'

covert, unethical disclosures and extreme rants suggest

an acceptable behavior and a new normal in the profession

(Robb, 2011). However, the National Association of

Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics stresses the

importance of client confidentiality, and all social

workers have a responsibility to abide by the code.

Innovative technology can and should be embraced as

it can allow helping professions to make a positive

impact. It can help educate clients and make

interactions with clients easier (Reardon, 2011). For

example, clients who may not be comfortable with face-to-

face contact can utilize instant messaging with their

social worker. This is also true for clients who moved

away but wish to continue receiving services from their

current provider via Facebook chat, or Skype (video

messaging), or Google chat options (Reardon, 2011).

However, it is also important to be aware of how much

technology can affect clients' lives, especially in

communication and relationships. It is necessary for

social workers who have a presence online to stay current

with both the trends and potential pitfalls of social

media use. As an advocate for clients, social workers

must remember that connectedness in clients is a primary element that can be increased (Reardon, 2011).

Currently, one can do a simple Internet search for social worker blogs and find several social workers depicting their daily activities, their anger and frustrations with clients, and highlights about the nature of the job. For social workers, venting about clients in work lunchrooms and hallways is not a new occurrence (Robb, 2011). These actions have always been in ethical conflict with the professional practice of social work. In addition, social media has not created these ethical dilemmas, as they have always existed. Social media simply brings a new focus to the ethical challenges (Robb, 2011). The privacy and confidentiality protections that the social work field customarily provides its clients are challenged when social media provides outlets for dissemination of personal information (Reardon, 2011). The activities of the social work renegade blogger jeopardize confidentiality, and empirical research in this area can help know if social workers are truly abiding by ethical standards. This study is needed because of the lack of empirical research on this issue. It has become necessary to

evaluate whether the benefits of using social media

outweigh the risks, and this study initiates that

discussion.

Practice Context

There is a need for empirical discussion about

ethics and the responsible use of Facebook, YouTube,

blogs, message boards and Twitter by social workers.

Helping professionals may need some help navigating the

intersection of the digital world and ethics. There are

the social work professionals who are in breach of the

NASW Code of Ethics and go off course (Robb, 2011).

Robb (2011) gives examples of bloggers:

Since January 2009, one social worker (a self-

described Capricorn) has been blogging the intimate

details of her clients' lives, including an incident

in which an ostensibly intoxicated baby was placed

in her office after a "drug raid."

One month prior to referencing a patient who "could

only be described as a little meth-y," an Oregon-

based medical social worker wrote, "Same problem as

usual…how to talk about some of my experiences

without breaching patient confidentiality."

Affixed to this "youngish" social worker's blog is a

disclaimer attesting to "altered names, places, and

other identifying information…to protect [client]

privacy." The postings that follow reveal

excruciating details about the social worker's

foster care clients. (p. 9)

It appears many social workers believe that the NASW

Code of Ethics and the state licensing boards allow

client information to be shared as long as identifying

information is not given (Robb, 2011). However,

maintaining confidentiality is at the core of the social

work profession. As cited in Robb (2011), NASW General

Counsel Carolyn Polowy stated:

On this matter, the code is unambiguous. We must

respect the inherent dignity and worth of the

individual as sacrosanct. Sharing personal

information is anything but respecting the client's

dignity. Why would anyone even want to give the

appearance of compromising social work's core

values? (p. 10)

Frederic G. Reamer, a professor of social work at

Rhode Island College and prominent ethicist has written

on ethics and social media extensively. Throughout his

literature, he states that when social workers choose to not abide by the Code of Ethics, they are headed towards a path of ethical misconduct (Reamer, 2005; Robb, 2011).

Reamer (2008) found the following:

As a general guide, social workers who use social media need to think very carefully before they post anything. We must adhere not just to the letter of the code but also to its spirit. Sliding underneath the code by doing something technically permissible or debatable does not mean you are acting ethically or that your actions are not potentially harmful. (as cited in Robb, 2011, p. 9)

An additional concern about the use of SNS is that the identity of the renegade bloggers can easily be found out via a Web 2.0 (social media) tool kit. Robb (2011) stated that he was able to uncover a specific bloggers name, city of residence, education, past and current employers, resumes and photographs. A client may be able to just as easily discover the same information (Nosko et al., 2010). Renegade bloggers can also be exposed by site hackers, alienated coworkers, estranged friends and previous lovers involved in divorce or custody battles, and website leaks. Robb (2011) found the following:

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Elizabeth H, an MSW student, shared her opinions

about the security risks of using SNS.

I did everything right, including the tightest

privacy settings [on Facebook] to limit what people

had access to. All it took was a keylogger [spy

software program] and everything about me was

exposed. (p. 10)

## Policy Context

New technology in the field of human service has

presented ethical challenges before. When the fields of

professional ethics and modern bioethics developed in the

1970s, practitioners and researchers struggled with a

variety of ethical dilemmas, especially in healthcare

(Reamer, 2011). For example, when the new technology to

transplant organs was developed, surgeons found

themselves having to make difficult ethical and moral

decisions about who would receive the only organ

available that day or night. Therefore, today's

challenges faced by social workers who use social media

are simply the latest chapters in helping professionals'

efforts to use technology appropriately (Reamer, 2011).

The current NASW Code of Ethics was ratified in

1996, and may be in need of an update to include social

worker's use of social media and the internet to find out more information about their clients (National Association of Social Workers website, n.d.). Electronic search engines did not yet exist in 1996. There is a need to create an ethics-based social media policy, so that clients are made aware that their social worker will not conduct an Internet search on them. One exception to this would be if there was an emergency where information transmitted electronically would help keep the client safe (Reamer, 2011).

Employees have the right to discuss their working hours, wages and working conditions. Therefore, social media policies should balance the employer's needs with the employees' rights. Appropriately worded policies may help prohibit employees from making disapproving, defamatory or abusive statements (Arce & Morin, 2011). For example, Orange County Social Services Agency (OCSSA) based in Orange County, California, uses a Confidentiality of Client Information form that all employees must sign as a condition of their employment. Orange County Social Services Agency's (1996) form states:

...information pertaining to clients of the agency

shall not be disclosed to anyone, in or out of the

workplace..., nor shall it be published, or used by

any employee, except for the purposes directly

connected with the administration of agency

programs... (Orange County Social Services Agency,

1996, p. 1)

The social media movement has created situations

with unique ethical and clinical challenges for both

clients and practitioners. It will be necessary to

ensure compliance with existing and updated ethical

standards related to confidentiality, privacy, informed

consent, and documentation (Reardon, 2011). It is

necessary for social work practitioners to develop

comprehensive social media policies and to review them

with clients (Reamer, 2011). While technology changes

rapidly, professional organizations may have difficulty

providing guidelines to their employees about how to

respond ethically to the unique situations social media

use can present. However, this does not mean that the

existing guidelines (i.e., the NASW Code of Ethics) do

not apply (Reardon, 2011).

The prominent use of social media by social workers and its ethical impact cannot be ignored. This is why it is important to understand the problem further and to conduct empirical research on the subject, beginning with assessing the attitudes of graduate social work students. As an MSW student and Title IVE recipient (child welfare emphasis), I am concerned about the problem and social service agencies and clients should be concerned as well. Currently, there are no studies that address social workers use of SNS and how it may ethically impact the profession.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine graduate social work students' attitudes toward the use of social networking sites and the possible ethical implications of such use. Due to limited research regarding this topic, the most suitable design for this study is an exploratory quantitative survey. Vignettes involving ethical choices have been created to assess the attitudes of the social work students toward the use of social networking sites and possible ethical implications. The vignettes and measurement instrument have been created to specifically

measure the perceptions of SNS use by graduate social work students, and their knowledge of the NASW Code of Ethics.

Graduate social work students' attitudes about the use of SNS can be scrutinized to get a better idea of its impact on the field. This is a new research area and findings can help evaluate the NASW Code of Ethics and perhaps re-examine confidentiality rules. There are dangers of using social networking and it is necessary to wake up to the ethical, legal and professional implications for social workers. A significance of this study's use of graduate students is that it may help address generational rifts in the profession. Older professionals may understand the warnings a social service organization heeds about social media use. On the contrary, younger social workers may not comprehend why something so integral in their lives (social media) has to be scrutinized at all (Reardon, 2011). This study can serve as an initial starting point for discussion among the generations.

## Significance of the Project
## for Social Work

The findings from this study will provide

information about graduate social work students'

attitudes about the use of SNS, and the possible ethical

implications.  With the potential results of the study,

employers in social work and child welfare can be more

aware of the impact of social media use by employees and

the confidentiality implications for the agency's

clients.  This study will directly contribute to child

welfare practice because the issue being addressed deals

specifically with current problems facing child welfare

agencies and their employees.  Robb (2011) states that in

a child welfare court case, or other liability lawsuit,

attorneys may ask a social worker if he/she has ever

blogged about clients or posted any client information

online.  Currently, child and parent's attorneys (public

defenders) in child welfare cases in the OCSSA have begun

to conduct Facebook searches of the case social worker to

gather damaging information about the worker and to

discredit their expertise and/or recommendation to the

Juvenile Dependency Court (Orange County Social Services

Agency Children and Family Services [OCSSACFS], n.d.).

For example, if the attorney finds online pictures of the social worker enjoying some alcoholic beverages with friends, then the public defender is likely to suggest to the court that the social worker's behaviors put into question their abilities to label a mother as an alcoholic and to say that the mother's behaviors impair her parenting abilities resulting in removal of the child (Orange County Social Services Agency Children and Family Services [OCSSACFS], n.d.).

These potentially embarrassing and damaging situations are a very real possibility for child welfare workers. The findings of this study may also help child welfare workers re-educate themselves on the NASW Code of Ethics, specifically about informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, service, social justice, the dignity and worth of a person, the importance of human relationships, integrity and competence (National Association of Social Workers website, n.d., p.1). The results of this study may influence a change in the NASW Code of Ethics, should there be evidence to support unethical use of SNS by social work students. In addition, the findings may initiate open discussion about child welfare policy guidelines and then incorporate them into child welfare

practice.  The findings will allow for other policies to be created that deal specifically with inappropriate and unethical actions on the part of the child welfare workers.

