The Invisible Become Visible:
An Analysis of How People Experiencing Homelessness Use Social Media

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Abstract

This research examined how people experiencing homelessness use the social media platforms of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Through 15 interviews at a day shelter in a central North Carolina city, the author discovered that people experiencing homelessness use Facebook for three main reasons: to remain connected with family and friends; to find support; and to share ideas in a safe space. This research conclude that homeless service providers should offer classes that teach their clients how to use social media websites. Also, people experiencing homelessness may be more likely to use a wider variety of social media websites if service providers post valuable information for their clients on those web pages.

I. Introduction

@beckyblanton wrote in a reflection, "Homeless people have one story—or so people think. No one bothers to stop and ask the homeless for their story or even expects to see a story other than, 'I'm broke, addicted, mentally ill, angry, hurt and dangerous.' It's up to you to add to, or go beyond that negative story. If you ever wanted the keys to life, to possibility, to freedom, social media and a blog are those keys. Get them. Use them. They can change your world." (Horvath, 2010, para. 3)

This research examined how people experiencing homelessness use the social media platforms of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. It also studied how this group of people bridges the digital divide by gaining access to computers and the Internet. This research was conducted through a series of interviews with clients at The Center, a day shelter in a central North Carolina city.[1] This research is important because people experiencing homelessness have been largely misunderstood and ignored. By understanding how members of this population use social media, the community can develop a deeper insight into the lives of people experiencing homelessness and better understand their stories.

We rarely hear homeless individuals' voices. Instead, others speak for them, creating a stereotypical image of a "homeless person." People experiencing homelessness are changing this image through their use of social media. Mark Horvath, founder of InvisiblePeople.tv and the We Are Visible network, has empowered homeless and impoverished individuals by teaching them how to share their voices, stories, and needs via the Internet. After experiencing homelessness, Horvath discovered that social media provides innumerous

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1 The name of the center and its location has been changed in order to protect the privacy of the respondents.

resources to homeless individuals that offline resources cannot. These resources include locating services, finding support, sharing stories, and obtaining jobs (Tabb, 2011).

Horvath said 100 percent of the sheltered homeless he has met were using Facebook (Gustafson, 2011). Therefore, he thought it was necessary to create WeAreVisible.com to teach people experiencing homelessness about the benefits of using other social media outlets. He launched this website in September 2010 after receiving a Pepsi Refresh grant. On WeAreVisible.com, Horvath provides simple tutorials for people experiencing homelessness on how to use Gmail, WordPress, Facebook, and Twitter as survival tools ("Social media," 2010). By encouraging this population to use social media, Horvath has helped housed individuals see past the cardboard sign by providing real insight into the problems that homeless individuals face every day (Tabb, 2011). Ben Bates, a man experiencing homelessness who is known to the Twitter world as @cardboardblog, said, "Without social media I would feel like a complete outcast of society" (Horvath, 2010, para. 7).

In addition to providing a platform to share individual stories, social media has helped people find housing and the necessary resources to get back on their feet. Rd Plasschaert, a woman experiencing homelessness from California, said, "Quite frankly, I would be sleeping on the streets if I hadn't opened myself up to social media. I'm off the streets because of it . . . People, do you realize what we have available to us?" ("Social media," 2010, para. 11).

Finally, people experiencing homelessness use social media to connect to family and gain support. Daniel Morales acquired national attention when he used Facebook to locate his daughter, Sarah, whom he had not seen in 11 years (Adams, 2011). Likewise, Elisa Melo uses Facebook to talk to her family in Brazil twice per week. After fleeing an abusive relationship, she entered a shelter. "That helps a lot—reading the stuff they're writing me, telling me to go on and to keep myself healthy," Melo said (Adams, 2011, para. 8).

There are many newspaper reports about the use of social media by people experiencing homelessness. However, little academic research has been conducted about how this population accesses computers and why they use these alternative media outlets.

II. Literature Review

Research has been conducted about how the media portray homelessness. However, little research has examined how people experiencing homelessness engage with the media, particularly social media. Social media has helped homeless individuals become an increasingly well-connected group (Kline, 2005). Therefore, research about how people experiencing homelessness engage with and access social media is important because it will help the community understand how this population uses social media to positively impact their lives and share their stories.

Several studies reported that people experiencing homelessness access computers at public and university libraries, social service agency centers, coffee shops, and hotel lobbies (Eyrich-Garg, 2011). In addition, homeless shelters have responded to the web-based needs of their clients by creating computer labs (Taylor, 2011). The location and context of a computer lab is important to people experiencing homelessness and determines whether or not they use that resource, especially in libraries (Bure, 2005; Holt, 2010).