Overall, this study will provide information on a controversial and timely topic, greatly contributing to the field of social work.  All phases of the generalist model of social work practice will be addressed through this study as its topic has the potential to affect all stages.  This study's research question is: "What are graduate social work students' attitudes about the use of social networking sites and the possible ethical implications of such use?"

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW


Introduction

This chapter covers the literature surrounding

social media use by professionals, confidentiality issues

and ethical dilemmas. The literature seeks to understand

the general use of social media, the technological impact

of social media, the current NASW Code of Ethics, and

theories about ethics in social work. The chapter is

divided into several sections that will address general

use of social media, privacy and ethical concerns, and

theories guiding conceptualization of the problem.


General Use of Social Media

Social media provides a way for more than a billion

people around the world to be connected. Both

collaboration and communication have provided a new path

to social networking (Nosko et al., 2010). Individuals

support one another through blogs, podcasts, discussion

posts and comments. Facebook, Twitter and other similar

online social networking sites provide online

opportunities to create profiles and connect to others to

create networks. Social interaction and connection are the objective of social media (Cheung & Lee, 2010). These opportunities provide a means for individuals to share stories, in pictures, words and videos with their friends. People connect with others who live, study and work around them. People learn about parties, events and other social gatherings. Participation in online social networks is a social phenomenon that is largely dependent upon interactions with others in a personal network. Studies have recently begun to examine online technology use and those behaviors and attitudes that are associated with online communication (Nosko et al., 2010).

Cheung and Lee (2010) conducted an empirical study of 389 Facebook users and found that collective intention (intentional social action) for those who use social networking sites is the direct result of both social identity and subjective norm versus group norm. The measures were We-Intention (to use a social networking site), Subjective Norm, Group Norm, Cognitive Social Identity, Affective Social Identity, and Evaluative Social Identity (Cheung & Lee, 2010, p.25). The constructs were measured with perceptual scales. Respondents were student groups on Facebook and they were

administered an online survey about their use of

Facebook. This study was one of the very first to

measure social behaviors by the collective in the online

social network context. The study used a research model

that is based on social influence theory. The findings

supported the idea that intentional social action is

explained by social influence processes (Cheung & Lee,

2010).

Although there is no previous empirical research on

social workers' attitudes about SNS use and the ethical

implications, researchers have begun to explore self-

disclosure and online communication. As of yet, child

welfare agencies across the country have not studied this

study's specific topic. This author has included peer-

reviewed journal articles about the increasing use of

social media in other helping professions and the ethical

challenges professionals are confronted with.

Technological Impact

With the technology that is available today, helping

professionals may have easy access to client information

outside of a clinical setting (Tunick, Mednick & Conroy,

2011). The Internet provides a two-way highway for

clients to find the professionals and for the professionals to have access to community services; however, it can also serve as a means for helping professionals to have access to client information, and for clients to find out information about their helping practitioners (Tunick et al., 2011). Online therapeutic relationships may allow clients with boundary issues to find out personal information about their social worker and this may create a dual relationship. This in turn can be very problematic in that dual relationships go against the NASW Code of Ethics, and they can jeopardize the therapeutic interventions in place (Tunick et al., 2011).

Recently, many studies have examined the use of social networking among doctors and doctors-in-training. Findings suggest that many of the professionals do use SNS, do not utilize privacy settings on their online profiles and many post potentially damaging information online such as photographs depicting alcohol use and intoxication, sexually provocative photographs, client clinical information and offensive group membership (Tunick et al., 2011). As a result, the term "e-professionalism" was created to define the intersection of professional action and online behavior. This has

resulted in discussion about the need for the application

of ethical guidelines and professional standards with the

advancement of access to technology (Tunick et al.,

2011).


Privacy and Ethical Concerns

Robb (2011) authored an article in *Social Work*

*Today*, about social workers using social media

responsibly.  While he did not conduct empirical research

on the subject, he did gather 11 individuals comprised of

social workers, technology/legal experts and social work

students to discuss the responsible use of social

networking sites and ethics.  The group agreed that

guidelines should be created and implemented to help

professionals navigate social media use and ethics.  They

were very quick to judge those social workers who have

chosen to violate the NASW Code of Ethics and go rogue.

The intended audience for this article is the social work

professional (Robb, 2011).

Reardon (2011) also authored an article in *Social*

*Work Today,* about how to build a private practice in

today's digital world.  Like Robb (2011), this article

does not serve as empirical research but rather as

general information to social work professionals. This

article offers advice on how to use new technology tools,

how to avoid the potential pitfalls of social media use,

and how to attract clients responsibly and ethically

(Reardon, 2011). Both Robb (2011) and Reardon (2011)

offer sound advice and suggestions about the growing

impact of social media use on the social work field.

According to Acquisti and Gross (2009), existing

research on Facebook has focused on identity presentation

and privacy concerns. They also argue that users may be

putting themselves at risk both offline and online

because of the amount of information participants provide

about themselves, the open nature of the information, and

the lack of privacy controls enacted by the users. They

found a correlation between individuals' Social Security

numbers (SSN's) and birth data, and for younger people,

SSN's could be predicted through statistical inference.

This is due to the public availability of data from the

Social Security Administration's Death Master File, SNS

and data brokers. Their results highlight the privacy

risks of sharing information in public forums (Acquisti &

Gross, 2009).

Gewirth (2001) discussed confidentiality in child welfare in general terms. According to the author, the confider of information is both the subject and the client and the caseworker is the recipient of information. The author further stated that the client has a right to know that the content he or she discloses to the helping professional will not be divulged to others without their consent. Likewise, the helping professional has a responsibility to not share this content with any unauthorized persons. However, the author contended that there are some exceptions when confidentiality should be justifiably overridden (Gewirth, 2001). This article is relevant as it discussed how the practice of child welfare presents difficult confidentiality situations. However, there is no mention of social networking use and confidentiality issues. Yet, confidentiality is a standard in the NASW Code of Ethics that all social workers must abide by, so its relevance is important. This article serves as general background information.

Taylor, McMinn, Bufford, and Chang (2010) conducted a survey study of 695 graduate psychology students and psychologists about their current use of SNS, their

opinions regarding the online regulation by American

Association of Psychologists (APA), and clinical work

interaction as a result of the online activities. The

study concluded that established psychologists rarely

used SNS, and they did not have the experience to provide

supervisory guidance in this matter. Also, there was no

consensus about the APA guidelines. Continued training

and education were suggested to help deal with the use of

SNS (Taylor et al., 2010).

Another study similar to Taylor et al. (2010), was

done by Lehavot, Barnett & Powers (2010). They surveyed

graduate psychology students also and found that most of

them use SNS and do not use privacy settings. Further,

67% of the respondents admitted to not concealing their

real name, 20% admitted to posting photographs and 37%

admitted to posting personal information they would like

to keep from clients. In addition, 27% of the survey

respondents admitted to looking up client information

online. They did so because they were either curious or

trying to seek the truth about their clients (Lehavot et

al., 2010). The authors reported that this behavior is

unethical because the information was obtained without

the client consent. These actions also jeopardize the

ability to form and maintain a trusting client

relationship, and the intent to do no harm to the clients

(Lehavot et al., 2010).

Tunick et al., (2011) conducted a questionnaire

study with 246 pediatric and child psychologists and

psychologists-in-training. The subject of the study

included the respondent's personal use of SNS and

blogging and client use of SNS. The most used social

networking site was Facebook (95%), 56% of the

respondents had been using SNS for no longer than a year,

and 70% of the participants checked their SNS multiple

times a week. In addition, 25% of the survey respondents

reported that they have received "friend requests" online

from former clients; yet, responses to these situations

varied. Most clinicians declined the invitation, some

made decisions based on the individual situation, and

others admitted to accepting the request. In addition,

the authors reported that there were significant

relationships between restricted SNS and blog access and

posting material that they would not want clients to see

(Tunick et al., 2011).

As to viewing client's social networking sites, 32%

of the survey respondents admitted to "googling" their

clients and more than half of them asked their clients or

informed them beforehand. For those professionals who

found disturbing information on their client's websites,

those concerns were ultimately addressed in therapy.

However, only 35% of the survey participants stated that

they talked with their underage clients about privacy and

safety while using the Internet. This study highlights

the importance of how social media usage by both

clinicians and clients can jeopardize the delicate

therapeutic relationship, especially when those clients

are underage (Tunick et al., 2011).

Student therapists' attitudes and behaviors about

the use of search engines to gather more information

about clients were examined by Dilillo and Gale (2011).

A sample of 854 psychology doctoral students was surveyed

about their opinions, online activities, and frequency of

looking for client information online. The study results

showed that the students regularly used the Internet,

including search engines and social networking sites.

The study found that 66.9% of the participants reported

that using online search engines to search for

information on clients was "always" or "usually"

unacceptable. However, 97.8% stated that they used a

search engine to gather information on a client in the last year. In addition, 94.4% of study participants admitted to searching for client information on social networking sites (Dilillo & Gale, 2011). This study highlights a discrepancy between the respondents' attitudes and actual behaviors. Dilillo and Gale's (2011) study is also a first of its kind to examine this issue.

An exploratory study conducted by Mansfield et al. (2011) examined the ethical dilemmas facing health professionals and their use of social networking sites. The authors were specifically interested in confidentiality and doctor-patient boundary issues. They formed a group of medical professionals from various Australian and New Zealand medical associations and created guidelines regarding the use of social media. The authors stated that more research is needed, especially as the impact of social media continues to grow. The authors would like to further explore both negative and positive outcomes of social media use in the health care profession and update their existing guidelines (Mansfield et al., 2011).

## National Association of Social
## Workers Code of Ethics

Ethical dilemmas in the field of social work emerge

when competing duties, values and obligations are

encountered by practitioners. These dilemmas can occur

in all domains of social work (Reamer, 2005; Robb, 2011).