Middle-aged, educated homeless individuals are more likely to use computers and social media than their older, less-educated counterparts (Taylor, 2011; Le Dantec, 2008a). People experiencing homelessness use computers to remain socially connected with others, to find jobs, housing and leisure opportunities, and to locate other resources (Eyrich-Garg, 2011; Roberson, 2010). Internet technology provides people experiencing homelessness with the opportunity to interact with the larger community, including housed individuals and politicians (Roberson, 2010). Computers build life skills by helping people experiencing homelessness work toward achieving personal goals, such as managing time, doing research, writing resumes, and dealing with a fear of learning new skills. Researchers found the increased self-esteem that accompanies learning to use a computer helps people experiencing homelessness see themselves as capable individuals with a vision of life other than homelessness (Swenson Miller, 2005).

Researchers questioned if the rise in digital technology will increase the digital divide or help bridge the gap by integrating impoverished individuals into mainstream society. Christopher Le Dantec and W.K. Edwards (2008) applied the digital divide to the homeless community. The researchers conducted three

interviews with 28 homeless individuals at outreach centers. They found there is a digital divide within many homeless communities as some people experiencing homelessness are disinterested or do not know how to use computers, while others are skillful at using computers and other digital technologies.

To remain connected, some people experiencing homelessness have created blogs. Researchers have discovered that there are four benefits to writing and maintaining blogs to homeless individuals. First, blogs provide an outlet for people experiencing homelessness to communicate with others on their own terms. Second, blogs are a space where stereotypes are challenged. Third, blogs act as a support system. Finally, blogs are emotionally beneficial because they help people experiencing homelessness stay connected (Yost, 2009).

People experiencing homelessness have access to computers to blog and use social media. Karin M. Eyrich-Garg (2011) studied computer use among 100 unsheltered homeless men and women in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She discovered that almost half (47%) of her sample used a computer and cell phone in the past 30 days for a variety of reasons, including job searching and connecting to others. Eyrich-Garg found that people experiencing homelessness perceive themselves as having access to a social network through digital technology and therefore have better physical and mental health in addition to lower levels of victimization. She concluded that healthcare providers could use technology as a cost-effective way of communicating with people experiencing homelessness because technology can facilitate prevention and intervention strategies with this computer-connected population.

Other researchers echoed the benefits of social support groups. Stephen Hwang (2009) and his team of researchers sampled 544 homeless adults and discovered that there is an increased need for services that encourage the integration of people experiencing homelessness into social networks. These social networks can be in person or on the Internet.

Another common thread in the literature is the importance of staying connected to family, friends, and the community. Eyrich-Garg reported that networking websites could help people experiencing homelessness meet their social needs while giving them a stable place to portray themselves. Le Dantec and Edwards also reported that these social connections help people experiencing homelessness survive on the streets. Losing contact with these support groups exacerbates the emotional stress of being homeless.

Technology, such as cell phones, is also correlated with identity and self-esteem. Le Dantec reported that cell phones are important to managing the presentation of self. For people experiencing homelessness, having a cell phone helps comfort their concerned friends and family. In addition, it is a way to be in control of others' perceptions because a cell phone number reassures people experiencing homelessness that their cell phone is not associated with their current situation. This reassurance provides them with a sense of hope and a vision for a life that does not involve being homeless. Even though cell phones are the preferred way to keep in touch with others, owning a cell phone is a challenge since cell phones need to be recharged, are expensive, and can also be lost or stolen (Bure, 2005; Le Dantec, 2008b).

Clare Bure (2005) studied the use of cell phones by people experiencing homelessness in central Scotland. Her research illustrates the complexities of promoting inclusion into mainstream society through technology. Bure reported that people experiencing homelessness could be digitally included while remaining socially excluded because they use communication tools in ways that are relevant to their own lives. However, Bure noted that digital technology is helpful because it provides access to practical information on affordable housing, jobs, healthcare, and other topics.

Some researchers focused on the challenges that people experiencing homelessness face with computer and Internet use. Many do not have the necessary literacy and technical skills to access the Internet and computers (Bure, 2005; Le Dantec, 2008a). Lack of access is the biggest deterrent. Shelter computers are only available at certain times, public library computers are often booked, and Internet cafes are expensive (Taylor, 2011). In addition, many homeless support workers do not know where free Internet and computer access points are located so they cannot encourage their clients to use these resources (Bure, 2005). Finally, safety is a major concern because laptops and other electronic equipment can be stolen (Roberson, 2010).

Overall technology provides the opportunity for productive interventions in homeless individuals' lives. Social support networks result in a better life and health for people experiencing homelessness. The positive benefits that technology brings to this population causes researchers to seriously think about the digital divide. While there are numerous venues for free Internet access, such as shelters and libraries, there is also

an increased need for people experiencing homelessness to own a laptop or Smartphone. Since many cannot afford these digital technologies, there is a possibility that vulnerable populations will fall through the cracks and the digital divide will increase.

This research examined how people experiencing homelessness use social media and the benefits these outlets provide for members of this population. It focused on what information they seek online and how they remain connected to society and share their voices by engaging with blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Finally, the research discussed how people experiencing homelessness gain the necessary skills to effectively use these social media outlets and the Internet.

III. Methodology

There is no single homeless community because many factors contribute to homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development classifies a person as homeless if that person lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. A person is also considered homeless if his or her primary nighttime residence is: 1) a shelter that provides temporary living accommodations; 2) an organization that provides residence to individuals who need to be institutionalized; or 3) a place that is not designed for sleeping ("Federal definition," 2011). Despite this definition, it remains difficult to obtain a complete picture of the homeless population.

The 2011 annual point-in-time count discovered about 13,000 people as homeless on any given night in North Carolina ("State totals," 2011). In the central North Carolina city examined in this study, more than 1,000 people experience homelessness on any given night. Many of these people have found help at The Center, which is a day shelter in the downtown portion of the city that provides resources for people experiencing homelessness. Every month, more than 180 "intakes," or new people who have never been to The Center before, use the services provided by the day shelter, which is open from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. These services include case management, mental health screenings, spiritual empowerment classes, job skills classes, and support groups. In addition, a computer lab with 15 computers provides clients with the opportunity to browse the Internet, check e-mail, apply for jobs, and use social media.

This research study was conducted through 15 interviews with clients at The Center (see Appendix A for interviewees). These interviews were advertised through fliers for one week in The Center's common room and computer lab. The interviews were also announced at the daily morning meeting at The Center so guests at the shelter would be aware they could participate in an interview on that particular day. Over the course of two days, the author spent eight hours at The Center and asked participants four main questions about how they interacted with social media and how they learned to use these media outlets (see Appendix B for questions). Each session lasted 15 minutes in a small, quiet conference room at The Center. The clients' involvement was voluntary, so they could withdraw from the interview at any time. In addition, each participant signed a consent form and was informed that their words may appear in a widely circulated research paper. Finally, participants were not paid for their time. After the interviews were completed, the researcher analyzed the data to look for trends in their responses.

IV. Findings

This research found that people experiencing homelessness in this central North Carolina city mainly use Facebook. Respondents are engaged with this social media tool for three main reasons: 1) to remain connected with family and friends; 2) to find support; and 3) to share ideas in a safe space. These same respondents were hesitant to use Twitter because they did not want to update others about every moment of their lives. No respondents had LinkedIn accounts or maintained blogs.

The age of respondents ranged from 25 to 55 years old, with the average age being 36 years old. The amount of time respondents spent on the computer ranged from 1 to 10 hours per day. The average amount of time spent on a computer was four hours per day. Respondents gained computer access at The Center and local libraries. No respondent owned a personal computer, but if they did, they said they would spend more time on the Internet. For example, Respondent #2 said he was on the computer and Internet more often

before his laptop was stolen.

Facebook

Thirteen respondents had Facebook accounts that were used on a regular basis. The amount of time spent on Facebook ranged from five minutes to four hours per day. Most respondents spent about one hour per day on Facebook and had been active on their Facebook accounts for a wide variety of times, ranging from one to six years. Almost a half of respondents had their Facebook accounts for only one year.

Staying Connected: Overall, those with an account said they use Facebook to stay connected. People experiencing homelessness easily lose contact with their family and friends. Respondent #14 said, "It's a lonely life when you don't have people in your immediate atmosphere that want to talk about things that are important to you." Facebook is a free and easy way that people experiencing homelessness can remain connected to their support networks.

These connections are maintained through the "little things" people can do on Facebook. Respondent #11 appreciated that Facebook reminds him about people's birthdays so he can send his friends celebratory messages. His ability to share this joy in a free way helped Respondent #11 feel like he can remain a part of the community despite his lack of economic resources. In addition, three respondents emphasized that they like commenting on people's photos. Doing this helped the respondents remain updated about people's lives and made them feel more connected to their friends and family.

People experiencing homelessness also use Facebook to stay connected with the community by researching details about local events and by searching for jobs. Three respondents specifically mentioned they used Facebook to gather details about community events, such as meals, parties, and cultural events. Another three respondents used Facebook as a networking tool to locate jobs. For example, Respondent #9 thought Facebook was beneficial because it allows people to "network, advertise, and connect with the world."