This study's subject matter concerns the NASW Code of

Ethics privacy and confidentiality ethical standards

(1.07[c] and [i]), as well as those standards related to

informed consent and conflicts of interests (1.03[a] and

[e] and 1.06[a] and [c]) (See appendix A).

While the Code of Ethics was approved by the 1996

NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 2008 NASW

Delegate Assembly, it is still necessary to note that

these standards do not include specific social media and

Internet use (National Association of Social Workers

California Chapter website, n.d.). Yet the Internet is a

public place where any and all information shared on it

can be viewed and accessed (Arce & Morin, 2011). This is

where a necessary change in social work policy and

practice may be needed, pending this study's results and

other future empirical research. None of the ethical

standards addressing confidentiality, informed consent,

privacy and/or conflicts of interest address social media use specifically. Therefore, it is necessary for this study to be completed so that a possible revision of ethical standards in the NASW Code of Ethics regarding the use of social media can be considered and therefore implemented.

Lehavot (2009) examined the American Psychological Association's ethical standards as they relate to confidentiality and privacy, boundaries and informed consent. In her article, she addressed psychology graduate students' use of the Internet to post information related to their academic pursuits and activities. For example, Lehavot (2009) questioned how online information was being used by faculty for the purposes of screening graduate school applicants and to learn more about their student activities. She also used case examples, one of which highlighted psychology students' own caseload of clients and how those clients may have accessed the student therapist's personal webpage, profile or blog. While she reported that the graduate students and all users of the Internet have the right to post information online, self-determination might be limited due to either a social and/or

professional context. She also highlighted the point

that those who use the Internet should have no

expectation of privacy; therefore, what others search for

and find is information that can be used like any other

information found. Although she made these arguments

specific to the psychology profession, similar reasoning

could be applied to the social work profession and use of

social media. While individuals may have a certain

expectation of privacy in particular situations and when

they put specific precautions in place, a schema is

necessary to define the boundaries of Internet use and

what can be used and shared (Lehavot, 2009). Her

recommendations included graduate programs establishing

guidelines about looking for information online and using

that information to screen prospective graduate students.

Secondly, graduate students should be cognizant about

what they post online while being considerate of their

fellow students, faculty and prospective clients

(Lehavot, 2009).


Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Social work literature includes cited frameworks

that social workers can use to work through ethical

decisions. These frameworks typically consist of systematic applications of ethical standards, ethical theories and social work values. Ethical theories are predominately based on moral philosophies of what is right and wrong (Reamer, 2005).

Reamer (2005) summarized the relationship between ethical and legal standards in the United States. His discussion focused on five sets of guidelines and requirements: regulatory law, constitutional law, statutory law, common law, court-made law and executive orders. Legal standards as they relate to professional negligence have existed in courts of law for hundreds of years, and are applicable to social workers' ethical decisions and judgment (Reamer, webinar, 2012). When helping professionals use electronic communication and social networking sites with clients, the nature of the professional's duty may be called into question at any time. Social workers must always be cognizant of any possible harm to the client in all interaction. Further, in a court of law, therapeutic exchanges may be examined for a causal connection between a breach of duty and damage or injury to the client (Reamer, webinar, 2012).

Ethical theories are typically classified as deontological or teleological. Deontological theories are those that claim that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, or good or bad, without regard for their consequences (Reamer, 2005, p. 165). According to this theory, regardless of the consequences, social workers must always be law-abiding (Reamer, 2005).

Teleological theories in contrast emphasize the idea that actions are determined by consequences. Therefore, a social worker can justify violating an unjust law if more good than harm is produced (Reamer, 2005). These theories provide a framework basis for ethical and legal conflicts in social work practice. In addition, Reamer (2005) stated that social workers actions may not be consistent with the legal laws and/or the ethical standards of the profession. Social workers actions may be acts of commission including deliberately violating the law to in order to complete their ethical duty. Moreover, social workers actions may also be failures to act. This occurs when social workers do not take the necessary action to comply with a law in order to complete their ethical duty (Reamer, 2005; Reardon, 2011).

These theories are related to the topic of social
workers using social media because they highlight the
challenges of helping professionals not being able to
easily compartmentalize their professional and personal
lives. In addition, because there is no guaranteed
safety and anonymity in the use of social media, social
workers must be extremely careful in using SNS to discuss
clients and/or themselves (Robb, 2011). The renegade
bloggers who seemingly exploit the gray areas of the NASW
Code of Ethics are jeopardizing the social service
agency, the clients, the employees and the profession. As
a result, these defiant social workers will have no
defense against an ethics committee. Conversely, instead
of creating any possibility of misunderstanding, some
social workers may choose to not engage in the use of
social media at all, regardless of any consequences
(Robb, 2011).

## Summary

As previously stated, there are currently no
empirical studies relevant to social workers' perceptions
of SNS and possible ethical implications. However, there
are several studies that have recently emerged concerning

ethical dilemmas in other helping professions.   In

addition, the NASW Code of Ethics does not clearly

identify the use of social media as a possible ethical

violation of privacy and confidentiality standards.

Therefore, the necessity of this study is evident, as its

topic is worthy of empirical examination.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS


Introduction

The following chapter will cover an outline of the

research methods utilized in this study concerning social

work students' attitudes about the use of social media

and possible ethical implications.  Topics addressed

include the study's design, the sampling methods, the

data collection and testing instrument, the procedures,

the protection of human subjects and the data analysis.


Study Design

This study sought to understand the attitudes of

social work students about the use of social networking

sites in social work and the possible ethical

implications of such use.  An exploratory quantitative

survey design was used to identify the attitudes of

social work graduate students.  Practical methodological

implications and limitations of the study included

developing a new instrument that accurately assessed the

attitudes of social work students.  This study used a

convenience sample of graduate social work student

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cohorts who are currently attending California State University San Bernardino, a comprehensive four-year university in Southern California, with an estimated population of 17, 500 students. Cohorts were divided into full-time (1st year and 2nd year), part-time (1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year), and then further divided into Title IVE and non-Title IVE students. The questionnaire consisted of 19 demographic questions and eight vignettes (see Appendix B). Students, through the hypothetical vignettes, were asked about their perceptions of social networking site (SNS) use in social work and child welfare and the ethical challenges it can create. The participants were asked to read the vignettes and answer the corresponding questions. The sample for the study included 55 participants.

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of standardized instruments concerning ethical choices in the use of SNS for social workers. Since there were no current instruments pertinent to this topic, an instrument was created for the purposes of this study. Therefore, the validity and reliability of this instrument are unknown. As a result, the validity and reliability may have suffered, due to the inability to

test the instrument extensively. However, a pretest was conducted on November 2, 2011 with three undergraduate social work students did not participate in the study. Another limitation of this study was that the study used a convenience sample, which impacted the generalizability of the findings. This limited the study's ability to generalize the results to the total population of social work students as a whole. In addition, since the sample was comprised of the social work students' cohorts, there might have been discussion amongst participants as to the content of the instrument, which can impact the results of the study. An advantage to the research-designed instrument is that it is customized; it is relevant and appropriate to the issue being studied. Additionally, others who are interested in addressing the issue of SNS use in child welfare and social work and the possible ethical implications of such use can use this instrument in the future. No hypothesis was formed concerning this study's subject matter due to a lack of empirical research on the issue.

## Sampling

The sampling frame consisted of both male and female graduate social work students in the social work department at California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB). The sample consisted of a range of ethnicities and ages. A total of 161 surveys were distributed with a response from 56 students. This sample size still provided a valid representation of the graduate social work student population on campus, as evidenced by the demographic findings.

The sample in this study was comprised of 56 California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB) School of Social Work graduate student cohorts, both full-time and part-time students, as well as Title IVE and non-Title IVE students. The only criterion for the sample was that the participants were attending CSUSB in the graduate social work department. Gender, age, level of education, years of experience, internship placement and use of social media were factors that varied amongst the participants. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire, answering demographic questions and questions concerning scenarios about the choices of social workers who use social networking sites.

## Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected using self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire was distributed to graduate social work students who were attending California State University San Bernardino during the Winter Quarter of 2012. Participants in the study were provided a six-page questionnaire, including demographic questions and eight vignettes. The vignettes were designed to measure the actions of posting online about another worker's clients, conducting online searches for client background information, accepting online friend requests from former clients, general online venting about social work issues, posting a blog disclaimer about changing client information and then revealing case details, using SNS to vent when unable to debrief difficult cases with a supervisor or co-worker, using Twitter (an online blog) to communicate with clients about appointments and to provide therapy, and having two social workers use SNS to discuss cases, goals of treatment and levels of intervention. Questionnaires were printed in English. The questionnaire contained no identifying data to maintain confidentiality. The

estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 10-15

minutes. The questionnaire's purpose was to measure the

perceptions of graduate social work students about the

use of social networking sites in the field of social

work and the possible ethical implications of such use.

The questionnaire utilized a nominal level of measurement

for the demographic questions and an ordinal level of

measurement for the vignette questions.

The vignettes used a Likert-type scale, indicating

the level of magnitude of ethical agreement or unethical

agreement of the respondent to the vignettes.

Respondents were asked to select a response from the

following: 1 (very ethical), 2 (somewhat ethical), 3

(somewhat unethical), 4 (completely unethical) and 5

(don't know). Each vignette revolved around the actions

of child welfare workers/social workers who used SNS and

the possible ethical challenges it created. The

demographic variables included gender, age, ethnicity,

level of education, job title, length of work experience,

internship placement and experience, Title IVE and non-

Title IVE status, student cohort and use of social media.

Overall, this study used quantitative methods to explore

graduate social work students' attitudes. However, space

was provided after each vignette for respondents to explain their answer and most of the participants gave additional reasoning for their selections. This data is qualitative in nature and content analysis was completed, identifying the major categories and patterns in the data.