In conclusion, people experiencing homelessness use Facebook to remain connected with their family, friends, and community. They strengthen this sense of connectedness by accepting friend requests, sharing celebratory messages, commenting on people's photos, obtaining details about local events, and by locating jobs.

Support: In addition to serving as a connection tool, Facebook provides people experiencing homelessness with a sense of support. Respondent #14 said the support he gained from his family and friends on Facebook helped him overcome many challenges. In addition to receiving personal messages from friends, five respondents specifically mentioned they joined Facebook groups that matched their personal and professional interests, such as animal advocacy or faith-based groups. Being a member of these groups made the respondents feel like their ideas are validated and accepted, regardless of their homeless condition. Respondent #15 said he likes Facebook groups because they helped him find "my kind of people." Respondent #7, a minister, said he used Facebook to join religious groups to share his ideas and help people discover "the truth." Therefore, Facebook groups help people experiencing homelessness meet online friends that share similar interests. Establishing these connections provides members of this population with the sense of support they need from the community.

Safe Environment: The third and final theme that emerged from this research is that Facebook is a safe space for people experiencing homelessness to share their ideas. Respondent #6 said that because users must accept a "friend request" in order for someone to view their profile, Facebook provides a relaxing and safe environment for people to share their ideas. "No one can get in unless they're invited," Respondent #6 said. Therefore, Facebook provides privacy and a space where people experiencing homelessness are in control of how they are perceived by other people.

Other Social Networking Sites

Twitter: People experiencing homelessness perceived Twitter as a way to provide others with minute-by-minute updates about a person's day. Therefore, they are often reluctant to create Twitter accounts. "I don't think that anyone is very interested in what I am doing at every moment of the day," Respondent #10 said with a smile on his face. Respondent #14 even said he is "afraid" of Twitter because he thinks it is a "confirmation of what our self-deluded society is becoming." No respondents mentioned following service providers or news organizations on Twitter. Only Respondent #6 had a Twitter account, but he did not know how to use it. When asked why he signed up for this account, he laughed and said, "I don't really know. It just felt like

the right thing to do."

LinkedIn: People experiencing homelessness perceive the main benefit of LinkedIn to be networking with professionals in the community. However, no respondents had LinkedIn accounts. Most respondents were interested in this social media tool, but they did not know how to create an account or how to use LinkedIn's website.

Blogs: No respondents had blogs because they thought others did not want to read what they wrote. Respondent #6 was interested in putting his poetry and artwork on a blog, but he did not have the necessary computer skills to do this.

Other Findings: Only two respondents did not have Facebook accounts. Respondent #1, a woman in her mid-50s, did not have enough confidence in her computer skills to use Facebook, even though her daughter encouraged her to do so. Likewise, Respondent #4, a woman in her mid-40s, did not know how to use a computer. This finding illustrates that there is a large gap in computer skill levels among members of the homeless population, which supports Le Dantec's research on the digital divide within the homeless community.

It is also important to note that Respondent #10 specifically mentioned that he is interested in using Foursquare because he thinks this website has a stronger community focus than Twitter or Facebook.

V. Discussion

This research examined how people experiencing homelessness use the social media platforms of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. It also looked at how members of this population gain access to computers to use this type of media. This research is important because people experiencing homelessness are a largely misunderstood population. By learning more about how this population uses social media, other people will gain a deeper understanding of the homeless condition. Respondents in this study were eager to discuss their involvement with these social media outlets and to share how they locate computers.

This research discovered that people experiencing homelessness use Facebook because it allows them to connect with others and find support in a safe space. The respondents perceive the main benefit of Facebook to be maintaining relationships with their family and friends who are scattered across the country. People experiencing homelessness think it is invaluable to maintain these social connections because this type of support helps them overcome challenges. Respondents argue that Facebook is the most beneficial social networking tool to use, and they are hesitant to use Twitter, LinkedIn, or create their own blogs.

Privacy

One of the most interesting ideas discovered by this research is the importance of privacy on social media websites. Many respondents view their Facebook profile as a safe space where they are in control of how their image is presented to the community. Therefore, they are leery of permitting other people to enter that safe space. This causes respondents to be cautious when accepting friend requests, joining groups, posting photos, and commenting on people's walls. Respondents are also very aware of how they present themselves in their profiles because information remains on the Internet forever. This is an interesting discovery because people experiencing homelessness rarely have the opportunity to control other people's perceptions of them, causing them to have a heightened awareness of the power of their Facebook profiles. This finding makes sense because a reduction of privacy and feelings of personal safety often accompany being homeless.