## Procedures

The data collection procedures for this study involved distributing questionnaires to graduate social work students who were attending California State University San Bernardino via distribution of the questionnaires into the student's mailboxes at the School of Social Work in early January 2012. Every graduate social work student has an assigned mailbox labeled with their name in the social work resource room located on the third floor of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Building on campus. The resource room serves as a gathering place for social work students to study, hold informal meetings, conduct internet research and collect mail. The room is open only to social work students and is accessible through a door lock with an entry code. During the third week of January 2012, this researcher

placed one questionnaire with an attached envelope, an informed consent form, a debriefing statement and a recruitment flyer into each graduate social work student's mailbox. The questionnaire contained 19 demographic questions relating to gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, job title, length of work experience, internship placement and experience, Title IVE and non-Title IVE status, student cohort and the use of social media. The questionnaire also included eight vignettes about the ethical dilemmas that social workers and child welfare workers who use SNS may face. The participants were asked to read the vignettes and to indicate the degree to which the situation in the vignette is ethical. Once they completed the questionnaire, students placed it into the included envelope and then sealed it to help ensure that anonymity was intact. Next, the students took their questionnaire to the main office of the social work department (located on the fourth floor of the Social and Behavioral Sciences building), which is open Monday through Friday during the hours of 9:00am and 5:00pm. When they went to the main office, the students asked the office staff for the social media questionnaire collection envelope, which the office staff agreed to

keep safe and secure at all times in a filing cabinet located in the office. Only the office staff had access to the secured filing cabinet and collection envelope. The students placed their sealed questionnaire into the collection envelope, and then the office staff returned the collection envelope to the secured filing cabinet. If it was after hours, the students slid their sealed questionnaire under the locked office door. This investigator picked up completed questionnaires at least twice a week from the office. Respondents were given seven days after distribution to complete the survey and return it to the main office. In early February 2012, a reminder flyer was put into each student's mailbox asking them to complete the survey and turn it into the main office of social work as soon as possible. Approximately two weeks later, with the permission of the class professors, this researcher spoke to graduate social work students in their classrooms about the purpose of the study, and to ask for their assistance in completing the survey. Data collection was complete by the end of March 2012. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, this investigator received approval from Dr. Laurie Smith, Director of the School of Social Work at

California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB).
This step was completed on November 29, 2011 and the
School of Social Work encouraged participation in the
study.

At the conclusion of data collection, 161 surveys
had been distributed into student's mailboxes in the
social work resource room on campus and 56 completed
questionnaires were returned. Each survey was
voluntarily completed by the students. In February 2012,
in the midst of data collection, all of the graduate
social work students at CSUSB received an email from the
School of Social Work warning them about breaching client
confidentiality while using social networking sites.
This email was in response to a social work intern (not a
student of CSUSB) who posted client information on her
Facebook page. This researcher was interested in finding
out if this study breach might contaminate the
respondent's survey answers, especially for those
students who hadn't completed the survey yet but were
planning on doing so.

A packet containing an informed consent form
(Appendix B), along with the debriefing statement
(Appendix C) and questionnaire (Appendix D) was given to

each participant. Participants were informed that all information given is confidential and that their identity will remain anonymous. Discontinuing participation and refusal to participate was allowed and the participants were given the necessary information should they wish to learn the outcome of the study. The researcher inputted the data into an SPSS computer program. Data collection began in early January 2012, with data entry occurring in February and March 2012. Data analysis began in March 2012. The results of this study are available after June 2012.

## Protection of Human Subjects

To protect the identity of respondents, questionnaires did not request names. The identity of the participants in this study remained strictly confidential and anonymous. Any information obtained in connection with this study remained confidential and will be disclosed only with participants' permission or as required by law. When the questionnaires were collected, and the data was entered into a computer file, the questionnaires were shredded. All of the participants also received a letter of informed consent, stating the

purpose of the study and explaining that their

participation in the study was completely voluntary.  In

addition, the informed consent form explained the risks

and benefits to the participants, explained whom to

contact for answers to pertinent questions about the

research and research subjects' rights, and whom to

contact in the event of a research-related injury to the

subject, and explain where the study results could be

obtained after the completion of the study.  If the

participant's desired, they had the option of marking an

X on the informed consent form, rather than signing their

name.  Additionally, the participants received a

debriefing statement and the name of the research

supervisor should they have concerns following their

participation in the study.  The study's purpose was

clearly stated on both the debriefing statement and

informed consent.  There were no long-term risks

projected to occur to respondents.


Data Analysis

This study employed quantitative and qualitative

data analysis techniques.  Descriptive statistics were

used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the

sampled participants. Descriptive statistics were comprised of univariate statistics such as frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and variability. As to the qualitative data, this researcher completed content analysis, looking for similarities and differences among the data to identify patterns and themes. These procedures were important to help describe what the research question was looking to explore.

## Summary

As previously stated, this study sought to examine the attitudes of social work students about the use of social networking sites and the possible ethical implications of such use. This chapter reviewed the research methods to be utilized in the proposed study. The findings of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding social media use and social work practice. This chapter also addressed several precautions that were taken to protect human subjects involved with data collection. The data collection and analysis process were handled with great consideration and the protection of the participants was of the utmost importance throughout the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The chapter is a presentation of this study's

findings of graduate social work students' attitudes

about using social networking sites (SNS) in social work

and the possible implications of such use. The chapter

begins with demographic information about the respondents

and their response frequencies for the vignettes,

followed by frequency tables. Next, a narrative summary

of the qualitative data is presented, followed by a

summary.

Presentation of the Findings

At the conclusion of data collection, the sample size

consisted of 56 completed questionnaires. In Table 1,

the demographic characteristics of the respondents are

listed including age, gender, ethnicity, education level,

school program, Title IVE status and survey submission

timeline. The sample age range is from 22 to 60 years

old and the mean age is 32.04 years old. Approximately

half of the respondents (54.5%) are between the ages of

22 and 30, 23.6% are between the ages of 31 and 40, 16.3%

are between the ages of 41 and 50 and 5.4% are between

the ages of 51 and 60.   Over 89% of the respondents are

female and 10% are male.   Of the respondents, 39.3% are

Hispanic, 37.5% are White, 12.5% are African-American,

5.4% identified as Other, 3.6% are Asian/Pacific Islander

and 1.8% are Native American.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Age** (N=56) | | |
| 22-30 | 30 | 53.5 |
| 31-40 | 13 | 23.2 |
| 41-50 | 9 | 16.1 |
| 51-60 | 3 | 5.4 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.8 |
| **Gender** (N=56) | | |
| Male | 6 | 10.7 |
| Female | 50 | 89.3 |
| **Ethnicity** (N=56) | | |
| African-American | 7 | 12.5 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 2 | 3.6 |
| Hispanic | 22 | 39.3 |
| Native American | 1 | 1.8 |
| White | 21 | 37.5 |
| Other | 3 | 5.4 |
| **Education Level** (N=56) | | |
| Bachelor's degree | 47 | 83.9 |
| Master's degree | 9 | 16.1 |

Table 1.  (Cont'd)Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **School Program** (N=56) | | |
| Full-time 1st year | 18 | 32.1 |
| Full-time 2nd year | 27 | 48.2 |
| | | |
| Part-time 1st year | 3 | 5.4 |
| Part-time 2nd year | 2 | 3.6 |
| Part-time 3rd year | 6 | 10.7 |
| | | |
| **Title IVE** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 29 | 51.8 |
| No | 27 | 48.2 |
| | | |
| **Survey Submission** (N=56) | | |
| Before confidentiality email | 23 | 41.1 |
| After confidentiality email | 33 | 58.9 |

The education level of the respondents was either a completed bachelor's degree or a completed master's degree.  More than half (83.9%) had a bachelor's degree, while 16.1% had a master's degree.  Almost half (48.2%) of the respondents are full-time students in their second and final year of schooling and 32.1% are full-time first year students.  Some of the respondents are part-time students, with 10.7% being third year part-timers, 5.4% being first year part-timers and 3.6% being second year part-timers.  Title IVE status was divided almost equally among the respondents, with 51.8% as Title IVE (child

welfare emphasis) and 48.2% not Title IVE (no child

welfare emphasis). Finally, the majority of the

respondents (58.9%) submitted their completed surveys

after the breach of confidentiality email was sent out,

and 41.1% submitted it beforehand.

Table 2 shows the employment and internship

characteristics of the respondents.

Table 2. Employment/Internship Characteristics of the
Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Employed in child welfare** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 6 | 10.7 |
| No | 50 | 89.3 |
| **County in which employed** (N=56) | | |
| Riverside | 2 | 3.6 |
| San Bernardino | 6 | 10.7 |
| None | 48 | 85.7 |
| **Job title** (N=56) | | |
| Adult Protective Services Intern | 1 | 1.8 |
| Children's Service Social Worker V | 1 | 1.8 |
| Social Services Assistant | 1 | 1.8 |
| Social Worker II | 4 | 7.1 |
| Social Work Assistant | 1 | 1.8 |
| None | 48 | 85.7 |
| **Internship in child welfare** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 24 | 42.9 |
| No | 32 | 57.1 |

Table 2. (Cont'd) Employment/Internship Characteristics
of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Internship county** (N=56) | | |
| Riverside Co | 12 | 21.4 |
| San Bernardino | 18 | 32.1 |
| Other | 1 | 1.8 |
| None | 25 | 44.7 |
| **Amount of child welfare internship experience** (N=56) | | |
| None | 31 | 55.3 |
| Under 1 year | 16 | 28.6 |
| 1-2 years | 8 | 14.3 |
| 4 years | 1 | 1.8 |

Most of the students (89.3%) reported that they were not

employed in child welfare. Of those who were employed,

3.6% worked for Riverside County and 10.7% worked for San

Bernardino County. Although two of the respondents

stated that they were employed by a local county

(Riverside or San Bernardino), they did not work in child

welfare. Most of those respondents who were employed by

a local county had the job title of Social Worker II

(7.1%). Also, for those who were employed in child

welfare, two respondents had 4-5 years of work experience

and two respondents had 8-11 years of experience. The majority of the students (57.1%) did not currently have an internship in child welfare, while 42.9% reported that they did. Most of those with a child welfare internship (32.1%) were with San Bernardino County and 21.4% were with Riverside County. For those with a child welfare internship, 28.6% had less than one year of experience and 14.3% reported one to two years of experience.

Table 3 depicts the social media use characteristics of the respondents. Out of 56 respondents, only one person reported that they do not use social networking sites (SNS). For the respondent who stated she was not currently using SNS, she also reported that she was not likely to start using SNS in the future. Almost every respondent (94.6%) reported using Facebook, and more than half of the students also used YouTube (58.9%).

Table 3. Use of Social Media Characteristics of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Use social media** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 55 | 98.2 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| No | 1 | 1.8 |

Table 3. (Cont'd) Use of Social Media Characteristics of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Facebook** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 53 | 94.6 |
| No | 3 | 5.4 |
| **Twitter** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 7 | 12.5 |
| No | 49 | 87.5 |
| **MySpace** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 7 | 12.5 |
| No | 49 | 87.5 |
| **Youtube** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 33 | 58.9 |
| No | 23 | 41.1 |
| **Google+** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 14 | 25.0 |
| No | 42 | 75.0 |
| **Blogs** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 6 | 10.7 |
| No | 50 | 89.3 |
| **Message boards** (N=56) | | |
| Yes | 4 | 7.1 |
| No | 52 | 92.9 |
| **SNS used most** (N=56) | | |
| Facebook | 52 | 92.9 |
| Youtube | 1 | 1.8 |
| Google+ | 1 | 1.8 |
| Blogs | 1 | 1.8 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.8 |
| **How likely to use SNS if not currently using** (N=56) | | |
| Not very likely | 1 | 1.8 |
| Not applicable | 55 | 98.2 |

Table 3. (Cont'd)  Use of Social Media Characteristics of the Respondents

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **How often use SNS** (N=56) | | |
| Several times a day | 36 | 66.7 |
| Once a day | 7 | 13.0 |
| A few times a week | 7 | 13.0 |
| Once a week | 1 | 1.8 |
| A few times a year | 1 | 1.8 |
| No answer | 4 | 3.7 |
| **Purpose of using SNS** (N=56) | | |
| Personal | 30 | 53.6 |
| Professional | 1 | 1.8 |
| Both | 21 | 37.5 |
| Other | 1 | 1.8 |
| No answer | 3 | 5.4 |
| **How safe is personal information** (N=56) | | |
| Somewhat safe | 24 | 42.9 |
| Somewhat unsafe | 19 | 33.9 |
| Very unsafe | 9 | 16.1 |
| Don't know | 2 | 3.6 |
| No answer | 2 | 3.6 |

One-fourth (25%) used Google+, 12.5% used MySpace and Twitter each, 10.7% used blogs and 7.1% of the respondents used message boards.  The most frequently used social networking site was Facebook (92.9%) and many of the students used SNS several times a day (66.7%), once a day (13.0%), or several times a week (13.0%). Over half (53.6%) of the respondents used SNS for

personal use, while 37.5% used SNS for both personal and professional use. Almost half of the students (42.9%) stated that they felt their personal information was somewhat safe online and 33.9% of the students felt that their information was somewhat unsafe. Only nine of the respondents felt that personal information online was very unsafe.

Table 4 displays the hypothetical vignettes that were used to assess the graduate students' perceptions of SNS use in social work. The answers to the vignettes were based on each student's ethical perspective. For each vignette, respondents chose one of the following answers: "Very Ethical;" "Somewhat Ethical;" "Somewhat Unethical;" "Completely Unethical;" or "Don't know."

Table 4. Social Media Vignettes

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Employee uses Twitter about methamphetamine exposed child** (N=56) | | |
| Very Ethical | 1 | 1.8 |
| Somewhat ethical | 0 | 0 |
| Somewhat unethical | 6 | 10.7 |
| Completely unethical | 49 | 87.5 |
| Don't know | 0 | 0 |
| **Facebook vent** (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 0 | 0 |
| Somewhat ethical | 3 | 5.4 |
| Somewhat unethical | 11 | 19.6 |
| Completely unethical | 42 | 75.0 |
| Don't know | 0 | 0 |
| **Disclaimer** (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 3 | 5.4 |
| Somewhat ethical | 4 | 7.1 |
| Somewhat unethical | 9 | 16.1 |
| Completely unethical | 37 | 66.1 |
| Don't know | 2 | 3.6 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.8 |
| **LCSW Twitter** (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 1 | 1.8 |
| Somewhat ethical | 5 | 8.9 |
| Somewhat unethical | 6 | 10.7 |
| Completely unethical | 35 | 62.5 |
| Don't know | 8 | 14.3 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.8 |
| **Facebook friend request** (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 2 | 3.6 |
| Somewhat ethical | 7 | 12.5 |
| Somewhat unethical | 16 | 28.6 |
| Completely unethical | 30 | 53.6 |
| Don't know | 1 | 1.8 |
| **Blog vent** (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 6 | 10.7 |
| Somewhat ethical | 6 | 10.7 |
| Somewhat unethical | 16 | 28.6 |
| Completely unethical | 25 | 44.6 |

Don't know                                      3              5.4

Table 4. (Cont'd) Social Media Vignettes

| Variable | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Google/Facebook search (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 5 | 8.9 |
| Somewhat ethical | 13 | 23.2 |
| Somewhat unethical | 8 | 14.3 |
| Completely unethical | 16 | 28.6 |
| Don't know | 14 | 25.0 |
| | | |
| Therapist message board (N=56) | | |
| Very ethical | 12 | 21.4 |
| Somewhat ethical | 11 | 19.6 |
| Somewhat unethical | 13 | 23.2 |
| Completely unethical | 10 | 17.9 |
| Don't know | 9 | 16.1 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.8 |

The vignettes in table 4 are presented in the order of

highest "completely unethical" percentages.  Also,

additional space was provided for the respondents to

explain their answer about the social worker's actions

depicted in each situation.  Therefore, open-ended

responses (qualitative data) were collected with the

scale of ethicalness (quantitative data) in each

vignette.

Vignette 1 describes a work situation where a social

worker accesses Twitter to blog about a co-worker's

client.  Most of the respondents agreed (87.5%) that the

actions of the social worker were completely unethical

and some sample responses from March 2012 included: "A

social worker does not need to share their client's

information and experiences online" (Participant 1), "If

any identifying information is included, some individuals

may recognize who this person is.  Therefore, this is

breaching confidentiality" (Participant 3), "It could be

traced back to the client if others in the office see the

Twitter message" (Participant 13), "It is a violation of

the client's rights. It could put both workers at risk if

the family was aware of the post and they could face

disciplinary action at work" (Participant 20), "Violates

client confidentiality even if the child's name and age

are not posted" (Participant 22), "Clients are

confidential and friends do not need to know"

(Participant 31), "It's simply unnecessary" (Participant

56), and "Client info should never be posted online.

Colleagues/supervisors and people within your department

should be used to debrief about it" (Participant 29).

For those respondents who stated that the social

worker's actions were somewhat unethical (10.7%), some of

their answers were, "This individual should not blog

about clients.  I would have said completely (unethical)

had she used the clients name or personal information"
(Participant 6), "If the co-worker did not identify the
child in anyway, there is no breach. Somewhat
(unethical), because you are talking about a child's
misfortune and on a social networking site, anyone can
get that information" (Participant 14), "I am assuming no
names or personal information was addressed. And I am a
little concerned about whether information like this
should be posted" (Participant 18), "Not ethical, but
would be worse if she disclosed specific details"
(Participant 37), "I would want to know if the child's
identity was used. Also online social networks can
identify current location. That can break client
confidentiality" (Participant 28), and "Child should be
autonomous and can't reveal where the (meth) lab was"
(Participant 46).

Vignette 2 describes a child welfare employee who
completes a Google/Facebook search on a client to gather
more information. Responses were divided with 28.6%
choosing "completely unethical," 23.2% choosing "somewhat
ethical," 25% choosing "don't know," 14.3% choosing
"somewhat unethical," and 8.9% choosing "very ethical."
Those who chose "completely unethical," explained their

answers in March 2012 with, "Does not protect client right to privacy" (Participant 7), "I don't know why, it just seems wrong" (Participant 12), "There are protocols and legal methods for gathering information and some of the information may not even be relevant...plus, how does the worker document where she found this information?" (Participant 35), "People put things that are untrue on there all the time, not credible" (Participant 17) and "Need to obtain informed consent before going through client personal information" (Participant 38).

The "somewhat ethical" answers were explained with, "I think it's okay to look and see what the child says about themselves" (Participant 5), "If the profile is public then it is not unethical since the client freely shares this information publically" (Participant 6), "If approved by the agency, then okay. Some professional agencies conduct these types of searches on their employees and clients" (Participant 16), "It is a good resource to get information" (Participant 26) and "It's online, its fair game" (Participant 46).

Those students who answered with "don't know" stated, "This might give the worker a more rounded picture of the client, but is there damaging information

on there?" (Participant 3), "If it is required by CPS to do this (depends on policy)" (Participant 13), "The worker is trying to gather info on the client. However, I would try not to rely on this kind of source" (Participant 15), "Not sure if the internet sources can be used in court as supporting evidence in a child welfare case" (Participant 43), and "It depends on the information. Looking for a runaway child would be okay. Looking for personal information on a client would be unethical" (Participant 47).

"Somewhat unethical" answers were explained as "You cannot trust websites to be honest and true, not a professional way to do a psychosocial assessment" (Participant 8), "Additional information and personal photos are available and should not be viewed" (Participant 21), "Not our job to search, if the client wants to show us, that's fine. But not to go investigate. The client will feel violated if you bring up the information in session" (Participant 31). "Privacy violation but all resources should be available to protect the children" (Participant 40), "This should only be done if the CPS employee is trying to gather information regarding safety or location of client"

(Participant 44) and "I'm not sure what the rules are about this, but it does not seem appropriate. It could be useful though if you have limited information" (Participant 36).