Computer Training

People experiencing homelessness do not often have the opportunity to attend computer classes that teach them necessary skills. Therefore, unless a person was familiar with using a computer before they became homeless, they are not able to acquire the computer skills they need to use a wide variety of social networks. For example, clients at The Center are offered classes that teach them how to create a resume, set up an e-mail account, and do other basic tasks. The clients can only learn additional skills, such as social media skills, if a teacher or computer specialist volunteers to hold classes at the day shelter. For example, in June 2011, a professor from a local university held a one-month class at The Center that expanded clients'

knowledge of how to use social media, particularly Facebook. Twitter was mentioned in this class, but participants found it challenging to maintain their accounts after the class ended.

In conclusion, respondents are more willing to use other social networks if they learn the necessary computer skills to use these social media tools. Therefore, it would be beneficial for homeless service providers to offer these computer skills classes to their clients because, without the necessary knowledge, clients may become victims of the digital divide.

Homeless Service Providers

No respondents mentioned using Facebook or Twitter as a tool to locate resources or services for them. Most respondents were surprised when asked if they knew that The Center has Facebook and Twitter pages. One possible reason for this is that many non-profit service providers are not regularly updating their Facebook or Twitter accounts with valuable information for their clients. For example, The Center is one of the largest homeless service providers in this central North Carolina city. However, this organization does not update its Twitter account with information about services provided or opportunities for their clients. In addition, The Center's Facebook page primarily serves as a public relations tool because it provides photos, videos, and calls for donations. This same description can be applied to other service providers in this central North Carolina city. Therefore, if service providers' Facebook and Twitter accounts provide pertinent information to their clients, people experiencing homelessness may be more likely to create Twitter accounts to follow this information or to become fans of the service provider's Facebook page.

It is important for people experiencing homelessness to use a variety of social media outlets. Homeless service providers play a large role in providing members of this population with the necessary computer skills to do this. They can also influence how people experiencing homelessness perceive social media. If service providers share valuable information with their clients on their social media accounts, people experiencing homelessness may be more likely to use Twitter or other social media tools.

The "We Are Visible" Project

Twitter and other social media tools are changing the way that communities perceive people experiencing homelessness. These benefits are not largely understood by homeless individuals in this central North Carolina city. No respondent was aware of Mark Horvath's "We Are Visible" project and many did not realize that the benefits of Twitter extend far beyond a person's ability to update others about their daily activities. Twitter can be used to locate resources, find out services available to people experiencing homelessness, and find links to helpful websites.

VI. Conclusion

This research found that people experiencing homelessness in this central North Carolina city use Facebook as their main social networking tool. They spend about one hour per day on Facebook connecting with family and friends, finding support, and sharing ideas in a "safe space." These same respondents are hesitant to use Twitter because they do not want to update other people about every moment of their lives. No respondents had LinkedIn accounts or blogs.

This research leads to the following two conclusions: 1) Shelters and other homeless service providers need to provide classes about how to use social media so people experiencing homelessness have the confidence they need to engage with these websites; and 2) People experiencing homelessness may be more likely to use Facebook and Twitter if service providers post valuable information for their clients on these social media pages.

Homeless service providers need to offer computer training classes and share valuable information with clients on their social media websites. If this happens, more people experiencing homelessness will be plugged into social media. This will create a ripple effect in the community as housed people become more aware of the homeless condition, causing them to put a face to homelessness. Like @beckyblanton said, social media can change homeless individuals' worlds by providing the community with actual stories of people who are homeless (Horvath, 2010).

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Respondent Demographics

Respondent #	Age	Gender	Respondent #	Age	Gender
1	55	Female	9	28	Female
2	mid-20s	Male	10	43	Male
3	mid-40s	Male	11	43	Male
4	mid-40s	Female	12	mid-50s	Female
5	early 30s	Male	13	late 20s	Male
6	25	Male	14	31	Male
7	early 30s	Male	15	early 30s	Male
8	Early 30s	Male			

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. On a daily basis, how often do you use a computer?
   a. Where do you access a computer?
   b. How much computer experience have you had?

2. Do you use Facebook? Why? What information do you seek on Facebook?
   a. Twitter? Why?
      i. What information do you seek on Twitter?
   b. LinkedIn? Why?
      i. Why did you signup for this service?
   c. Blogs? Why?
      i. What information do you share on your blog or seek on others' blogs?

3. What do you think are the benefits of social media to people experiencing homelessness?
   a. Why is social media a powerful way for people experiencing homelessness to connect with others?

4. How did you learn to use these social media outlets?
   a. Have you ever heard of WeAreVisible.com?