Finally, for those respondents who selected "very ethical," explanations included, "Having as much info as possible helps the worker come up with a case management plan" (Participant 4), "What she is doing is public information and not illegal. However, there must be limits placed on personal information about people" (Participant 24) and "If the search is conducted in agency office with staff trained to locate absent relatives or criminal checks" (Participant 30).

The third vignette is a situation in which a social worker receives a Facebook friend request from a former client and the social worker accepts the request because the person is no longer a client of the agency. More than half of the respondents (53.6%) chose "completely unethical," 28.6% chose "somewhat unethical" and 12.5% chose "somewhat ethical." Those students who selected "completely unethical" in March 2012 justified their answers with "The worker should only have a professional relationship with the client and Facebook is not

professional" (Participant 6), "Shouldn't be friends with a client even if it is an old client" (Participant 11), "Social worker should know what to do when this happens, do not accept it" (Participant 17), "The client is at risk because the social worker is familiar with the clients background" (Participant 29) and "Weird, clients are not our friends" (Participant 55).

"Somewhat unethical" explanations were "This person may return as a client, it confuses the worker-client relationship" (Participant 1), "Although they are no longer in a professional relationship, the power balance may still be uneven. Should wait 3 years, then they can be friends" (Participant 3), "Well it's been a few years but you never know what kind of conflict can exist and be used against the social worker in the future. Better safe than sorry" (Participant 45) and "Depends on how long the client has been terminated for" (Participant 53).

Those respondents who chose "somewhat ethical" stated "I know Children and Family Services (CFS) says this is unethical, but personally I don't see what would be wrong with this" (Participant 5), "Because the person is no longer a client of the agency, and as long as the

worker isn't posting negative things about clients or the agency" (Participant 18), "If the client is no longer part of the system. Should have been a minimum of 5 years" (Participant 46) and "As long as it will cause no harm to the client" (Participant 37).

Vignette 4 is a situation in which a social worker with an MSW degree blogs online about her frustrations with clients, without using any identifying information. Less than half (44.6%) of the students indicated that the social worker's actions were "completely unethical," and 28.6% indicated that it was "somewhat unethical." The rest of the students were divided in their answers, 10.7% for "very ethical," 10.7% for "somewhat ethical," and 5.4% chose "don't know."

The "completely unethical" choices in March 2012 were paired with qualitative responses including "A blog is public and therefore a prior or current client may see this post. People may jump to conclusions about the subject of the blog" (Participant 6), "Work needs to be kept at work. Statements like hers are discriminating and insulting. She should vent to her supervisors" (Participant 16), "The worker is attempting to vent about her issues but this is not an appropriate way to do so"

(Participant 19) and "Although it is fine to be upset, it is unethical to post things about clients. I feel that this is a worker who may need some time to reevaluate her career" (Participant 36).

Respondents who chose the "somewhat unethical" response offered the following reasons: "As long as she doesn't describe specific clients/situations, venting may be appropriate" (Participant 1), "She needs to put personal issues aside. Everyone is battling something on a daily basis. But she does need catharsis and an outlet" (Participant 3), "It's sending a negative message to all of those who will read her post regarding social workers" (Participant 15), "She is not speaking about a particular client or a particular case/situation. However, blogging about it for anyone to read is wrong" (Participant 24) and "The code of ethics (once we become a social worker) should guide our life" (Participant 53).

The respondents who chose "very ethical" and "somewhat ethical" were similar in their written answers. Many of them stated, "She didn't give out any information" (Participant 4), "She's venting, leave her alone" (Participant 13), "As long as she did not name any specific clients, I think it's okay, but she should

respect the difference between her professional life and private use of SNS" (Participant 12) and "She has the right to free speech. Social worker does not equal a saint" (Participant 37).

The fifth vignette depicts a long-time employed social worker who uses a disclaimer on his online blog to change client identifying information, and then reveals personal information about his clients. More than half of the respondents (66.1%) found this scenario to be "completely unethical," 16.1% found it to be "somewhat unethical," 7.1% found it to be "somewhat ethical" and 5.4% found it to be "very ethical." In March 2012, the majority of those students who thought the scenario was "completely unethical" indicated that, "Unless the social worker has consent from the client, they shouldn't discuss anything" (Participant 10), "Personal details or not, he has no right posting facts about his clients on his blog without their consent" (Participant 14) and "Sometimes cases can be identified although names and locations are changed" (Participant 29).

"Somewhat unethical" choices were paired with answers such as "If the clients privacy is protected, then it may be okay, otherwise these specifics are not

appropriate" (Participant 1), "I personally think that if one is in this field, they should never post, blog or tweet about their job or clients. However, there is no identifying info" (Participant 45) and "There is never a need to blog about your clients regardless of the disclaimer. Blogs are often misunderstood" (Participant 52).

"Somewhat ethical" and "very ethical" explanations included "If the blog is for informational purposes, the social worker is taking actions to protect privacy" (Participant 24), "If the information was changed and his blog may be to help others, I think it could be alright" (Participant 54) and "If people know where this person works, confidentiality is at stake" (Participant 3).

Vignette 6 describes a situation in which a Child Protective Services social worker uses their personal Facebook page to vent about clients after an upsetting day. Two-thirds (75%) of the respondents felt that this social worker's actions were "completely unethical," 19.6% reported "somewhat unethical," and 5.4% reported "somewhat ethical." While the majority of choices were "completely unethical" and "somewhat unethical," narrative answers in March 2012 included "Should not put

where he works. Might have negative repercussions" (Participant 3), "This person is blasting their agency out to the public. This tarnishes the agency's name because this shows that they are employing someone who would discuss personal matters within their caseload on SNS. Again, not the appropriate venue" (Participant 14), "Not a healthy way or most effective way to cope with feelings. This is not self-care and the social worker should do what is necessary to receive needed supervision" (Participant 28) and "The social worker knew what he/she was getting into, get out of the profession" (Participant 50). "Somewhat ethical" answers were paired with "If no other information is provided, then they are just venting" (Participant 21) and "Again, venting with no specific information" (Participant 27).

The seventh vignette is about an LCSW who uses Twitter to communicate with clients to set appointments, provide crisis intervention and general therapy. Most of the respondents (62.5%) reported that this vignette was "completely unethical," 14.3% chose "don't know," 10.7% chose "somewhat unethical," and 8.9% chose "somewhat ethical." In March 2012, the narrative answers paired with "completely unethical" choices included "Individuals

who may follow the client will be able to see

intervention and therapy notes. Plus how can you fit a

session into 140 characters?" (Participant 3), "They need

their license stripped away and burned! Totally

inappropriate forum for that sort of client interaction.

There is no privacy or protection for the client"

(Participant 14), "Do not use SNS to communicate with

clients. They are not your friends" (Participant 17) and

"I'm not sure, but if clients are posting their names for

appointments and the LCSW is providing

intervention/therapy and all users can read it, then

that's violating confidentiality" (Participant 24).

   "Don't know" narrative answers were "I don't know

how this form of SNS works, including privacy, etc."

(Participant 27), "If a client agrees, it might be okay

but I don't think it's proper" (Participant 31) and

"Depends on security of website and privacy of LCSW's

page and conversations" (Participant 43). "Somewhat

unethical" selections included "I wouldn't do that. If

allowed by the agency, then I could see the use"

(Participant 16), "Process should be formal so that

client takes treatment seriously" (Participant 34) and

"Setting appointments seems okay, worded carefully, but

that's about it" (Participant 49). Finally, "somewhat

ethical" choices were paired with narratives such as "If

the clients are comfortable with it and no private

information is revealed, it's okay" (Participant 1), "I

think as long as the advice and crisis intervention is

not geared towards specific people it's okay. Not okay

to schedule appointments" (Participant 5) and "The LCSW

is making herself available, however this may indicate

the LCSW and client are friends, which might not be a

good thing" (Participant 33).

The final vignette is about a therapist who does not

know how to proceed with a domestic violence victim and

the therapist seeks advice from an online social work

message board. The responses were divided with most

students (23.2%) choosing "somewhat unethical," 21.4%

choosing "very ethical," 19.6% choosing "somewhat

ethical," 17.9% choosing "completely unethical" and 16.1%

choosing "don't know." In March 2012, narrative answers

for "somewhat unethical" include "Seek advice from

supervisor first, colleagues next and go from there. You

don't know if the site is public or restricted access"

(Participant 8), "Is the blog locked to the public? Has

a confidentiality agreement been signed? Is this an

agency approved practice?" (Participant 16), "It would have been more appropriate to call or email the other therapist so as not to expose the client's information" (Participant 20), "May be viewed by others, there are plenty of internet hackers" (Participant 26) and "The social worker is potentially exposing her client's confidential information which can cause repercussions for the domestic violence victim" (Participant 29). The next set of narrative answers for "very ethical" and "somewhat ethical" include "As long as no identifying information was given, she is merely consulting" (Participant 3), "As long as privacy is kept, the social worker is doing his/her best to provide proper assistance to the client" (Participant 34) and "As long as it's a secure board which requires proof of professional credentials with licensed moderators present, it's appropriate to discuss redacted information" (Participant 38).

"Completely unethical" narrative answers included "Once again, no protection for the client. The fact that she is a victim of domestic violence should tell any worker that the client's protection is crucial and everything should be done to protect that client"

(Participant 14) and "Breach of confidentiality is likely

on a social work message board. Why not use an email

with HIPPA confidentiality disclosures?" (Participant

30). Finally, the last set of narrative answers paired

with "don't know" include "Depends if the message board

is visible by the public or not" (Participant 12), "As

long as she's not disclosing the name or personal

identifiable information. Professionals always consult

with each other" (Participant 15) and "Are these message

boards secure? Is it public information? I want to say

it's better to communicate directly and confidentially"

(Participant 35).

## Summary

The study presented here stems from the exploratory

design of this study, examining the attitudes of graduate

social work students' about the use of social networking

sites (SNS) and the possible ethical implications of such

use. This chapter described the characteristics of study

sample participants, participants' ethical perceptions of

the vignettes presented and qualitative responses. These

results indicate some differential attitudes towards the

use of SNS in social work and child welfare.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## DISCUSSION

### Introduction

In this chapter, the study's findings will be discussed in greater detail, as well as the limitations of the study, recommendations for social work practice, policy and research and the conclusions. In addition, the qualitative data is discussed as it relates to the eight hypothetical vignettes.

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the attitudes of graduate social work students about the use of social networking sites and the ethical implications of such use. The sample size for this study consisted of 56 graduate social work students attending California State University San Bernardino. The sample was mostly female and equally consisted of both Caucasian and Hispanic students; however, African-Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders and those students who identified as Other were also represented. Most students had at least a bachelor's degree, and almost half of the respondents

were full-time students who would be graduating in June 2012.  The sample was divided almost equally for Title IVE (child welfare emphasis) and non-Title IVE status and the majority of the students submitted their questionnaires before the breach of confidentiality email was distributed.

This study's findings indicated that the great majority of students (55 out of 56 respondents) used social networking sites and of those sites, Facebook is used the most.  In addition, most respondents reported that they accessed SNS several times a day, which might imply that access occurred while on both professional and personal time.  This study found that over one-third of the students used social networking sites for both personal and professional use.  Of note, almost half of the respondents reported that they felt their social networking site postings and information were "somewhat safe" compared with only nine respondents who selected "very unsafe."  Yet in nearly every vignette, the majority of the students chose "completely unethical" to describe the hypothetical social worker's SNS use.  These findings may indicate that the majority of the student

sample is quick to ethically judge other social worker's

actions for similar SNS use.

Certainly, in any of the vignettes, client

information could have been discovered from a source that

is not Internet-related.  However, the ease and

accessibility of the Internet and social media means that

it is more likely to be the source of the information and

this is also more common.  It is important for any of the

social workers depicted in the vignettes to find a

balance between their personal desires and professional

judgment.  When presented with the unique ethical

dilemmas that social media use sometimes creates, the

helping professional may have to sacrifice their personal

choices.  As a result, the autonomy of the professional

is justifiably restricted for the betterment of the

client, the therapeutic relationship, the treatment

intervention and the perception of the social work

profession as a whole (Lehavot, 2009).

The study found that participants were ambivalent

towards the social worker conducting a Google and/or

Facebook search on a client.  There was an equal

distribution of "completely unethical," "somewhat

ethical," and "don't know" answers.  Some students felt

that the scenario was a confidentiality breach, while others said that if it was an agency practice, then it was acceptable. Others stated that the information was unreliable either way. These responses illustrate that some professionals and graduate students may believe that because the Internet is a public forum, anyone who posts something online forfeits their right to privacy. One could argue that individuals who engage in this type of activity are doing something that is no different than other public behavior (Lehavot, 2009). This can lead to some important questions: Can information learned through the Internet about a client be considered confidential? And can it be used in a professional manner? Should the information be considered public or private? Lehavot (2009) explains it well: "…privacy is a subjective state that individuals may expect under certain conditions and when they exercise specific precautions" (p. 131). Without obtaining informed consent, the clinician's actions are unethical. However, "Googling" may be acceptable as long as helping professionals notify their clients about this practice. The survey respondent answers to this particular vignette were intriguing.

The study also found that participants' views were very mixed on a vignette describing a therapist who does not know to proceed with a domestic violence victim so she seeks advice from an online social work board. This scenario highlights how the Internet is a pathway for communication among colleagues and professionals and how it is growing, instead of diminishing (Lehavot, 2009). In fact, the use of the Internet has been engrained into the social work profession. Responses for this vignette were also in fairly equal amounts, between "somewhat unethical," "completely unethical," "very ethical," "somewhat ethical" and "don't know." Some students felt that the information exchanged might be viewed by others or hacked somehow, while other students felt that the consultation was acceptable as long as no identifying information was given. For those students who selected "don't know," they questioned if the message board was secure or public. The social work profession is very likely to continue to face online communication that threatens the ethical and professional standards. Therefore, training and education on the ethical implications of online communication will be necessary to properly equip helping professionals.

The study revealed that half of the respondents believed accepting a Facebook friend request from a former client was completely unethical. However, the other half of the respondents chose either "Very ethical," "somewhat ethical," or only "somewhat unethical." A few of the students stated that Facebook relationships with clients are not professional. Others said that as long as at least three years had passed, then the worker and client could be online friends. Finally, other students defended the social worker's actions by saying that because the person was no longer a client of the agency, then it was an acceptable behavior. Online interactions between helping professionals and clients can be ambiguous in nature due to the lack of distinction between professional exchanges and personal ones. This vignette demonstrates how the ambiguity may make it a challenge for those helping professionals to interpret the NASW Code of Ethics (Lehavot, Barnett & Powers, 2010).

This study's results indicate that social networking site use is in fact widespread and an emerging trend. The findings also highlight the importance of not only working professionals in the social work field, but also

that of graduate social work students who have an

internship in social work and/or child welfare, and will

eventually graduate with an MSW degree.  Although the

findings demonstrate some general knowledge of the NASW

Code of Ethics of these soon to be graduates, the results

also highlight how ubiquitous social media use is.

Qualitative responses associated with the eight

hypothetical vignettes illustrate the need for further

research and education among MSW students.


## Limitations

This study faced several limitations. One limitation

is the low response rate.  Out of 161 questionnaires that

were distributed to the students, 56 were returned and

this resulted in a 33% response rate.  The small sample

size may reduce the ability to generalize this study's

findings to all graduate social work students.  Another

possible limitation of the study is the fact that the

entire sample is comprised of graduate college students.

Therefore, it is likely that they all have been exposed

to computer use and possible social networking site use.

Such a widespread use is different from working

professionals who may have less exposure to SNS and may have differing opinions about its use.

A very important limitation of this study is the lack of empirical research regarding graduate social work students' attitudes about the use of social networking. While this researcher was not able to locate journal articles about social workers and social media use specifically, there are a few studies that used psychologists or psychiatrists as a sample on their SNS use. However, these studies did not use hypothetical vignettes. Without an established body of empirical knowledge to compare this study's findings to, it is not possible to make a worthy comparison.

The final limitation is in regards to the design of this study. As noted above, no research exists regarding this study's topic. As a result, no standardized instrument was available for use. This researcher created an instrument based on her subjectivity and both the validity and reliability of the study's findings may have suffered as a result.

Recommendations for Social Work
Practice, Policy and Research

The prevalent use of social media in today's society
has changed interpersonal communication on a substantial
level. These changes have the potential to affect the
social work profession's ethical standards, especially as
they relate to confidentiality, informed consent, self-
determination and self-disclosure (Tunick et al., 2011).

How do helping professionals ensure the safety and
protection of clients, while defining the limits of
social workers' responsibility to their welfare? When
helping professionals choose to view client information
online, outside of the clinical setting and/or without
their permission, this too jeopardizes the treatment
protocol and threatens the therapeutic relationship,
while compromising professional boundaries (Tunick et
al., 2011).

This study's results, including the qualitative
data, indicate that graduate social work students are in
need of more training, education and experience in the
ethical use of social networking sites. The findings are
also indicative of the need for the NASW Code of Ethics
to create specific ethical standards as they relate to

the use of SNS. Some examples would include developing guidelines about receiving online friend requests from clients, conducting Facebook/Google searches on clients, seeking professional knowledge and information online and posting client's information online.

Once the NASW Code of Ethics has been updated to include ethical standards that relate to SNS use, child welfare agencies will likely need to provide training and guidance to their employees. Perhaps they should make it mandatory to ensure their employees are in compliance with the ethical code. Not all employees of child welfare agencies are defined as social workers, nor are they members of the National Association of Social Workers. However, this study illustrates the importance of ethics trainings specific to social media use for all employees in child welfare and social work.

The prospective damage to clients as the result of social workers who misuse social media is concerning. In addition, the motivation of professionals who engage in the unethical use of SNS should be examined as well. A need for future empirical research is evident as there are no previous studies examining SNS use with social workers or social work graduate students. This study's

results indicate that further empirical examination needs to occur with social workers specifically. The graduate social work students are relatively unaware of the ethical dilemmas that SNS use can create, or how to appropriately react to the situations.

The popularity of SNS use will only grow and it does not appear to be diminishing anytime soon. Specific to social work and child welfare, certain practices like electronic communication may become ethically questionable. Lehavot (2009) provides good questions for those students and/or professionals who use social media: What are the benefits and risks associated with posting information on the Internet? Is it likely that clients, colleagues and the agency I'm employed with will be profoundly and negatively impacted by my online activities?

In today's world, technology is changing rapidly, and this may make it difficult for professional agencies and associations to create and provide ethical guidelines about how to appropriately respond to social media related issues. However, this study's subject matter should serve as a reminder that the current NASW Code of Ethics is still applicable. Unethical social media

practices increase the likelihood of social workers

having to face ethics committees, licensing boards and

lawsuits.  Constructive responses including the creation

of an ethical social media policy can be extremely useful

to help protect both clients and practitioners. Policy

creation can help reduce the risk to social workers, help

prevent any future ethical errors and it holds the social

work profession accountable.


## Conclusions

The findings from this study are indicative of some

confusion and ambivalence towards the use of SNS among

the graduate social work students.  For those students

who use SNS, they may find themselves in ethical

predicaments, not knowing how to appropriately respond.

The quantitative data illustrated high use of social

media, and specifically Facebook by the students.  The

hypothetical vignette data were more contrasted with some

respondents siding with the "completely unethical"

viewpoint on every vignette, and other students who were

more varied with their ethical selections.  Participants'

views were split on the issues of seeking professional

knowledge and information online, responding to an online

friend request from a former client and conducting a

Facebook and/or Google search on a client.  This study

has hopefully contributed to the already started

discussion regarding SNS use among social workers and

social work students.

APPENDIX A

CODE OF ETHICS

Code of Ethics

On privacy and confidentiality:

(c) Social workers should protect the

confidentiality of all information obtained in the

course of professional service, except for

compelling professional reasons.  In all instances,

social workers should disclose the least amount of

confidential information necessary to achieve the

desired purpose; only information that is directly

relevant to the purpose for which the disclosure is

made should be revealed (National Association of

Social Workers website, n.d., expression 1.07)

(i) Social workers should not discuss confidential

information in any setting unless privacy can be

ensured.  Social workers should not discuss

confidential information in public or semipublic

areas such as hallways, waiting rooms, elevators,

and restaurants (National Association of Social

Workers website, n.d., expression 1.07).

The NASW Code of Ethics privacy and confidentiality

standard (1.07[m]) further states:

(m) Social workers should take precautions to ensure
and maintain the confidentiality of information
transmitted to other parties through the use of
computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines,
telephones and telephone answering machines, and
other electronic or computer technology. Disclosure
of identifying information should be avoided
whenever possible (National Association of Social
Workers website, n.d., expression 1.07).

As to informed consent and the use of technology,

(a) Social workers should provide services to
clients only in the context of a professional
relationship based, when appropriate, on valid
informed consent. Social workers should use clear
and understandable language to inform clients of the
purpose of the services, risks related to the
services, limits to services because of the
requirements of a third party payer, relevant costs,
reasonable alternatives, clients' right to refuse or
withdraw consent, and the time frame covered by the
consent. Social workers should provide clients with
an opportunity to ask questions (National

Association of Social Workers website, n.d.,

expression 1.03).

(e) Social workers who provide services via

electronic media (such as computer, telephone,

radio, and television) should inform recipients of

the limitations and risks associated with such

services (National Association of Social Workers

website, n.d., expression 1.03).

Conflicts and dual relationships:

(a) Social workers should be alert to and avoid

conflicts of interest that interfere with the

exercise of professional discretion and impartial

judgment. Social workers should inform clients when

a real or potential conflict of interest arises and

take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a

manner that makes the clients' interests primary and

protects clients' interests to the greatest extent

possible. In some cases, protecting clients'

interests may require termination of the

professional relationship with proper referral of

the client (National Association of Social Workers

website, n.d., expression 1.06).

(c) Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries. (Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively.) (National Association of Social Workers website, n.d., expression 1.06).

National Association of Social Workers website. (n.d.). www.socialworkers.org

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

# INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to explore social work students' attitudes about the use of social networking sites and possible ethical implications of such use. The study is being conducted by Christina Dillon, an MSW student at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) under the supervision of Professor Janet Chang at CSUSB. The study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study it to understand the attitudes of graduate social work students about the use of social media in social work and the possible ethical implications of such use.

**Description:** If you take part in this study, you will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire that asks about your attitudes about the use of social media in social work.

**Participation:** Participation is totally voluntary, and you are free to skip any questions you do not want to answer.

**Confidentiality:** The information you give will remain confidential and anonymous and no record will be made or kept of your name or any identifying information. The anonymous data from these questionnaires will only be seen by the researcher; the results will be conveyed to others in group form only.

**Duration:** Filling out a questionnaire should take no more than 15 minutes.

**Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks to taking part in the study and no personal benefits involved.

**Benefits:** Your opinions will help social workers and administrators to better understand the use of social media in social work and the unique ethical challenges it can present.

**Contact:** If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact Dr. Chang at (909)537-5184.

**Results:** The results will be available after December 2012 at the Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino.

By marking below, you agree that you have been fully informed about this questionnaire and are volunteering to take part.

_____    _____
Place a check mark here               Date

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in this study conducted by Christina Dillon, MSW student at California State University, San Bernardino and for not discussing the contents of the questionnaire with other students. The questionnaire you have just completed was designed to explore social work students' attitudes about the use of social networking sites and the possible ethical implications of such use. It is hoped that the results of this study will help social workers and administrators better understand the unique ethical challenges that social media use in social work can present.

if you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Janet Chang at (909)537-5184. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino in December 2012.

Thank you again for your participation in this research project.

APPENDIX D

QUESTIONNAIRE

## Survey Questionnaire

## A Study Examining Graduate Social Work Students' Attitudes about the Use of Social Networking and Possible Ethical Implications

PART I: BACKGROUND

In this section, you will be asked a series of demographic questions. Please write or circle your answers. All of your answers will remain confidential.

**A1. Are you a Title IVE or non-Title IVE graduate social work student at California State University San Bernardino?**

1. Title IVE
2. Non-title IVE

**A2. What is your gender?**

1. Male
2. Female

**A3. Current Age:** _____ **years old**

**A4. What is your ethnicity?**

1. African American
2. Asian/Pacific Islander
3. Hispanic
4. Native-American
5. White
6. Other (Please specify) _____

**A5. What is your highest level of education?**

1. Bachelor Degree
2. Master Degree

**A6. Are you currently employed in child welfare?**

1. Yes
2. No [Please skip to A10]

A7. Which county do you work for?_____

A8. What is your job title?_____

A9. Amount of experience in child welfare: _____months/years

A10. Do you currently have an internship in child welfare?

1. Yes
2. No[Please skip to A13]

A11. In which county are you interning?

1. San Bernardino County
2. Riverside County
3. Other:_____

A12. Amount of internship experience in child welfare: _____months/years

A13. As a graduate student, are you in the full-time or part-time program

and what year?

1. Full-time, 1$^{st}$ year
2. Full time, 2$^{nd}$ year
3. Part-time, 1$^{st}$ year
4. Part-time, 2$^{nd}$ year
5. Part-time, 3$^{rd}$ year

A14. Do you use social media, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube,

Google+, blogs, online message boards, etc.? Please circle all of the answers that

apply.

1. Facebook
2. Twitter
3. MySpace
4. YouTube
5. Google+
6. Blogs
7. Online message boards
8. I do not use social media [Please skip to A16]

**A15. If you selected any of the answers above from #1 through #7, which one do you primarily use?**

1. Facebook
2. Twitter
3. MySpace
4. YouTube
5. Google+
6. Blogs
7. Online message boards

**A16. If you do not currently use social networking sites (SNS), how likely are you to start using them in the future? [If you currently use social networking sites, please skip to A17]**

1. Very likely [Please skip to B1]
2. Somewhat likely [Please skip to B1]
3. Not very likely [Please skip to B1]
4. Not at all likely [Please skip to B1]

**A17. How often do you use social networking sites (SNS)?**

1. None of the time
2. Several times a day
3. Once a day
4. A few times a week
5. Once a week
6. Once a month
7. A few times a year

**A18. For what purpose (reason) do you use social networking sites (SNS)?**

1. Personal
2. Professional
3. Both
4. Other (Please specify) _____

**A19. If you use social networking sites (SNS), how safe do you feel your personal information is, such as your full name, city of residence, names of the high school and colleges you've attended, any online resumes, current and former employers information and personal photos?**

1. Very safe
2. Somewhat safe
3. Somewhat unsafe
4. Very unsafe
5. Don't know

PART II: SAMPLE VIGNETTE'S

**Please read the following scenarios carefully. After reading the scenarios, please answer the following questions.**

**B1. One day, a child welfare worker was sitting at her desk when a co-worker brought a methamphetamine exposed child into the office that the worker earlier detained from a drug lab found inside a local home. The child welfare worker decided to log-in to her Twitter (online blog) account on her phone and post about the co-workers new client. What do you think about this worker's actions?**

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B2. An employee who has worked in child welfare for three years decided to complete a Google/Facebook search on one of her Child Protective Service**

(CPS) clients to gather more information. What do you think about this worker's actions?

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B3.** On his lunch break, a social worker decides to log-in into his Facebook account. He immediately sees that he has a friend request from a former client. The social worker decides to accept the friend request because the person is no longer a client of the agency and the social worker genuinely likes the client. What do you think about this worker's actions?

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B4.** A young social worker with her MSW (Masters of Social Work) degree, blogs about her experiences. One day, she is particularly annoyed with clients and declares, "Why do all these people complain, without actually doing something about changing themselves? Why am I focusing on this? It's because I'm angry! No offense, but today I don't care about anything, social issues included. It's all unimportant right now..." What do you think of this MSW's actions?

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B5. A long-time employed social worker has a disclaimer on his online blog that reads, "To protect my client's privacy, I have changed the names, locations and other identifying information." The social worker then proceeds to reveal personal details about his clients. What do you think of this worker's actions?**

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B6. A newly employed social worker with Child Protective Services (CPS) had a very upsetting work day. He was unable to debrief or process his day with his supervisor or co-workers. The social worker went home and was still feeling very angry and exasperated. He decided to log-on to his Facebook account and write the following posting, "I hate working for Child Protective Services (CPS), and all of these clients drive me crazy! Today I had to tell a druggie mom how smoking meth while pregnant is a bad thing. Give me a break!" What do you think of this social worker's actions?**

1. Very ethical

2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B7. An LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker), regularly uses Twitter [an online microblogging service that allows users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, informally known as "tweets"] to communicate with clients in regards to setting appointments, providing crisis intervention and general therapy. What do you think of this social worker's actions?**

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

**B8. A therapist has a new female client that is the victim in a dangerous domestic violence relationship. This therapist is puzzled on how to proceed with the case. She seeks advice in regards to a suggested treatment plan and appropriate level of intervention from a fellow therapist on an online social work message board. What do you think of this social worker's actions?**

1. Very ethical
2. Somewhat ethical
3. Somewhat unethical
4. Completely unethical
5. Don't know

Please explain why:_____

## THE END

Thank you for your participation, contribution to the field of social work and for not discussing the contents of this questionnaire with other students. Please put the completed questionnaire inside the attached envelope, seal it and take it over to the main office of the social work department (located on the fourth floor of the Social and Behavioral Sciences building) Monday through Friday between the hours of 9:00am and 5:00pm. When you go to the main office of the social work department, please ask the office staff for the social media questionnaire collection envelope, and then place your sealed questionnaire inside of it. If it is after hours, then please slide your sealed questionnaire under the locked office door. Please return your completed questionnaire within 7 days to the office. It is hoped that the results of this study will help social workers and administrators better understand the unique ethical challenges that social media use in social work can present.

Thanks again!

Developed by Christina Dillon

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